



Effective Meetings #2 Getting Started: Have a Meeting on Meetings

In a previous article¹ we discussed that some have estimated the cost of ineffective meetings to be 25% or more of a workday. This provides a major incentive to improve meetings.

For many, however, the large number of issues associated with improving meetings may appear overwhelming, and thus it may be difficult to start making changes. A good way to get started is to have a meeting devoted exclusively to improving your organization's meetings. A primary goal of this initial meeting is to establish a set of enforceable guidelines that address the major issues of ineffective meetings in your organization. Set up this meeting to demonstrate to the attendees that a new mode of meetings can and will make an impact in organizational and personal effectiveness.

The first step is to identify the major meeting issues for your organization. You may experience some resistance from others, and don't let that stop you. Many will bet their last paycheck that "Meetings will always be the way they have always been; change is simply not going to happen." Many of our clients initially considered meetings as a "necessary evil" that had to be tolerated.

Some people might say that solving the meeting problem lies elsewhere in the organization, outside their control. For example, all of a company's meetings might end and start at the same time, with no allowance for transit time. As a result participants are almost always late. Some of the problems might be of this nature. However, you will be happily surprised at how many issues you are able to handle effectively within your own range of influence.

Some suggested guidelines for your "Meeting on Meetings" that have been effective include:

Before The Meeting

- Keep in mind that this is a fact-finding meeting as well as an opportunity to alter the fundamental context for future meetings.
- This is the first demonstration of a new way of conducting meetings, and it will probably be uncomfortable [especially for you].

¹ *Effective Meetings #1: The Cost of Ineffective Meetings*



- Be prepared to hear things with which you might disagree.
- Allow for the possibility that the results will be a complete surprise to you and in a very good way. It might go far better than you expect.

At The Meeting

- Have only one agenda item: to create a set of guidelines that improve the efficiency of the group's meetings as much as possible.
- Give everyone an opportunity to contribute to a "Master List" of all the things that they think are wrong with the meetings. This is an opportunity for everyone to outflow. During this phase, do not permit any discussion or censoring. Everything that is said is written down (a flip-chart visible to all is extremely useful for this purpose).
- After the list is completed, group similar issues together, e.g., those concerning time management, those that appear outside the group's ability to solve, etc. Rank the issues from the most to the least impact on the effectiveness of your meetings. Don't waste time on miniscule items that make little difference.
- For each group of issues, create a consensus on a set of enforceable guidelines that handle that issue. An enforceable guideline means that a violation can be objectively determined and is not the result of subjective observation. For example, the guideline "All participants will be present at the published start time" is enforceable. The guideline "All participants shall pay attention at all times" is subjective, and is not enforceable. For more suggestions, see *Effective Meetings #4: Suggested Meeting Guidelines*.
- For issues seen as outside the group's control, have the group consider and perhaps discuss what actions could be taken to encourage the larger group to consider solutions.



After The Meeting

- It often helps to circulate and/or post the guidelines in the meeting room.
- Rigorously enforce the guidelines. Any breaking or bending of a guideline will make that guideline, and possibly all the meeting guidelines, ineffective.
- If you get resistance to rigorous enforcement, emphasize that you are enforcing what each member of the group previously agreed to, which includes the enforcement.
- If the group wants to change a guideline, remind them that they may then get the undesirable consequences that caused them to adopt the guideline in the first place (for this reason it is useful during the meeting to record the problem that each guideline was designed to solve).
- Don't change a guideline the first time it is applied. Agree that a guideline won't be questioned until it has had time to work. For example, initially everyone may not be there on time. But after a few meetings, when people realize that the meeting will start on time whether they are there or not, they usually begin to arrive on time.
- Periodically review and revise your Meeting Guidelines, approximately every six to twelve months, depending on how well you and your group determine that the meetings are going.

Putting This Article into Action

Bite off only as much as the group is willing to chew. Don't try to get your meetings perfect all at once. The 80-20 rule applies here as well: 80% of the benefits will be realized with the first 20% of the guidelines implemented.

Summary

The large number of issues associated with improving meetings may appear overwhelming, and thus it may be difficult to start making changes. A useful first step in improving meetings is to have a meeting devoted exclusively to establishing a set of enforceable guidelines that will improve the quality of your meetings.

Permission is granted to reprint and distribute this article provided that the copyright and source information are included.