Make Your Next Meeting Your Most Productive Meeting Ever!

Building Productivity into Your Meetings

When I left college some 40 years ago I thought one of the great parts about business would be the meetings. I pictured myself sitting in a room with other managers making decisions that would change the face of business. My grandiose visions were shattered after the second or third meeting. First of all, meetings are a lot of work; there is work to prepare for the meeting and follow-up work after the meeting. Anyone who has sat through one or two days of meetings knows they are as physically exhausting as playing five sets of tennis. As for decisions being made in meetings I've found full grown adults can't even agree whether they want chocolate doughnuts with pink frosting, or pink doughnuts with chocolate frosting!

Whether you like meetings or view them with disdain, meetings are here to stay. Peter Drucker wrote in *The Effective Executive*, "We meet because people holding different jobs have to cooperate to get a specific task done. We meet because the knowledge and experience needed in a specific situation are not available in one head, but have to be pieced together out of the knowledge and experience of several people."

Although Drucker wrote these words nearly 40 years ago they are truer now than ever. Even though you might like to avoid all meetings and have your people out there doing "more productive" work there are at least six reasons why meetings will be even more important in the future:

The world around us is changing fast. The base of man's knowledge is increasing exponentially. No one has a corner on knowledge or experience. With the pace of business increasing people will meet to make decisions necessary to manage shorter business cycles.

Technology is exploding. Computers have made it possible to communicate with not only people but with computer libraries, art galleries, universities, and more through on-line services

and the Internet. All this technology and access to information will be channeled through the business in meetings.

Globalization of business. Companies are competing not just within their own countries, but globally. Meetings will be required to manage the flow of international businesses.

Teams are flourishing. Businesses are developing partnerships internally with suppliers, and with consumers. Meetings between cross-functional managers will be necessary to coordinate the activities of the group

Reengineering is perpetual. Corporate hierarchies have been flattened. Corporate design will become more fluid to keep up with the changes in business. Meetings will help control the work processes.

Demographic changes. Not only is the world getting smaller through the use of technology but the face of the workforce is also changing. As the workforce changes the needs of the consumer changes. The Pacific Rim has become a technological powerhouse. The European community is a world-class competitor. The countries from the former Soviet Union hunger for modern conveniences and staples of all kinds. Meetings will help keep up with these shifting consumer needs.

With all this change those who learn how to manage their businesses to meet consumers' needs better and faster will have a distinct competitive edge. Part of that competitive advantage comes from the ability to manage the meeting process efficiently.

The First Meeting Consultant

Hundreds of years ago the first meeting consultant, Jethro, told Moses that if all he did was have meetings with people all day he would end up killing himself and the people he was trying to help (Exodus 18). Whenever two people couldn't agree about something they would trudge off to see Moses and let him decide what to do.

This sounds a lot like business life today; two people can't agree on a strategy so they go see the boss and let her decide. More often than not a meeting is scheduled to deal with the issue. Moses called a number of meetings himself. Usually the meetings dealt with God's law and included representatives from each tribe.

The world has changed a lot since Moses' day and it will continue to change long beyond our short time here on earth. The better we are at meeting to get specific tasks done the more likely our business will be successful. So Drucker was right, we meet to piece together the knowledge and experience of people.

The Purpose of Meetings

A 1989 study of 903 employees from 36 companies completed by the University Of Southern California Annenberg School Of Communications found that there were nine primary purposes of meetings:

- Reconcile a conflict   29%
- Reach a decision   26
- Solve a problem   11
- Ensure understanding   11
- Facilitate communication   5
- Solicit support   4
- Explore new ideas   4
- Accept reports   2
- Demonstrate a system   2
- Other   6

Many of these purposes overlap. Someone may demonstrate how a computer system works to get support for the purchase. You may attempt to reconcile a conflict by facilitating communication.

If you boil these meeting purposes down even further, you see that meetings serve either to solve problems or to educate. Problem solving in a meeting may take the form of resolving a conflict to reach a decision, or brainstorming new ways of going to the customer. Education in a meeting includes telling or showing employees or customers how a system or product will work.

The one meeting purpose that was not identified in the Annenberg study was that companies use meetings to control processes. By focusing a group's attention on a meeting agenda management can control the work process. For example, let's assume that management knows that increased customer service is a key to building business. Management convenes meetings to discuss the importance of customer service and then directs employees to create sub-committees to work the issue and management. Viola! Control of the work process!

The Meeting as an Asset

Time is money. No business can survive without understanding this maxim. A meeting is a use of an asset called time. It is a decision to use the asset time in one way versus another. Companies who manage meeting time as though it were cash will reap the same kind of financial rewards as those who manage their cash flow well.

Most meeting consultants say the cost of a meeting is at least double the cost of the person's salary plus travel, hotels, meals, etc. So let's say you have a meeting in your own conference room and that no one has to stay overnight in a hotel. If you have ten people in the meeting at an average salary of $75,000 that yields an hourly cost of a meeting of $375 per hour. A full day of this group's time costs $3,000! Double that, and the true cost of this meeting is closer to $6,000!

Get fifty of these people together in different cities for a four-hour video conference and the tab would be around $7,500. Double that and the true cost of this video conference is closer to $15,000!

The 3M Company estimated that that its 3,500 worldwide managers meetings spent 4.4 million hours in meetings at a cost to 3M of a whopping $78.8 million!

It's staggering to think about the raw cost, but now add the opportunity cost of meetings that were unproductive, meetings that should have never been called in the first place, and people attending meetings who didn't need to be there. It's no wonder some companies have said, "No more meetings!" Of course the answer isn't, "No more meetings," but "Make meetings productive."

Getting Started

Making your company's meetings more productive will require planning, training, and tenacity. Here are four steps to get you started.

#1 - Pre-Planning

Remember your English teacher and the guidelines for writing a story; Who, What, Where, When, and How? Planning for a productive meeting is much the same, just change the order a bit.

- **What** do you want to accomplish? Is the meeting purpose educational, problem solving, or systems control? The purpose of the meeting and the meeting objective are the most important factors to consider when planning for a productive meeting.

- **How** do you expect to accomplish the meeting objective? Based on the meeting purpose, what is the best way to accomplish the meeting objective?

- **Who** must be in attendance? Make sure the necessary people are in attendance before you consider inviting the "nice to have" people.

- **When** does the meeting need to be convened? Is there a problem or other time-driven issue that dictates the meeting time?

- **Where** should the meeting be held? Conference rooms are nice for short meetings, but consider off-site locations when a whole day or more is needed.

#2 - Agenda Development

Developing a solid, focused agenda is a necessary element of the meeting planning process. Begin by establishing the agenda with input from the team, craft the agenda allowing adequate time for the topics to be covered and needed breaks, then and only then, distribute the agenda to the team along with instructions for pre-work that needs to be completed.

- **Develop** a preliminary agenda based on the meeting purpose. If you have a work team consider having the team submit agenda topics for inclusion in the final agenda. Submissions should include the agenda topic, purpose, who will coordinate, time needed, and any special equipment needed.

- **Craft** the final agenda leaving time for two short breaks every four hours plus a non-working lunch, and or dinner, as appropriate.

- **Detail** in the agenda any pre-work that needs to be completed. Forward the completed agenda to the attendees with plenty of lead time so they can thoroughly prepare for the meeting.

#3 - Meeting Operations

Learning to run a productive meeting will take time and effort. Here are nine guidelines to get you started:

- **Room Layout.** Layout should facilitate accomplishment of the meeting purpose. Round tables are good for small group discussions, U-shape for large group discussions, or classroom for training meetings. Avoid having a speaker or a movie screen against a wall with windows. When off-site, avoid rooms with distracting views of swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. Make sure acoustics are good, and that video equipment is working properly and can be seen throughout the room.

- **Start Time.** Always start exactly on time. Remember, time is a non-renewable asset. Don't waste it.

- **Opening.** The opening is critical since it sets the tone of the meeting. In groups where discussion is expected make sure everyone knows everyone else. In large groups have everyone at least introduce themselves to their neighbors. Once the introductions have been made, state the purpose of the meeting and review the meeting principles.

- **Meeting Principles.** Golfers have a set of rules for summer and winter play. Meetings should also have rules. Rules for meetings can be different depending on the meeting purpose. For example, when a free-flowing discussion is valued that rule should be engaged. In other cases it is best to hold discussion questions to a specific time. Many teams establish specific sets of rules they use for certain types of team meetings.

- **Parking Lot.** In a meeting where open discussion occurs there will often be questions or ideas that are worth pursuing, but are off the subject. Use a flip chart to make note of parking lot issues and circle back to them as time permits or need dictates.

- **Scribe.** Appoint someone to document key points of the meeting. This should include agenda topics, decisions made, persons responsible, follow-up steps needed, etc.

- **Facilitator.** Appoint a facilitator who will make sure that the meeting principles are followed. The facilitator keeps the focus of the meeting on the agenda topic and makes sure that discussion is focused toward achieving the agenda purpose.

- **Timekeeper.** Appoint someone to keep track of the meeting schedule. Don't allow an interesting discussion to run 30 minutes over schedule and risk not having enough time for other important topics. As the appointed time for the conclusion of each agenda topic comes near the timekeeper should announce the time remaining. If a topic is really important you may *choose* to extend the time and modify other elements of the agenda.

- **Meeting Close.** Conclude the meeting on-time. Review the meeting objective and key points of agenda items. Focus on results achieved and follow-up work to be completed.

#4 - Meeting Follow-Up
There is still work to be done after the meeting is over:

- **Meeting Evaluation.** Evaluate the meeting in terms of effectiveness and productivity. Make notes on what worked well, and what needs improvement.

- **Meeting Notes.** Review the meeting notes from the scribe for completeness and accuracy. Distribute to attendees and other parties as appropriate immediately after the meeting.

One Final Thought

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, provided instructions for the orderly worship of God. He stressed that words must be for the edification of the body, and that only one person should speak at a time. Concluding these instruction he wrote, *"For God is not a God of disorder but of peace"* (1 Cor. 14:32).

There are many Biblical examples that highlight the importance of an organized approach to work. One of my favorites is depicted when Jesus feeds the 5,000 by organizing the people into groups, having the disciples hand out food, and then having them pick up the leftovers (Mark 6).

There is no reason for the meetings we run to be a mass of confusion. We can, with a little thought and planning, prepare ourselves and our employees to run meetings productively.

Time is one of the few non-renewable resources that we have the ability to use productively or to waste. Don't waste it in unproductive meetings!

Cases in Real Life

A meeting I attended some time ago provides a good example of what can happen when meeting principles are not followed.

The afternoon meeting was held in a conference room that accommodated our group of 15 comfortably. There was a flip chart to capture ideas. Since the meeting purpose involved group discussion, the tables were set in a U-shape. Coffee and sodas were available in the room so no one would "disappear" to get refreshments.

The meeting owner started with a review of the meeting purpose which was to brainstorm new project ideas. Sounds great doesn't it? This meeting owner obviously understood some of the important elements of running a productive meeting.

However, the meeting would have been more productive had several meeting principles been followed.

1) The meeting started almost 20 minutes late. As people arrived for the meeting they cooled their heels while waiting for the final participants and the meeting leader to arrive.

2) Introductions were not made. Even the meeting leader didn't know everyone in the room!

3) Several people in the room really didn't need to be there because they had no experience with the issues being discussed.

4) After the meeting purpose was stated it was immediately modified. Rather than get ideas for new projects, a review of current projects was undertaken. While it was interesting to review current projects status it was not the stated purpose of the meeting.

5) While most of the group contributed responsibly one person didn't say a word during the entire meeting and no one solicited her opinion. On the other end of the spectrum, one man spoke up loudly and frequently to tell stories of how the work he did was like the point being discussed. He jumped right into the conversation interrupting whoever was talking.

6) The meeting ended 30 minutes late without ever focusing on new project ideas. In fact, even the current project review was incomplete.

Despite what happened it would not have been very difficult for this meeting to have been turned into a productive success:

1) Assign a scribe, facilitator, and a timekeeper. The facilitator and timekeeper can be the same person.

2) Take a moment for introductions. Include, if appropriate, the project each person manages.

3) If it is really important to modify the purpose of the meeting to include a review of current projects, then announce the change. Set a specific time for the project review and ask the timekeeper to keep you on track. If you have 20 minutes and ten projects, then limit each person to two minutes.

4) The facilitator should make sure that everyone participates if they have something to contribute. This is as simple as saying, "Do you have an idea about this?" Also, for the man who interrupts to tell stories, the facilitator can remind the group to stay on track.

5) Focus the meeting on the primary purpose; to generate new project ideas. Brainstorming should be informal. Capture all the ideas on the flipchart without judging the worth of the idea.

6) The scribe captures each of these ideas and other key points. Document follow-up needed and persons responsible.

7) Conclude the meeting with a review of the purpose, the work accomplished, and next steps.

This meeting got off to a good start with a good room layout and stated purpose. But as you can see, a stated purpose doesn't guarantee a productive meeting without following important meeting principles!

Meeting Notes

Use these meeting notes to increase the productivity of your groups' meetings.

1) Establish Operating Principles for your meetings. Develop different principles for different types of meetings.

      a. Ask your group to list the values and principles they view as important. For example: One conversation at a time, don't interrupt others, no personal attacks, no foul language, be on time, prepare for meetings in advance, etc.

      b. Capture this list on a flip chart.

      c. Ask the group to consolidate similar principles into one.

      d. Repeat for each type of meeting you expect to have; decision making, brainstorming, teaching, etc.

      e. Post the meeting principle list in the room during every meeting until everyone is aware of the principles.

2) Establish a meeting schedule. In many businesses it is easier to establish a meeting schedule a year in advance than it is to try to rearrange schedules at the last minute.

      a. Along with the meeting schedule assign facilitator, scribe, and timekeeper responsibilities to people on a rotating basis.

3) Prior to each meeting ask the group to submit agenda topics. Each submission should include topic owner, purpose, time required, desired outcome, and any special equipment needed.

4) Complete the agenda to distribute to participants along with a cover letter that announces the location, and confirms the time and date. Complete this with enough lead time for adequate advance preparation.

5) Arrive at the meeting site early to check the room layout, acoustics, lighting, etc.

6) Follow your meeting agenda closely, but be flexible to allow for adjustments in time requirements where necessary.

7) Follow-Up.

      a. Complete a meeting evaluation. Detail what worked and what did not work well.

      b. Review meeting notes and distribute to attendees.

      c. Make sure that decisions are followed-up, and that project work is completed.

Problem People:

Adapted from Michael Doyle and David Straus' book, *How To Make Meetings Work.*

The Latecomer. Always arrives late and causes additional disruption as they get brought up-to-date.

The Early Leaver. Likes to leave meetings early to get on with other "more important" work.

The Broken Record. Likes to say the same thing over and over again. Occasionally even uses different words.

The Doubting Thomas. The naysayer in the group who is convinced that everything worth trying has already been tried.

The Headshaker. Uses non-verbal cues to dramatically express disagreement.

The Dropout. Mentally the Dropout has checked out. They busy themselves doing something other than paying attention to the meeting topic.

The Whisperer. Can't seem to keep from engaging in disruptive side conversations.

The Loudmouth. Likes the sound of his own voice, and tends to dominate the conversation.

The Attacker. Likes to criticize by launching personal attacks.

The Interpreter. Tells you what someone else is trying to say. Usually by interrupting them.

The Gossiper. Thinks rumor and innuendo are more fun than facts.

The Know-It-All. Tries to force his opinion on the group because of his superior knowledge.

The Backseat Driver. Likes to tell everyone what to do.

The Busybody. Runs in and out of the meeting to take phone calls or deal with other crises.

The Interrupter. Can't wait until someone else finishes a sentence to start talking.