Turning Hours into Minutes
How to Make Meetings More Effective

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"Do it Well. Make it Fun."

Most people do not like meetings. Your colleagues aren't rolling out of bed each morning saying, "I hope we have a bunch of meetings today." Meetings take staff away from what they'd prefer to be doing. But meetings are necessary for any organization. In fact, the word "organization" implies that you *should* be "organized." Go figure. And one of the ways we get organized is to meet with one another face-to-face as a group, team or committee. I'm sure that even back in caveman days, there was a meeting each day to determine how the cavemen would hunt and catch their dinner. Of course, the next day the meeting was often attended by fewer cavemen due to their "dinner" catching them. On the positive side though, with less people, the decision making was easier.

One survey reported that 85% of workers hate meetings. That's not a surprising statistic. In fact, we could probably all agree that most meetings are tolerable at best. However, if you're running a meeting with ten people and 8.5 of them don't want to be there, the odds for success are stacked against you!

I was responsible for running quality improvement meetings when I worked in hospice and if I must be candid, the meetings were awful. I had run two and people were threatening not to come back. It was not only the content but a number of the members of the committee didn't want to be there. So, I had a challenge in front of me. At the end of the second meeting, I promised everyone that if they came back to the next meeting, it would be different.

I was required to give a report of all the quality activities that were going on throughout the organization. This was just a boring list of projects, statistics, and outcomes. So, at the third meeting, I decided to sing my report. Yes, I sang it to the tune of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song. People sat up, laughed, and started humming along. It totally changed the atmosphere of the meeting. We got to work and not only accomplished more than the previous two meeting combined, we ended early. If we can have that kind of impact with a simple change in our methods, we should always be looking for some ways to make meetings more fun. But before we get to the fun, let's look at how to run an effective meeting.

First, the person running the meeting is a facilitator, not a dictator. The best meetings are the ones that run effectively and efficiently and you don't even realize that the person running the meeting has done anything. But he or she is definitely there facilitating the process. Facilitation means moving the process along and moving the participants towards the desired outcomes. Not forcing but nudging.

In meetings, process is very important. Some decisions need to marinate and can't be made quickly. Even after simmering for a while, you may decide to go with the original suggestion, but the group needed to go through the process to be comfortable with the outcome. A baby needs to fall to walk. There is no way to avoid it. Groups sometimes need to stumble in meetings to get to a great decision.

The facilitation of discussions is important to allow everyone to have input and to help the team congeal. Effective meetings and effective teamwork rely on members feeling a part of something important and that their input is valued. We do this by creating ground rules that respect input and don't judge individuals. As someone once said, "We should deal with issues bare fisted but deal with people with gloves on." So, the role of facilitator is to support members and gingerly limit conversations that get off track.

Second, an agenda is a tool. It lets participants know what to expect and it allows the facilitator to move the meeting along. The agenda should be sent out to all participants prior to the meeting (a week is suggested) and all agenda items should have timelines associated with them so that each participant knows how much time is allotted for each discussion. Then, if someone goes over their time, they must buy back time from someone else on the agenda so that the meeting ends as scheduled.

One of the most important agenda items should be attached to every other item on the agenda and it should say, "What the heck is going to happen and who the heck is responsible for it?" This is a way of assuring that the outcome of the meeting gets accomplished. How many times have you left a meeting not knowing who was going to do what? Then you spend the next couple of days clarifying it through emails and phone calls. What a waste of time. Before everyone leaves the meeting, it should be clear who is responsible for each action item from the meeting. In fact, it's a good idea to review it at the end of each meeting.

Finally, this thing called minutes which is really a document that captures hours of discussions is another critical element of the meeting process. It should be completed within 72 hours of the meeting and distributed to participants while the information is still fresh in their minds. Otherwise, your participants will only glance at it and not remember how the actual discussions went.

That's it. That's all it takes to run a good meeting. It takes focus, organization, and patience to the facilitate the process. But since we know that almost all meetings are boring and tense, what can we do to make the experience more fun? A lot.

Making meetings fun is not rocket science but it does require that you commit time and energy to the preparation process. But I think you'll see that the return on your investment is significant and well worth the advance planning. Here are some ways you can avoid taking a beating in your meetings:

- **Assign a member of your team or committee to the role of "VP for Humor."** The primary responsibility for the VP for Humor will be to bring something fun to each meeting. It can be a joke, story, cartoon or a fun activity. I once saw a cartoon that showed a father reading a bedtime story to his son. The caption read, "Actually, they *could* put Humpty together again, but the procedure wasn't covered by his insurance." Pass that cartoon around at the start of your meeting and you're guaranteed to get a laugh or two *and* a more relaxed atmosphere in which to proceed. By the way, your VP for Humor will be flattered by the "VP" title. That is, until she realizes there is no accompanying salary increase

- **Have fun with agenda items.** As President of a local non-profit board, I used to put "Bored Meeting" at the top of the agenda instead of "Board Meeting." I thought it was funny and yet some members of the board thought it was unprofessional. However, they had no problem considering their uptight, too serious, stick-in-the-mud attitude as professional. Go figure. You can make your agenda items more fun by listing items such as the "Approval of the Hours" instead of the "Approval of the Minutes" (hey, it's truth in advertising) or by listing "Old Business" followed by "New Business" followed by "Nobody's Business!" A lively agenda will keep members interested and give them something to talk about both before and after the meeting.

- **Make the minutes of meetings fun to read.** There is nothing that indicate that meeting minutes should be boring. I've checked. While they certainly need to be accurate and professionally reflect the organizational processes represented, they can still be fun to read. I used to hide jokes or important information in the minutes of my meetings and give out prizes for the first person to find it. Basically, it was my way of getting people to read the minutes.

- **Make meeting management fun**. Sometimes the flow of a meeting is disjointed because of a dominant committee member, a conflict, or side conversations. Consider having an "Enforcer" at each meeting as a way to make sure the ground rules or the time schedules are followed. This person, armed with a Nerf gun, can shoot violators as a way to humorously move the meeting along. One organization used metal clickers found in old board games. Each committee member would hold their clicker on their lap under the table. Whenever anyone droned on and one, you could click your clicker. Because they were hidden, the guilty party never knew who clicked them. Brilliant!

- **Jazz up your reports**. Most reports include too much data and too little inspiration. A report that does not motivate your committee to some sort of action is waste of time – even if it is only for information. Consider illustrating your reports and presentations with humor. Turn your report into a game, a song or a skit rather than simply reading it. The group will remember the "experience" far longer and will be in a better frame of mind to respond accordingly.

- **"Alter" your meeting location**. Most meeting rooms are dull, boring and drab. Look around your usual meeting space. Could it use some spicing up? If so, consider decorating the room with plants, posters or cartoons so that the atmosphere is more conducive to creativity and enjoyment. You may also want to meet somewhere offsite. Many restaurants will let you use a private room for the price of a pot of coffee. Changing the room or the location can change the mood of the meeting. Changing the mood of the meeting makes it more appealing to the attendees.

- **Switch roles**. When problem solving or brainstorming, have members change roles to help them see things from another perspective. Let the manager play the staff member and the staff member play the board member. You'd be amazed at how differently we see the world when we get out of ourselves. Plus, it makes for a very lively (and funny) discussion!

- **Gather information differently**. Instead of just asking for "ideas" from your committee members, create fun games to generate ideas. Research shows that humor and creativity are closely linked. Charades, debates and skits can produce a creative atmosphere in which ideas will flourish – and it won't take any more time than simple brainstorming. For example, suppose you want to brainstorm inefficiencies on your department. Send the committee on a scavenger hunt to find the information rather than sitting in a room and just thinking about it.

- **Create fun rewards**. When your team or committee accomplishes something, reward them to make their efforts worthwhile. Offer to bake cookies, wash a car or provide other low cost incentives for your team to keep them involved, motivated and appreciated.

If your organization is going to be organized, you'll have to have meetings. Whatever you do, try to make the experience more effective *and* more fun so that 85% of your members *want* to be there.

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