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Guest Opinion KJ

Those time-wasting meetings can be productive if run right

Source: Boulder County Business Report

08/04/2006

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I hear complaints both ways - either there are too many meetings or not enough meetings.

Some sources estimate that executives waste approximately eight hours each week in poorly led meetings. When you consider the cost of everyone's time during meetings, this can be quite expensive. Most people don't like to meet because too many meetings run on too long and accomplish too little. Devoting time to an activity that offers little or no benefit is frustrating and can decrease employee morale.

But meetings can be an excellent use of time if managed and run appropriately. The key to effective meetings is being clear about what you want to accomplish, having effective participation and providing follow-through on accountability of action items.

Create an agenda

Don't ever bypass developing an agenda for any meeting. Agendas provide the meeting framework for the leader and participants. When my clients complain of bad meetings the first question I ask is, "Did you have an agenda?"

More often than not the answer is, "No."

It is surprising that such a simple and necessary step for meeting management is usually bypassed.

The purpose of the agenda is to clearly outline the plan for the meeting. Agenda content should include the details of the meeting's time, place and attendees; the meeting's objective; and all the discussion topics to be covered. You can create either a formal or an informal agenda, depending on the type of meeting and number of participants you'll have.

Formal agendas usually include much more content and information. Informal agendas typically just have quick bullet-point listings of discussion topics. Clear, concise, and detailed agendas help people prepare for the meeting and encourage everyone to stay on track. Schedule the informational items first. Keep them brief and no longer than five to 10 minutes. Take advantage of the precious time you have with the group and address the highest-priority topics next, even if they take longer. Leave the last five or 10 minutes at the end of the meeting for a wrap-up of action items, next steps and plans for

the next meeting.

Dealing with latecomers

We have all been culprits at one time or another - being late to a meeting. Sometimes it can't be helped. Most times, however, people are late because they lose track of time or are unable to stop what they're doing at the moment.

Here are some suggestions for participants to gently encourage them to be on time.

- _ Always start the meeting on time to create the expectation of "on time" behavior.
- _ Research suggests that if you start meetings at odd times, such as 3:45, people are also most likely to arrive on time.
- _ Ring a bell or other noisemaker two minutes before a meeting, usually the sound is reminiscent of school days, and sometimes Pavlov's dog trick just might work.
- _ Send an e-mail just before the meeting to remind those to finish the e-mail they are working on.
- _ Have those who are consistently late go first on the agenda.

Everyone abide by same rules

Setting up guidelines, or ground rules, governing the protocol of meeting participation can help you run a more efficient meeting. Developing meeting ground rules to be followed by all participants is an especially good idea for new groups or meetings in which sensitive topics will be discussed. When a group establishes and agrees to guidelines, everyone becomes accountable for enforcing the rules. Here are some examples of possible meeting guidelines to adopt:

- _ No cell phone or PDA use during a meeting. (An exception might be to allow ringers to be turned to vibrate for urgencies and emergencies.)
- _ No sidebar conversations with others.
- _ Let one person talk at a time. Minimize interruptions of others.
- _ Defer unrelated issues and topics to be resolved at a later date.
- _ Keep the discussion focused and on track.

Action item accountability

After the meeting notes have been distributed and action items clarified, the group needs to agree to a mechanism of follow up and accountability for those action items. If the meeting is a regularly scheduled meeting, follow up can occur at the next scheduled time.

If this meeting was a one-time-only meeting, determine a follow-up plan with your colleagues on how the action steps will be handled. This ensures that those actions will be handled and not delayed or forgotten. Nothing is more frustrating than attending a meeting, determining next action steps and then everything being forgotten when the meeting concludes.

Meetings are part of everyday business life and can be the source of some great ideas, thoughts and momentum. But effective meetings take planning and participant accountability. Before you call a meeting, be sure you have something to meet about.

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