Conducting Effective Meetings

Introduction

Have you ever been in a meeting that drones on and on? It starts late, runs long, and doesn't really accomplish anything. It's a complete waste of everyone's time. Worse yet, since nothing was resolved you'll have to have a follow up meeting. Argh!

According to a 2005 survey of more than 38,000 people from 200 countries around the world[1], workers spend an average of 5.6 hours per week in meetings. That figure increases significantly as you climb the ranks of an organization; executives; senior executives spend over 23 hours per week in meetings[2]. Of those meetings, 69 percent are considered ineffective. In other words, more than two out of every three hours spent in meetings are wasted. Those meetings cost the organization in terms of lost productivity and decreased moral.

If meetings are so unproductive, why do businesses continue to have them? If a manufacturing plant produced devices where two out of every three devices were defective, it'd be shutdown and revamped. So, why do organizations continue in an endeavor that is deemed such a productivity killer?

The simple fact is meetings are required in business. Some problems affect more than one department and require people from many different areas to work together. Some opportunities necessitate building cross-functional teams that work together to accomplish the goal. Like it or not, business meetings are here to stay. But they don't have to be ineffective; they can be improved.

In this chapter, you'll learn some keys to conducting an effective meeting. You'll gain practical tips for making your meetings more productive and dramatically improving one of the most inefficient parts of your day. You'll also discover ways you can improve meetings that you don't run.

The Cost of Ineffective Meetings

It's a common misconception that business meetings are essentially free if there is no travel involved. Weekly status meetings don't cost anything if the attendees

are local or can dial into a conference number.

On the surface, the rationale makes sense. Employees are paid to be at work during the time of the meeting. It doesn't matter if they are sitting at their desks or sitting in a meeting room, they are being paid just the same. If an employee was not in the meeting, he wouldn't be paid any less. Hence, there's no additional cost for holding meetings.

That's a flawed perspective. Meetings have an intrinsic cost. At a minimum, there's the opportunity cost associated with the loss of personal productivity. If someone is in a meeting, she is by definition not doing something else related to her job. In other words, she is sacrificing personal productivity for the sake of the team's productivity during the meeting.

If a team of five spends an average of eight hours each in weekly meetings, that effectively consumes a total of 40 hours of the team's overall personal productivity. That's a significant reduction in its work capacity.

Meetings also have a monetary cost associated with them that can be calculated.

Meeting Cost = (r * n * t) + e

where r is the average hourly rate on a meeting attendee, n is the number of attendees in the meeting, t is the duration of the meeting, and e represents the fixed expenses of the meeting.

As an example, consider a weekly team meeting with eight attendees. If the average hourly rate of a team member is $80/hour, each meeting costs $640. That's $32,000 annually for the team's weekly meetings, not to mention any loss in morale, personal productivity, and increased cynicism over unproductive meetings.

The Causes of Ineffective Meetings

How can you improve meetings?

To answer that question, let's look at the characteristics of an unproductive meeting. Consider the following scenario.

Sonya and four of her colleagues receive a meeting request form an Account

Executive to discuss the implementation issues with a large customer. The hour long meeting is scheduled for 2:00 PM Thursday; no additional information is provided in the request.

At 2:00 PM Thursday, Sonya puts the final touches on a email that she's composed and begins walking toward the meeting room, stopping to get coffee along the way. She arrives in the conference room a few minutes late, seven to be exact, but that's okay; there's only one other person in the room, Stanley, and he's working on his laptop.

Over the next several minutes, two others arrive including the Account Executive that called the meeting. Still, some key participants are missing so they wait for the another five minutes. The 2:00 PM meeting actually gets started at 2:15 PM.

"So what are we going to do about the implementation?" the Account Executive begins. Silence. Finally, Rafael speaks up. "We're working on it, but there have been a few irregularities that have caused delays." When asked about the specifics, Rafael doesn't have the information in front of him.

The meeting devolves into a discussion of metrics gatherings techniques and the appropriate level of project management reporting. Meanwhile, Stanley continues to work at his computer and Liz is replying to email on her smartphone beneath the table.

At 3:10 PM the Account Executive announces that he's late for another meeting and abruptly adjourns the meeting. Since no decision has been reached, he promises to schedule a follow up meeting early the following week. "This is an important client and we've got to get this resolved ASAP."

Sound familiar? Ineffective meetings tend to create a Positive Feedback Loop. The lack of a predefined agenda causes people to come late, arrive ill-prepared, wander off course during the meeting, and fail to reach any desired outcome. The result? Another meeting is scheduled.

Characteristics of Effective Meetings

As illustrated in the preceding anecdotal story, effective meetings don't just happen. They don't occur in organizations by accident. They must be planned and executed well.

Meetings tend to adhere to the Second Law of Thermodynamics and suffer from entropy. In other words, without express intervention, meetings naturally gravitate from a state of order to one of disorder, from a state of productiveness to that of a unproductiveness.

Fortunately, planning an effective meeting is relatively straightforward and easily repeatable, two things that technical managers like.

Good meetings:

- Have an agenda

- Start on time

- Have ground rules

- Keep on task

- Create action items

- Finish on time

- Have meeting notes

- Use a facilitator

We'll discuss each of these in the following sections.

Meeting Agendas

Starting On Time

Setting Ground Rules

Keeping On Task

Recording Action Items

Finishing On Time

The Parking Lot

Using a Facilitator

Improving Meetings You Don't Run

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[1] http://money.cnn.com/2005/03/16/technology/survey/index.htm

[2] http://www.iaf-world.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3918