

Why Are Most Meetings a Waste of Time?

Most meetings are a colossal waste of time. This is almost universally true. Ask anybody, and they will tell you a story. Why are so many meetings a waste of time? There are three reasons: 1) lack of clarity of purpose, and 2) lack of a formal structure to conduct the meeting, and 3) lack of follow-up to assure accountability.

Types of Meetings

There are several types of meetings. The type of meeting depends on the intended outcome of the meeting.

The Decision Making Meeting

The primary purpose of the decision making meeting is to make decisions. Concept reviews and design reviews are decision making meetings. This type of meeting requires advance notice about the required decisions, requiring pre-meeting preparation of the attendees.

The Working Meeting

Team meetings are an excellent example of a working meeting. The purpose of such a meeting is collaboration, where the team members have to sort out various ways of solving a problem. Call a working meeting only if a face-to-face meeting is a more efficient way of accomplishing the task than working alone.

The Sales Meeting

This is a specific type of decision making meeting, where the decision is about a purchase or a about the approval of a major project or program. Such meetings can be entirely internal to a company, typically in larger companies, where the program must be sold to upper management. If the meeting includes outsiders, then the company definitely should show their best side.

The Team Meeting

This is also a specific type of decision making meeting, where the decisions are about forward progress against the team objectives. Everything in the team meeting is considered in the context of a timeline and budget. Teams that meet regularly (weekly) also accumulate a lot of information in a very short time. This information must be tracked.

Assuring Meeting Success

For a meeting to be successful there must be an owner of the meeting. The owner of the meeting must make sure that the meeting is: 1) planned, 2) conducted according to protocols, and 3) recorded with clearly established accountabilities. Additionally, all the right people must be at the meeting. Clarity of purpose helps with this. If the purpose of the meeting is to make certain decisions, then it quickly becomes clear who should attend (the decision makers and affected parties). If all essential participants cannot make it, there is no point in holding the meeting.

The Agenda

The agenda is the plan for the meeting. The "owner" of the meeting sets the agenda. In the case of a very tightly packed meeting, where a lot must be accomplished in a small amount of time, this planning is critical. A good example is an 8 hour off-site strategic planning meeting. Such a meeting is very expensive, and 8 hours is not enough time. A meeting like this will require several hours to plan, even for an experienced meeting facilitator. The "owner" of the meeting may elect to hire a professional facilitator to run the meeting, in which case, the facilitator will plan the meeting, with input from the owner of the meeting. The agenda is published before the meeting, letting people know the starting time, duration, location, and pre-meeting tasks (preparation).

Meeting Roles

Effective meetings have assigned roles, which are filled before the meeting. These roles are: leader, scribe, timekeeper, gatekeeper, and recorder. Each person with a role knows how to play that role, because they have been trained and coached in effective team meeting skills.

Minutes

Minutes are a written account of the meeting. In some cases, there is a legal obligation to produce minutes, such as the minutes of the annual meeting of the corporation, the minutes of a city council meeting, etc. The most extreme case is



MAKING MEETINGS PRODUCTIVE

the transcript produced by the court stenographer. Most meetings are not bound by legal requirements. So one might ask, why produce minutes? The short answer is this: to assure accountability. Somebody once said “If it hasn’t been written, then it hasn’t been said.” Yul Brenner, in the movie “The King and I”, said, “So it is written, so it shall be done.” These are powerful statements that underscore the importance of keeping minutes to meetings.

Accountability

Most people (about 80%) who attend a meeting don’t write anything down, so they don’t get things done because they forget what they are supposed to do. Written words, easily accessible, in the form of minutes, are the key to assuring action instead of forgetfulness.

The Problem with Meeting Minutes

If issued at all, meeting minutes have problems: 1) not properly written, 2) not properly distributed, and 3) not properly filed. In most cases, the minutes are so useless as to barely add value over never having done them at all. The problem is particularly dire with regular team meeting minutes. Teams that meet regularly pile up a massive amount of information very quickly, so keeping track of the team related information is more like a database management task. Accountability and timeliness are lost if the information is not easily accessible to all.

Running a Proper Team Meeting

The meeting agenda is published and distributed before the meeting. The attendees know who they are, make the commitment to attend, and come to the meeting prepared. The meeting leader runs the meeting according to the agenda. The purpose of the meeting is to make decisions. If a decision cannot be made, then some obstacle is preventing that decision. This obstacle is called an “Issue”, usually stemming from uncertainty that has not been resolved or addressed in a satisfactory manner. “Action” is required to resolve issues. In other words, somebody has to do something to resolve an issue. During the meeting, the Scribe logs the Decisions, Issues and Actions into a register.

After the meeting, the scribe issues the minutes, which are a “snapshot” of the team register on that meeting date. Before each meeting, the team leader requests a status on all open action items from each team member. Complete items are logged and open items are investigated.

Meeting Tools

Tools for conducting effective meetings include: template for agenda, template for minutes, and template for team register. Templates should be easily accessible to all, should have associated training and written instructions. Management should set the expectations for consistent use.

Meeting Information Management

Most companies have file servers with shared drives. Each type of company function requires different types of meetings, according to the various purposes described previously. Each function should have a place where meeting information is stored. For each team, there is a folder labeled “Meetings” which contains all agendas, minutes, and the team register.

Management Sets Expectations

Management should set the expectations for the employees of the company. For example, executives can (and should) refuse to go to a meeting for which there is no agenda. After a meeting, the managers should expect to see the minutes in the prescribed formats. Management can demand to see the team register for any team at any time. This is accountability.

Benefits of Disciplined Meeting Protocols

- The purpose of the meeting is clear.
- Since the meeting is planned, it runs quickly and is not easily derailed.
- The result (outcome) of the meeting is clear.
- Written minutes establish accountabilities, thus enabling follow-up.

Request a sample meetings booklet by calling 661-312-5898 or write to info@strategicmodularity.com

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