

MEETINGS, MEETINGS EVERYWHERE...

Meetings! Everybody has them, and everybody hates them. Ask anyone – nobody enjoys meetings. People are always complaining about them: “I couldn’t get any work done because I was stuck all day in meetings!”

Yet meetings are an essential part of our business environment. You can’t run a company, make an important decision, or come to an agreement without some kind of meeting. Different people need to be able to give their input, discuss points of view, and reach a common understanding.

You could do the same with email or on the telephone. So why do we need meetings?

Just popping out for a quick meeting

A meeting provides face-to-face contact with other people. It’s that personal communication that makes all the difference.

Firstly, somebody took the time out of their busy schedule to come and see you. Anybody in a meeting must feel that you are, or at least the meeting is, important.

Then you have interpersonal contact: you see the other person in front of you. You touch them (shake hands), hear their voice clearly, see their facial expressions and gestures. It’s more natural. You can respond to others’ behaviour more easily.

A practical example: let’s say somebody doesn’t understand what you’ve been saying. They might not want to admit it, because they are embarrassed, but you might be able to see it in their face. So the meeting gives you the opportunity to address an issue of which you may have been otherwise unaware.

Telephones remove the personal touch. You can’t see the other person, so you miss out on their gestures, their facial expressions, and even some of their vocal tone (telephones distort sound for easier transmission). Watch any good public speaker, and you are sure to agree with the experts, who say that non-verbal communication accounts for over 75% of our message. All of this is missing over the phone.

And on email, it’s even worse. When things are printed, we tend to think they are correct, and we forget that they are often just somebody’s opinion, leading to misunderstandings. In addition, there is usually a delay between asking questions and receiving answers. You get immediate responses at meetings.

So if meetings are so great, why are they often so bad?

Not another meeting!

One of the main reasons that meetings are bad is that many people have poor communication skills. Never are they more highlighted than in the meeting with a dull presenter whose PowerPoint slides look like the densely-written pages of a textbook.

It is not the responsibility of the audience to pay attention. It is the responsibility of the presenter to get the audience's attention and maintain it. A bad presenter wastes everybody's time, because he's not getting his message across, and the audience is not listening.

The chairperson (leader of the meeting) might not be directing it properly. Some people may dominate the conversation, and others may interrupt, while still others stay silent and don't contribute what might be valuable input. The discussion may stray from appropriate topics.

Many people attend meetings unprepared, thinking they can wing it. Yet making decisions may require knowledge that can only be acquired outside of the meeting, such as information from people who are not present, or key financial data that needs to be absorbed first. A lot of people do not follow up their meetings, citing "too much to do", and the same action points linger from meeting to meeting.

Some people attend meetings when they don't have to. If you have nothing to contribute and nothing to really take away from the meeting, what are you doing there? If it's just FYI, then read the minutes afterwards.

Too many meetings start late and finish much later than the advertised time.

Keeping meetings efficient and effective

There are several ways you can keep a meeting running well.

Give your people communication skills training.

Like sporting ability, nobody is born able to present effectively, but for some it's more natural than others. Some people are not even aware that they are poor presenters. Get anonymous feedback on presentations (it's more honest) and get your people trained to be competent presenters. They don't have to be enthralling like Steve Jobs or dynamic like Barack Obama or entertaining like a stand-up comedian, but they should at least be able to hold audience attention and get their message across effectively. These are skills that can be learned!

Allocate roles properly

Every meeting has a number of roles, the most important of which are the Chair (the person who directs the meeting) and the Secretary (the person who takes the minutes, or the record of the meeting). Ensure that the people who are doing these roles understand them and perform them properly. They can also be taught – or give them to people whom you know will do them well.

Prepare adequately

Every presenter will tell you that the key to their success is good preparation. But this does not only apply to those making a presentation; the audience should also have some idea of what is going to happen, so that they have had time to process the information. Snap decisions are not always wise, especially when there are large amounts of money involved. Everyone present should have read the agenda and any accompanying material. If there is a lot of it and many people could not be reasonably

expected to get through it on time, the presenter should provide an executive summary.

Adequate preparation should also tell you what information you need to bring for your own contribution to the meeting. It will also indicate whether you need to be there or not, because then you will know something about the topic.

Stick to the schedule.

People are busy and have little time to waste. Don't annoy them by starting late and finishing late. Start on time, and don't go back over stuff you already covered before the latecomers; they'll soon learn when to get there – or not come at all. If you can't fit everything into the allocated time, schedule another meeting to cover it. Don't let the meeting drag on indefinitely: it's rude to your participants, who probably need to prepare for their next meeting!

Conclusion

Maybe you think that some of these things are trivial. But read the meeting literature and it all says basically the same...yet many people continue to complain about their meetings. Do you? With so many negative experiences in meetings, there must be something to it.

Others will say that in the real world, it is not always practical to do all of these things for every meeting, especially when their schedule is packed full. Yet many of these meetings could probably be avoided, and much of the preparation does not take long – sometimes passive tasks like background reading can be done in transit from one meeting to the next.

When meetings are well-run and productive, they can make working together a pleasure. When they are a mess, they can make people at best uncooperative, at worst openly hostile, and can even destroy business relationships. Show the people you work with some respect, and give them good meetings.

There are probably other things you can do but these are some ideas to get you started. Have a look at the links and do some reading to find more. Or come up with some of your own ideas for your meetings.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Tips for effective meetings

<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/>

Seth Godin's meeting solutions

http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2009/03/getting-serious-about-your-meeting-problem.html

Video Arts and meetings

<http://www.videoarts.co.uk/title.aspx/Communication/Meetings/MBM1>

Next time, we will be discussing something you often need at meetings: creativity.

Further reading:

Bratton, J., & Gold, J. (2007). *Human resource management: Theory and practice*. (4th ed.). Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dick, B. (1991). *Helping groups to be effective*. Chapel Hill, QLD: Interchange.