

MEETINGS: TIME WASTED OR WELL SPENT?

Some 25 million meetings take place in corporate America daily. Roughly half that time is wasted. Why so many unproductive meetings? One reason is that American business culture is "low context." We prize highly specialized functional experts who have a thorough understanding of what they do. This requires us to meet often, as teams, to exchange information and get a view of the bigger picture.

Another reason is that teams too often find themselves returning to the same issues and decisions. That occurs when individuals feel disenfranchised from decision making and do not fully accept the results. They go off to perform their own specialized functions not abiding by the team's decision, only to find that the decision resurfaces, often with more intensity.

Every team has the potential to achieve great meetings. It's a matter of finding the right formula. Our job, as coaches, is to work with the team and its leader in a structured, organized process to discover and apply that formula.

The basic problems with meetings

Among the most common problems with business meetings are that they

- **Try to accomplish too much.** You can't do an information dump, solve problems, make decisions, plan for action, etc., all in one short meeting.

- **Lack clear objectives and/or organization.** If objectives have been identified, the agenda may not properly reflect them. [Not all meetings benefit from an agenda. If problem solving is the objective, for example, the nature of the problem(s) may not be apparent until the group meets, making an agenda premature and possibly a deterrent.] There may not be an established process to allow each person to contribute to meeting the objectives.

- **Lack clearly defined roles for participants.** Too often team members are asked to carve out valuable time for meetings in which they have no real role. "I talk, you listen" isn't a good format because no one listens. It's BlackBerry® time.

- **Minimize differences of opinion and conflict.** Emotion is given no place in American business—certainly not in decision making. We don't know how to handle strong emotions, so we suppress them in meetings. We even expect our meeting leaders to suppress them for us. Yet it's emotion that contains the passion and commitment we strive for.

The role of the leader

Leadership is a major factor in the success or failure of team meetings. An executive once called me in because his team wasn't creative enough. In talking with the team, I learned that he had come into meetings swinging a base-

ball bat and shouting, "I pay you people to be creative!" Fear and intimidation won't create effective meetings. Leaders need to

- 1) Create an open environment.** Participants must know that their most challenging input will be welcomed, not judged.

- 2) Engage everyone.** Meetings need to be structured so that there's less information dumping and more room for conversation, debate, and airing of emotion.

- 3) Prepare participants** so they come to a meeting knowing

- They will be able to contribute. The process should allow analysts, problem solvers, organizers, information synthesizers, etc., to contribute according to their individual strengths.

- They will get what they need: clarity, a plan of action, a direction, etc.

- Something positive will come from their investment of time and effort.

- 4) Let participants know how each decision will be made.** The decision-making mode is a key to engagement. If your objective is to achieve buy-in, on the continuum of least to most successful the four styles are

- *Directive:* Make a decision and announce it.

- *Collaborative I:* Make a decision, announce it, and challenge others to change your view.

- *Collaborative II:* Make a tentative decision and gather input to make the final decision.

- *Consensus:* Participate in a process where everyone contributes to the decision and agrees to support it.

- 5) Manage unproductive behavior.** One person or a clique behaving disruptively can drag down the whole team. These situations have to be managed on a case-by-case basis, whether through the use of group dynamics to change the offending behavior, the leader pulling aside and confronting the offender(s), or an established process.

Working with a coach to ensure that meetings are productive, engaging, and inspiring will help reduce the amount of time your team spends in meetings. ■

For more information about team coaching and other coaching services available through The Ayers Group, contact Joan Caruso, Managing Director, Organizational Effectiveness Consulting, at joan.caruso@ayers.com or 212-889-7788.

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