

MEETINGS 101

Say the word "meeting" and expect to hear sighs, groans, or sarcastic remarks. A variety of tools and techniques (plus a healthy dose of common sense) can make meetings less painful, more productive, maybe even fun. There's also an important role for technology, although the undeniable power of computer-enabled meeting systems usually comes with astronomical price tags. Still, there's lots to learn from electronic "meetingware" even if you never buy it.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MEETINGS

1. **Only hold meeting if necessary.** Although cabinet and council meetings are necessary, some other committee meetings may not be necessary. It may be possible to conduct them by email, telephone, or even MSN Messenger (ask your kids!).
2. **Must have clear objectives.** The reason for a meeting is to do something together that you cannot do alone. Prepare and provide an agenda before the meeting so everyone knows their role and what to expect. Include topics, presenter, time, etc. Do not schedule too much, nor schedule too little.
3. **Everyone must know their role.** Ask ahead for people to lead the flag salute and give the invocation and benediction. Identify on the agenda where someone will be required to give a report or a presentation.
4. **Prepare an Agenda.** There are sample agendas in many materials you already have. Agendas help keep the meeting on track so that business that needs to be done can be done. Everyone is on the same page, so to speak.
5. **LEAD the meeting.** Start on time and end on time – do not punish those who are prompt by following those who are late. Keep the meeting on track by monitoring problem areas (rambling, dominating, argumentative, discouraging, comedian, etc.). Use a "Parking Lot" for items that need follow up but are not appropriate for the time they are brought up.
6. **Minutes.** Insure that minutes are taken accurately and correctly. They should be distributed in a timely manner after the meeting so people are clear on who will follow up on what. Your Cabinet Secretary will handle this for you.
7. **Praise in public.** Criticize in private. Enough said.
8. **Best model:** Democracy, not monarchy. Review Robert's Rules of Order.
9. **Majority rules** AFTER the minority is heard.
10. **End the meeting.** Allow 10-15 minutes for discussion or questions. Summarize decisions and actions to make sure everyone agrees what, where, when. Thank everyone for attending. Encourage them to call or email if they have any questions after the meeting.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF MEETINGS

Sin #1: People don't take meetings seriously. They arrive late, leave early, and spend most of their time doodling.

Salvation: Adopt Intel's mind-set that meetings are real work.

There are as many techniques to improve the "crispness" of meetings as there are items on the typical meeting agenda. Some companies punish latecomers with a penalty fee or reprimand them in the minutes of the meeting. But these techniques address symptoms, not the disease. Disciplined meetings are about mind-set – a shared conviction among all the participants that meetings are real work. That all-too-frequent expression of relief – "Meeting's over, let's get back to work" – is the mortal enemy of good meetings.

"Most people simply don't view going to meetings as doing work," says William Daniels. "You have to make your meetings uptime rather than downtime."

Is there a company with the right mind-set? Daniels nominates Intel, the semiconductor manufacturer famous for its managerial toughness and crisp execution. Walk into any conference room at any Intel factory or office anywhere in the world and you will see on the wall a poster with a series of simple questions about the meetings that take place there. ***Do you know the purpose of this meeting? Do you have an agenda? Do you know your role? Do you follow the rules for good minutes?***

These posters are a visual reminder of just how serious Intel is about productive meetings. Indeed, every new employee, from the most junior production worker to the highest ranking executive, is required to take the company's home-grown course on effective meetings. For years the course was taught by CEO Andy Grove himself, who believed that good meetings were such an important part of Intel's culture that it was worth his time to train the troops. "We talk a lot about meeting discipline," says Michael Fors, corporate training manager at Intel University. "It isn't complicated. It's doing the basics well: structured agendas, clear goals, paths that you're going to follow. These things make a huge difference."

Sin #2: Meetings are too long. They should accomplish twice as much in half the time.

Salvation: Time is money. Track the cost of your meetings and use computer-enabled simultaneity to make them more productive.

Almost every guru invokes the same rule: meetings should last no longer than 90 minutes. When's the last time your company held to that rule?

One reason meetings drag on is that people don't appreciate how expensive they are. James B. Rieley, director of the Center for Continuous Quality Improvement at the Milwaukee Area Technical College, recently decided to change all that. He did a survey of the college's 130-person management council to find out how much time its members spent in meetings. When he multiplied their time by their salaries, he determined that the college was spending \$3 million per year on management-council meetings alone. Money talks: after Rieley's study came out, the college trained 40 people as facilitators to keep meetings on track.

Sin #3: People wander off the topic. Participants spend more time digressing than discussing.

Salvation: Get serious about agendas and store distractions in a "parking lot." It's the starting point for all advice on productive meetings: stick to the agenda. But it's hard to stick to an agenda that doesn't exist, and most meetings in most companies are decidedly agenda-free. "In the real world," says Schrage, "agendas are about as rare as the white rhino. If they do exist, they're about as useful. Who hasn't been in meetings where someone tries to prove that the agenda isn't appropriate?"

Agendas are worth taking seriously. Intel is fanatical about them; it has developed an agenda "template" that everyone in the company uses. Much of the template is unsurprising. An Intel agenda (circulated several days before a meeting to let participants react to and modify it) lists the meeting's key topics, who will lead which parts of the discussion, how long each segment will take, what the expected outcomes are, and so on.

Intel agendas also specify the meeting's decision-making style. The company distinguishes among four approaches to decisions: authoritative (the leader has full responsibility); consultative (the leader makes a decision after weighing group input); voting; and consensus. Being clear and up-front about decision styles, Intel believes, sets the right expectations and helps focus the conversation.

"Going into the meeting, people know how they're giving input and how that input will get rolled up into a decision," says Intel's Michael Fors. "If you don't have structured agendas, and people aren't sure of the decision path, they'll bring up side issues that are related but not directly relevant to solving the problem."

Of course, even the best-crafted agendas can't guard against digressions, distractions, and the other foibles of human interaction. The challenge is to keep meetings focused without stifling creativity or insulting participants who stray. At Ameritech, the regional telephone company based in Chicago, meeting leaders use a "parking lot" to maintain that focus. "When comments come up that aren't related to the issue at hand, we record them on a flip chart labeled the parking lot," says Kimberly Thomas, director of communications for small business services. But the parking lot isn't a black hole. "We always track the issue and the person responsible for it," she adds. "We use this technique throughout the company."

Sin #4: Nothing happens once the meeting ends. People don't convert decisions into action.

Salvation: Convert from "meeting" to "doing" and focus on common documents.

The problem isn't that people are lazy or irresponsible. It's that people leave meetings with different views of what happened and what's supposed to happen next. Meeting experts are unanimous on this point: even with the ubiquitous tools of organization and sharing ideas – whiteboards, flip charts, Post-it notes – the capacity for misunderstanding is unlimited. Which is another reason companies turn to computer technology.

The best way to avoid that misunderstanding is to convert from "meeting" to "doing" – where the "doing" focuses on the creation of shared documents that lead to action. The fact is, at most powerful role for technology is also the simplest: recording comments, outlining ideas, generating written proposals, projecting them for the entire group to see, printing them so people leave with real-time minutes. Forget groupware; just get yourself a good outlining program and oversized monitor.

"You're not just having a meeting, you're creating a document," says Michael Schrage. "I can't emphasize enough the importance of that distinction. It is the fundamental difference between ordinary meetings and computer-augmented collaborations. Comments, questions, criticisms, insights should enhance the quality of the document. That should be the group's mission."

In other words, the medium is the meeting. That's why Bernard DeKovan prefers computers to flip charts and whiteboards. "Flip charts create behaviors conditioned by the medium," he says. "People start competing for room on the flip chart, the facilitator has to scratch thing out, and pretty soon you can't read what's on it. With a computer, you never run out of room for ideas, you can edit indefinitely, you can generate hard copies for everyone at a moment's notice. It's a much richer medium."

Sin #5: People don't tell the truth. There's plenty of conversation, but not much candor.

Salvation: Embrace anonymity.

We all know it's true: Too often, people in meetings simply don't speak their minds. Sometimes the problem is a leader who doesn't solicit participation. Sometimes a dominant personality intimidates the rest of the

group. But most of the time the problem is a simple lack of trust. People don't feel secure enough to say what they really think.

The most powerful techniques to promote candor rely on technology, and most of these computer-based tools focus on anonymity – enabling people to express opinions and evaluate alternatives without having to divulge their identities. It's a sobering commentary on free speech in business – "Say what you think, and we'll disguise your names to protect the innocent" – but it does seem to work.

But there are problems with anonymity. Some people like getting credit for their ideas, and anonymity can leave them feeling shortchanged. There are also opportunities for manipulation. Carol Anne Ogdin of Deep Woods Technology, a teamwork consultant and meeting facilitator based in Santa Clara, California, calls anonymity a "modest idea that's been blown out of proportion." In particular, she worries about gamesmanship - for example, people who build an anonymous groundswell of support for their own contributions.

Sin #6: Meetings are always missing important information, so they postpone critical decisions.

Salvation: Get data, not just furniture, into meeting rooms.

Most meeting rooms make it harder to have good meetings. They're sterile and uninviting – and often in the middle of nowhere. Why? To help people "concentrate" by removing them from the frenzy of office life. But this isolation leaves meeting rooms out of the information flow. Often, the downside of isolation outweighs the benefits of focus.

Jon Ryburg, the meeting ergonomist, offers a few ways to increase the "information quotient" in meeting spaces. For one thing, allow enough space in your meeting rooms for teams to store materials. Project teams generate lots more than minutes and memos. Meetings build models, fill up flip charts, create artifacts of all sorts - "information" that's vital to future meetings. "People are constantly hauling materials to and from meeting rooms," Ryburg says. "It's much easier to just store things for later meetings."

William Miller, director of research and business development for Steelcase, the office-furniture manufacturer based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, emphasizes that mobility is about more than convenience. The radical redesign of work, he argues, requires a radical redesign of meeting space. "And we don't talk about meetings. We talk about 'interactions.' It's part of the new science of effective work."

Sin #7: Meetings never get better. People make the same mistakes.

Salvation: Practice makes perfect. Monitor what works and what doesn't and hold people accountable.

Meetings are like any other part of business life: you get better only if you commit to it – and aim high. Charles Schwab & Co., the financial-services company based in San Francisco, has made that commitment. In virtually every meeting at Schwab, someone serves as an "observer" and creates what the company calls a Plus/Delta list. The list records what went right and what went wrong, and gets included in the minutes. Over time, both for specific meeting groups and for the company as a whole, these lists create an agenda for change.

How much can meetings improve?

The last word goes to Bernard DeKoven: "People don't have good meetings because they don't know what good meetings are like. Good meetings aren't just about work. They're about fun – keeping people charged up. It's more than collaboration, it's 'coliberation' – people freeing each other up to think more creatively."