

How to Host Productive Meetings

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As business professionals, we attend meetings constantly. Sometimes, many of the meetings we attend are a waste of time. Often, they are counter productive. If you are chairing a meeting, there are a few tips to remember.

Preparation

Preparing ahead is important. It begins with thinking about what you want to accomplish. Are there multiple things you want to accomplish? Do some things belong in a separate meeting? The wise meeting chair should make a list of his objectives and edit them according to practicality, scope and timing. For example, be realistic, practical. Can the things you want to accomplish actually be done? Based on your staff, is the scope of what you are trying to accomplish too massive? How many people need to be involved to see this idea to completion? Do you actually have the time? There may be too much going on already in your organization for people to embrace your objectives. By editing your objectives ahead, you can focus people on implementation versus resistance.

Scheduling

Scheduling a meeting when it is convenient can be challenging. However, the schedule does affect whether people can devote their full attention. The more advance notice you give for a meeting, the more likely attendees can clear their calendar. Some researchers believe shorter meetings are actually more productive since they force people to focus. However, the length of the meeting should be determined by the complexity of the issue or project and the difficulty in bringing participants together. It is also important to consider carpooling, work habits and rush hour traffic when making scheduling decisions.

Logistics

Before making a final decision on location, consider whether your selection of a site is convenient.

Can people have the option of attending by video or teleconferencing? Is it best to hold the meeting offsite, during lunch, or before the actual work day begins? If there is a need to host a meeting over the breakfast or lunch hour, the wise leader provides food, even if he or she has to personally absorb the cost. It demonstrates to those involved that you appreciate their efforts to make the meeting happen. In addition, by providing food, people can focus on the tasks at hand versus being hungry.

Agenda

People like to know what will be covered in advance. They also like the opportunity to amend the agenda or to comment on it before a final agenda is created. Agenda items should apply or be relevant to all attendees. Any amendments to the agenda should be done ahead of time, not during the actual meeting. If new topics for discussion occur during the meeting, it is best to put them on a flip chart and discuss them only if time permits. Finally, successful agendas attach a time frame to each item to be discussed.

Ground Rules

Every meeting should begin with some established ground rules. For example, you might insist that meetings begin and end on time or that participation by all is essential, not optional. Another ground rule might be not to interrupt or judge people's comments. Ground rules that are determined by the group, versus the leader, are likely to be embraced.

The Leader's Role

The Chair Person of the meeting needs to be cognizant of his or her role. In essence the job is like that of the traffic cop in the street, guiding people towards their destination. Obviously, disparate elements will come into play, and, as chair, you may have to referee disagreements and massage egos. Periodically, you should summarize where the group stands and refocus them on what still needs to be accomplished. Additionally, the leader has the responsibility to see that everyone's opinion is heard and that all are respected. Once decisions have been reached, they need to be charted and recorded by someone other than the leader. Timetables and the person responsible for implementation should also be noted. Once the meeting ends, par-

Continued on page 2

ticipants should receive copies of all agreed- upon decisions.

Hosting a productive meeting takes preparation and effort. By paying attention to some issues on the front end, the meeting can be well received and can generate the results you desire.

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