

Practical Strategies On-line! Fall 2004

The email and Web newsletter on organization and management issues for business.

From Michael H. Smith, Ph.D., and Associates

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Ten Tips For More Effective Meetings

It's been 28 years since Michael Doyle and David Straus wrote their groundbreaking book **How To Make Meetings Work (1976)**. Are you like many of my clients who gripe about numbing, deadening meetings? As one publication put it, "days, weeks, months, years of our lives are slipping away in stuffy, overcrowded conference rooms". Little appears to be accomplished and no one seems to be able to do anything about it.

Doyle and Straus claimed that there were 11 million meetings in the US every day in 1976. Doyle says that there are 25 million today and most of them don't work. If you calculate how much productive time plus lost wages accrue to those sitting in the room, a truly staggering figure emerges.

Fortunately there are answers for this dilemma. Let me offer you ten tips for turning around your unproductive meetings.

1. Is the meeting necessary?

Let's start with a fundamental-and radical- question: Is your meeting necessary? A meeting largely serves two important business purposes: sharing information or making a decision. Can some other method of information sharing/decision making be used? Meetings are often held because "it's time for our meeting" with very little thought spent in what will actually happen. So rethink if you even need to hold it.

2. Send an agenda in advance.

If you do decide to hold the meeting, send an agenda at least three days in advance. The agenda should be clear about what the meeting results should

be, how people should prepare and what roles they will play. Show how the meeting connects with other meetings that may have contributed to the issues that will be addressed. Ask for feedback. The three days allow for modifications if needed.

And don't forget to connect the meeting with the larger mission and vision of the organization. This creates and reinforces the much-needed larger context for the meeting.

3. Start and end on time.

Not doing this just (starting on time) reinforces the latecomers and punishes those who arrive on time. There are few things more maddening than waiting for stragglers and then listening to the half-hearted apologies-or no apologies at all.

Ending on time indicates that you value people's work that must be done after the meeting. Unfinished items can be carried over as part of the planning for the next meeting.

4. Create ground rules and follow them.

These should include:

- Whether "checking in" time should be before or part of the meeting
- Reinforcing starting and ending on time
- Creating a climate of trust where people can speak freely and no one gets hurt
- Setting boundaries around the decision making process. When do you just want information from the group and when do you want a group decision.

5. Appoint a recorder, timekeeper and facilitator.

This was Doyle and Straus' unique contribution to meeting effectiveness. These three roles keep the meeting moving and on track.

Appoint people to play these roles at each meeting. The roles can be rotated during the meeting if there is an important issue that the role players wants to participate in.

Have the recorder chart (on a flip chart) the "meeting notes" as the meeting progresses. This "public" recording of the meeting eliminates the need for minutes and allows everyone to stay involved by having his or her contributions noted. This method also allows for making corrections on the spot. The notes should be transcribed and made available to all after the meeting.

The timekeeper notes time allotted for agenda items and makes sure the time is adhered to.

The facilitator keeps the meeting on track and makes sure the ground rules are followed, participation is wide spread, people are listened to and issues are aired and brought to a conclusion.

6. Plan the meeting.

Review the agenda and the meeting's purpose. Get agreement on the outcomes to be accomplished by the end of the meeting. Make sure you have genuine buy-in.

7. Appoint a Devil's advocate.

For each issue discussed, appoint and rotate the role of "devil's advocate". Many people will not speak out at meetings for fear of retribution, low group trust or just the fear of looking stupid. As a result "group think" becomes the norm and poor decisions result. By appointing a devil's advocate, you give official permission for raising differing views.

8. Designate follow-up.

After an issue is agreed upon, designate:

- Who is responsible
- What they will do
- By when

This is the key issue of accountability. It makes the meeting worthwhile because it results in real organizational change.

9. Do a meeting review.

On a flip chart sheet, draw a line down the middle. On the top of the left column place a simple plus (+). On the other column, place a delta (Δ) (for needs improvement). List group responses to the following:

- Were the outcomes achieved?
- What worked and what didn't?
- How can the meeting be improved?

Use this information to plan the next meeting.

10. Monitor what happens after the meeting.

Note the water cooler/coffee machine conversations after the meeting. That's where the real meeting analysis often comes out. Comments made away from a meeting — negative or positive — do not contribute to the meeting's productivity. If you hear such comments, figure out a way to bring that information to the next meeting. It may require a revision of the ground rules so people feel safe to discuss the real issues.

Meetings don't have to be the horrible experience that they often are. By following these tips, your meetings and your organizational results will improve.

Interested in learning more? My one-hour "tune up" on meeting management is easily shared in your office, with your work team during a

meeting, or over the phone. Please contact me for more information.

Dept of Diversity: International Cross Cultural Negotiation

Over the past 20 years, a number of strategies have emerged to help Americans in international negotiations and not all of them have been helpful. The first strategy was to negotiate in your own style and let others do the same. This strategy caused much confusion based on unspoken intentions and unclear meaning about symbolic actions.

The second strategy was a swing in the opposite direction. Americans were to learn the negotiation style of other cultures. Unfortunately, it takes much time and effort to learn the style of another culture. The limited skill caused confusion; it also caused discouragement when, at times, Americans were taken advantage of.

The third strategy was a blend of the first two: be sensitive to cultural differences without sacrificing your negotiating strengths. Companies would provide guidebooks with "do's and don'ts" such as "In Japan, understand that an invitation to socialize should not be put off until after you've reached a deal". This strategy lent itself to cultural stereotyping. In addition, many negotiators from other countries were quite sophisticated and would take offense at efforts to accommodate.

Research has shown that the background, skills, style and experience are more important in a negotiation than cultural assumptions. Thus the above approaches are not successful because they overlook individual differences. So a better approach is to;

1. Do research about the person with whom you will be negotiating. If the person has a lot of experience, sticking with your standard style will probably cause less confusion.

2. Enlist an advisor from the other's culture. If the other person has limited international experience, the advisor person will coach you over the rough spots. Most important negotiations use experts for help.

3. Pay attention to the dynamics. Continually paraphrase and check for meaning. If confused, try to reframe and re-discuss. These negotiation strategies are often similar to what you do domestically.

Negotiation, Sept. 04

Having trouble with diversity and cross cultural issues at your workplace? The above material on cross cultural negotiation may also apply to your domestic situation. My associate Kennette Reed and I have

developed a program called "New Approaches to Diversity". It helps you avoid the focus on cultural stereotyping and to instead, constructively negotiate differences. Please contact me for further information.

Dept. Of Influence: Building Relationships

Back in the 60's, McLuhan said that the medium is the message. Robert Cialdini, Arizona State University professor, claims that in the realm of social influence, the relationship is the message.

Reporting a recent study on dating couples, Cialdini states that three approaches were tried to get a change in behavior: the coercive, rational and relationship-raising. The last was most successful because of a simple strategy: before asking for a change from a partner, the person made mention of their existing relationship. They made statements such as "You know, we've been together for a while now" or "We're a couple and share the same goals".

This approach is effective because it doesn't state the validity of a position. It offers the relationship as a reason for change, based on the strengths of trust and security, a reason that often is forgotten in the heat of a discussion.

The key question is: will it work at the workplace? Cialdini says yes and not without hard work. Citing studies, he states that it's the human condition to look for differences rather than commonalities. And this focus on differences gets worse under conditions of anxiety.

So we need to train ourselves to search for commonalities. When workers and organizations focus on shared organizational identity, loyalty and citizenship, and when we genuinely get to know each other, intentions are perceived more positively. Using "we" and "us" words then have real meaning.

Harvard Management Update, Sept. 04

Dept. of Mental Health: Workplace Depression

Women still make 74 cents to 77 cents for every dollar that a man earns. And depressed woman say that lower pay is their biggest obstacle to advancing their careers-even greater than gender discrimination, pregnancy or child care issues.

According to the University of Michigan Depression Center, the issue is compounded because 3/4 of depressed women won't ask for help because of fear of hurting their current and future jobs.

Prevention magazine as reported in American Society for Training and Development Journal, August 2004

Depression at work can be a serious issue for men as well as women. For more information, including a depression checklist, see Practical Strategies "Treating Depression in the Workplace" available under "Newsletters" at www.michaelhsmithphd.com.

Dept of Creative/Strange Organizational Behavior

Workers who took part in weekly drum circles for six weeks felt calmer and were less likely to quit their jobs than those who did not participate. The Mind-Body Wellness Center in Meadville, PA claims that a shared musical experience creates strong bonds between workers.

Whatever happened to the string quartet?

Self magazine as reported in American Society for Training and Development Journal, August 2004

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