advice chief

How to run a productive meeting

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"Unproductive meetings are a total waste of my time." How many times have you heard someone say that? As for me, I'd rather put a pencil in my eye than listen to people ramble on for no other reason than to hear themselves talk.

Over the years I felt like I was a PMA (Professional Meeting Attender). On some days I attended meetings all day long and then got nothing accomplished afterwards. However, over time, I learned to make my contribution to those lame-duck meetings purposeful and engaging when it was my turn to step up to the podium. When others appreciated my effort, they followed suit and our meetings started becoming more effective.

What did I do to help meetings become productive? I followed the tips I learned from John G. Miller, author of *The Question Behind the Question* and *Outstanding!* Here are his tips:

1) Have a clear leader. Only one person should run a meeting. Two or more meeting leaders creates confusion and halts meeting productivity.

2) Use a list for your agenda. Create a list of items that need to be covered and share the list with attendees before the meeting begins. Keep the list as small as possible and do your best to stick to it during the meeting.

3) Focus on the right things. Spending time attempting to hash out things people have no control over gets nothing accomplished and only makes people feel frustrated and negative. Stay focused on the things you can actually do something about. In fact, if there's no problem to solve or decision to make, then a meeting may not be necessary. Consider passing on information via a report distribution system or by email.

4) Meet at the right time. Know your culture and conduct meetings at times that work best for your people. The wrong times are typically right before and after lunch, at the end of the day, early Monday morning, and late on Friday. I'd never hold my weekly staff meetings first thing on Monday morning. Rather, I'd wait for a few hours to give people a chance to grab a cup of coffee, get organized, or get something else accomplished for the day.

5) Consider changing meeting locations. The same old location every time can become dull. If you can find other accommodating locations, use them--even somewhere outdoors can work! I would sometimes hold meetings at an outdoor park atrium, using handouts as visual aids instead of the typical audio visual equipment. This would contribute to people feeling refreshed throughout and after the meeting.

6) Invite the right people. If someone's presence isn't critical, they don't need to be there. Their input can be provided in writing to the meeting organizer beforehand. I used to hate attending a 2-hour meeting just to make a singular statement that could have been displayed on a PowerPoint slide for everyone to read instead.

7) Demand preparedness. People coming to meetings unprepared drains energy, wastes time, and causes the group to get very little done. It reminds me of this kid I used to know who would show up to play hockey without a hockey stick. Useless.

8) Be punctual. Start on time. If you're continually late, people start thinking it's okay that they, too, can stroll in late. I also recommend not starting a meeting on the hour. For some people, 9:00 means "around 9:00" and their arrival times will vary from 9:00 to 9:10. Instead, announce that you're starting a meeting at 8:57 and watch what happens. You'll be surprised to find everyone at their seats by 8:55, wondering why in the heck a meeting was called to start at 8:57.

9) Control tangents. When conversations get off track, pull them back to the topic at hand. Be firm and non-confrontational about it. If someone's feelings get hurt in the process, oh well. At least you're keeping your meeting productive and on track.

10) If someone is done, let them leave. Don't waste their time having them sit through discussion topics that don't apply to or affect them.

Lastly, I have one more possible suggestion but it may not be ideal for everyone: Meet at a place that has no chairs and leave people standing. You'll be impressed with how efficient, crisp, and precise people will be in their participation when they're unable sit down.

Meetings don't have to be a painful event that people despise. Make them fun, interesting, different, unpredictable, but most of all, productive!

~ The End ~