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We've Got to Stop Meeting Like This!

by Stuart Blickstein and Karen Blickstein

So Paul said, "I run great meetings. I allow one hour per week for the staff meeting, and when that hour is up, the meeting is over." Somehow, although I didn't ask him, I don't think that Paul's meetings are all that great. I'm not even sure that they don't take too long.

According to some estimates, American managers attend upwards of 20 million meetings per year. Industry Week estimated that unproductive meetings cost American business more than \$30 billion every year. And those figures don't include your church, school and charity meetings. How can we recoup some of that time and money? We can certainly use it more effectively.


Successful meetings require that three issues be dealt with: preparation, facilitation and participation.

"Let's get this staff meeting going, so we can all get back to work. Does anybody have any problems?" If this is the attitude, why bother? When nobody reports a problem, we have wasted a lot of time gathering the clan. Even if someone does need help -- do we have the right people there to help her?

Meetings need to have a clearly thought out objective, and the people who can move the meeting toward resolution must be there. Having the wrong people attend, or the right people absent, is just plain unproductive. This is where preparation is important. Carefully plan the objective of the meeting, whom to invite, when and where to hold the meeting. Then prepare an agenda and distribute it. Now you are on the way to a productive meeting.

"How was your weekend?" whispered Sam to Diane. "Great, and yours?" she replied. And off they went into their own world while you try to resolve the great issues of the day. So what if Sam is your company's marketing expert, and Diane's department will have to implement the new product rollout? They are the right people, and they are (sort of) at the meeting.

While good planning is an essential ingredient of successful meetings, it does not guarantee successful outcomes. Side conversations, axes to grind, reticence, digressions and arguments are just some meeting killers. Unless we recognize and respond to these behaviors, which are common and natural at meetings, our meetings will stray off track and we will not reach our goals. It is the responsibility of the meeting leader, the facilitator, to encourage participation and keep the meeting focused.



Drawing out quiet participants is not hard. Once people understand that their contributions are welcome, indeed necessary, and that their contributions will be given serious consideration, they generally participate willingly. A little show of respect goes a long way. Similarly, halting side conversations, or other behaviors that interfere with the meeting's progress, must also be accomplished with respect and without derision.

However, the facilitator is not alone in this responsibility. Each participant must come prepared to contribute to the progress of the meeting and to be receptive to the ideas of others. Reading the agenda in advance and arriving with information in hand, and being ready and willing to give and take, are the actions of a good participant.

Good planning, effective facilitation and active participation are the keys to productive meetings. How are yours?