

# Some pitfalls of pitiful meetings... and how to fix them

—by Dottie DeHart

If your team members (or you!) hear 'Meeting at 3:00' and think, Here comes another waste of my time, then it's time for a meetings overhaul at your organization. Meetings can be important team-building and idea-generating opportunities, if they are done well. The key, writes **Kimberly Douglas** in her book *The Firefly Effect: Build Teams That Capture Creativity and Catapult Results*, is knowing how to do them the right way.

It's Friday afternoon, and a staff meeting comes to a much anticipated end, leaving everyone involved wondering why the meeting was held in the first place. After all, the usual suspects dominated the discussion, and the same ideas that came up in last week's meeting were once again batted around. No one seemed to write anything down, and no one agreed to put anything discussed into action. If this kind of meeting sounds familiar, you're not alone, says Kimberly Douglas. It's a problem that plagues many organizations—but it's also one, she adds, that can be remedied.

"Every second of the work day is valuable," says Douglas. "None of it should be wasted in meetings that seem to go nowhere or that are plagued by conflict or lack of participation. I have sat through countless meetings myself—some great, and some not-so-great. Those that weren't so great could have been so much better with just a little more effort. If meetings are well conducted, they can actually become time well spent—time which increases employee productivity, participation, and innovation."

According to a Microsoft survey of over 38,000 employees, almost 70 percent felt that the average 5.6 hours they spend each week in meetings are unproductive. Another survey conducted by OfficeTeam had 28 percent of its 150 senior executives responding that meetings are a waste of time. Furthermore, 45 percent of respondents said they believed their



Source: [www.maniactive.com](http://www.maniactive.com)

## Bag the Brainstorming Meeting!

employees could be more productive if meetings were banned at least one day a week.

Unfortunately, not enough thought goes into how to conduct those meetings. Having a meeting, in and of itself, is not a bad idea. In fact, meetings can be the most engaging and thought-provoking times of the day for leaders and team members alike. The key is avoiding those pitfalls that sink a meeting's productivity."

A common problem with many meetings is that they're scheduled with seemingly no clear objective in mind. Douglas suggests that you run through a pre-meeting checklist before putting it on everyone's schedule. First, ask

yourself whether the meeting is even necessary. Could the information you want to provide be just as easily presented in an e-mail? What do you want to accomplish with the meeting? Will the accomplishment really require a group decision? If you ask yourself these questions and decide that you do need to have the meeting, next consider who should attend. Design an agenda for the meeting. And clearly communicate any prep work that needs to be done by the participants beforehand.

### BEFORE THE MEETING

To ensure that the meetings are productive, develop a specific agenda and send it out as far in advance of the

meeting as possible. Then, re-distribute a meeting reminder with the agenda 48 hours prior to the meeting.

Agendas typically provide information about the date, time, and location of the meeting; its objectives; and three to six agenda items with names of those presenting the issue and approximate time for the discussion. If background information is required, make sure to clarify the requirements.

“When people come into a meeting knowing what is going to be discussed, they see exactly how their time will be spent,” says Douglas. “They have time in advance to plan their own participation and can thus participate more effectively. By simply creating an agenda, you are already significantly upping your chances of having a successful meeting.”

Your meetings will also run more smoothly if those attending have a clear understanding of what role they are supposed to play. They need to know if you want them to be an expert, an “influencer,” or a decider. Make sure everyone who is attending the meeting knows exactly why they were invited.

Keep the number of “required” attendees as small as possible, but having a meeting without all of the right brains present can cause just as many productivity problems as postponing the meeting a couple of days.

Finally, ask yourself, Will this meeting be the best use of this person’s time, given its objectives? Awareness of the financial significance of the time spent in meetings will likely contribute to shorter, more productive meetings. When the eyes of attendees start wandering to watches, BlackBerries, and wall clocks to see how much time they’ve spent in the meeting and how much more time will elapse before they can get back to their long to-do lists... you’re in trouble.

#### DURING THE MEETING

The ideal maximum meeting length is 60 minutes. You can also use what I call

“time boxes” for each agenda item. That means X amount of time is allotted for each agenda item.

Build a reputation as being a meeting leader who starts and ends on time, every time. And if you do need to extend the meeting’s length, ask the group’s permission before doing so.

Another good technique for keeping the conversation flowing within the allotted meeting time—and ensuring that everybody has an opportunity to chime in—is “getting headlines” from each person in the meeting.

Anyone who’s ever attended a meeting knows that it doesn’t take long for things to get off track—the meeting becomes a free-for-all. The best way to avoid losing control of the conversation and the meeting as a whole is to set some conversational ground rules right away.

Create four to six rules which will help everyone stay focused on the meeting’s goals. A few possibilities include, “Everyone participates,” “Speak in headlines” (to prevent attendees from rambling), and “Police yourself—Am I participating too much or not enough?” Keep the rules front and center. You may even want to write them on a flip chart to display during the meeting. “Big talkers” eat up all the time. Every meeting has them; they love to let everyone know they are the most important people in the room, have the best ideas, and have a comment to make on every subject.

Your conversational ground rules should help keep them in line, but there are other ways to ensure that one person doesn’t dominate.

First, don’t let big talkers sit at the front of the room or the back center of a U-shape. This definitely gives them a feeling of being on stage. You may even want to use assigned seating, which would prevent big talkers from sitting next to a buddy. Big talkers tend to feed off of one another, and separating them will help reduce their excessive input.

“There are other meeting strategies that will help you garner the participa-

tion of everyone rather than just one or two individuals,” says Douglas. “I find that introverts write a lot and once they gather courage to join in on the conversation, they have plenty to say.” Doing a “round robin” allows these people to gather their thoughts, while forcing the big talkers to organize their thoughts rather than blurting them out every chance they get.

Breaking attendees up into small groups can also be effective. If quieter attendees can bounce ideas off of each other without the threat of being interrupted by someone else, you are able to truly let their innovations shine through.”

#### CREATIVITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Effective meetings are not necessarily free of conflict. In fact, conflict can be a good thing, provided it does not become unmanageable. Douglas advocates viewing conflict as “creative abrasion,” a phrase coined by the president of Nissan Design International, Jerry Hirshberg.

How does it work? Picture two tectonic plates on the earth’s surface—your way and my way, perhaps—grating against each other. Many people know that when this kind of friction occurs between plates, earthquakes often ensue. But what happens when these two plates—or viewpoints—come together?

If the environment is right, they create a mountain—a third viewpoint which is a product of the first two approaches, grander, loftier, and more powerful scale than either one was on its own. In other words, conflict was channelled into synergy.

“For creative abrasion to work, leaders have to view conflict as a good thing,” says Douglas. “Defuse the disagreement with collaboration. Openly discuss solutions and compromises that everyone can get behind. And remember, conflict is a group issue. Don’t single anyone out when a conflict arises. Handle it as a group.

Create and reinforce a common set of group conflict norms. “When things do get heated, ask everyone to take a break for a couple of minutes to think things over,” says Douglas. Remind team members of the meeting’s ultimate goal and ask them to listen to each other, perhaps in smaller groups initially, and then give each side a few minutes to state their position. This would help to balance inquiry with advocacy (of their own positions). “And if worse comes to worst, use humor to disarm a tense discussion, and then try to get everyone re-focused,” adds Douglas. “Once you’ve trained your team to truly value and listen to one another, I think you’ll find that situations that may have previously turned into tense conflicts instead turn into intense brainstorming and collaboration sessions.”

#### WHO IS MAKING THE DECISIONS?

So your meeting is nearly over, you’ve discussed everything on the agenda, and you’re ready to send everyone on their ways. Unfortunately, no one is quite clear about what they’re supposed to be doing or who is going to make that decision.

“As the leader, you don’t have to be the one making all of the decisions, but you do have to make sure the decision-making process is clear to everyone,” says Douglas. “Decide what the best decision-making process is at the beginning of the meeting based on time constraints and the need for buy-in.

Some of the issues to consider are: Should everyone vote and defer to the majority’s decision? Will it be better to build a consensus and go from there? Or should you, the leader, make the call? The best method is going to depend on what exactly the meeting’s goal is.”

The Vroom-Yetton Decision Making Model can be used to help you decide which approach to take—an autocratic, consultative, or group-based. Generally, the more critical the decision, the more consensus one needs to implement it. “Whatever decision-making method you choose, make sure everyone



understands who will be making the final decision from the get-go,” says Douglas. “The quickest way for a leader to lose his team’s respect is for him or her to make a decision that the team thought they would be making. If you just want your team’s input, let them know that ahead of time. Otherwise, people might think the decision-making responsibility had been taken away from them because they didn’t live up to what the boss expected.”

#### ENDING THE MEETING

Too often, meetings end and everyone goes back to business as usual. The likelihood of this happening is smaller if you record what went on in the meeting. There is no simpler way of doing this than by writing on a flip chart the WHO, WHAT, and BY WHEN of the directives discussed in the meeting.

“Do a final round robin with everyone recapping what they are accountable for delivering,” says Douglas. “Good questions for the leader to ask to get people thinking about the impact of the meeting include, ‘Who wasn’t in today’s meeting who needs to know what we decided today?’ and, ‘How are we going to communicate this to them?’

Once decisions have been made and everyone knows how they will be communicated, set the date, time, and

location for next meeting, making it clear that all will be responsible for reporting on the results of this meeting’s action items at the next meeting. And always distribute a brief meeting summary within 24 hours of the meeting.”

#### EVALUATING THE MEETING

A great way to change the mindset within your organization about meetings is to do proper meeting evaluations. “You don’t have to wait until a meeting is over to

evaluate,” says Douglas. “At least once during a meeting, have everyone assess the four Ps:

- *Progress*. Are we achieving our goals?
- *Pace*. Are we moving too fast or too slowly?
- *Process*. Are we using the right tools/methods?
- *Pulse*. How is everyone feeling—frustrated, satisfied, energized?

Don’t look at meeting evaluations as a throwaway step. They are key to ensuring that your meetings are consistently well organized and productive

“I believe wholeheartedly that a team meeting can be the most productive and exciting time in that team’s life,” says Douglas. “Unfortunately, too many organizations meet for the wrong reasons or have simply fallen into a going-through-the-motions meeting style. By implementing a few simple tools, you can breathe life back into your meetings. Give these strategies time to take hold, and you’ll find that your meetings can become times of trust building, problem solving, and collaboration that will energize your employees and give way to innovation that will greatly benefit the organization as a whole.”