

Meetings are like alcoholism, you need a 12 step process

Category: Accountability

Meetings can be the curse of business, and if you are not careful they can be the single biggest impediment to productivity. The danger is that if you run meetings that are unfocused and don't accomplish anything, then you not only waste your people's time but also demotivate them. You can actually reduce communication rather than improve it.

Like so many things in business, nobody told us how to do them and we have to figure it out for ourselves. Perhaps we can use the lessons we learned from meetings that we attended on somebody else's watch, but that doesn't mean that we do a very much better job at it.

There are twelve simple, but effective rules that you should follow in order to make sure that your meetings are effective:

1. Prepare Properly

Identify the purpose of the meeting in your own mind. Be very clear about exactly what it is that you want to accomplish at the meeting. Tell the attendees why it is being held, and what the benefits will be for the organization and for the people attending.

2. Always have an agenda

If you don't have an agenda, then your meeting will be unfocused and runs the danger of rambling. Prepare an agenda beforehand that is crisp and concise with a defined start and end time. Circulate it to the attendees ahead of the meeting so they know exactly what to expect, along with any work assignments and meeting notices.

3. Make sure the right people are there (and none of the wrong ones)

Don't fall into the trap of inviting people to meetings who don't belong there. You will simply waste their time and yours, and you send the wrong message to the entire team. Think about the hourly cost of each of the people at the meeting and add it up to come to an hourly meeting cost which you declare at the beginning of the meeting.

4. Always be on time for your own meeting

One of the huge mistakes in small companies is that there is very little discipline around when meetings start. The person leading the meeting is often the biggest culprit here, and it is common for meetings to be delayed. This should be avoided at all costs as it sends a message that your time is more important than the time of the team.

5. Start on time

The benefits to starting on time simply cannot be overstated. The message that you send if you don't start on time is that you aren't serious, and that you are prepared to waste the time of all the people who do show up on time for the sake of the person who is late. It is a good practice

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to start whether or not everybody is there and let the late-comers know that the meeting will not wait for them.

6. Start the meeting with updates on action items from previous meetings

At the beginning of each meeting, go over the action items agreed on at the last meeting. If you hold people accountable publicly they know that you are serious and peer pressure causes more effective follow through on agreed actions. If only one person has failed to complete their assignments, the silent pressure will build on them for the next meeting.

7. Stick to the agenda

Make sure that you address all the items on the agenda. In any meeting, there will be issues and items that come up that are not on the agenda. These may have validity, but dealing with them during a meeting where nobody has thought of them ahead of time derails the process and sends a very poor message. Identify them and table them for the next meeting.

8. Set action ownership

Every item that comes up in a meeting must have action steps and a clearly defined owner responsible for accomplishing those steps. Make sure that every item discussed has an action step associated with it and somebody responsible for making sure that it happens. Always assign a due date and always follow up.

9. End on time

Ending on time is important because you must send the message that you respect the time of the people who are attending the meeting. It is a good discipline for everybody attending the meeting to know that you will finish at a particular time, and it will focus the discussion in a much more effective manner. It is better to have shorter meetings whenever possible as it concentrates the energy. I even worked in a company once where the routine daily meeting was held standing up!

10. Set the agenda and date for the next meeting

At the end of the meeting, summarize what has been agreed upon and set the date for the next meeting. When doing this, be sure to leave enough time for the necessary items to be accomplished. Holding meetings too frequently is just as dangerous as not holding them frequently enough. Don't be afraid to adjust the frequency to make sure that you allow enough time for what needs to be done before the next meeting.

11. Leave enough time to implement what you discussed

Beware the temptation of trying to accomplish too much. If you overload your people with tasks that they don't have time to accomplish you run the danger that the initiative will be derailed. I ran a "strategic retreat" when I had my computer service company, and we came back with about 23 key items to be accomplished. It was way too many and we failed to implement the

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necessary actions. Had we prioritized and had only four or five we would have accomplished them.

12.Circulate minutes and action items

You should circulate minutes and agreed action steps within 24 hours of the meeting ending. That communicates your seriousness and gives people time to start thinking as early as possible about tackling their action items rather than leaving it to the last minute.