

TITLE: "HOW PRODUCTIVE ARE YOUR MEETINGS?"

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Since 1971: "Software for the finest computer - the Mind"

"Unless someone is looking for an excuse to duck a work assignment, nobody wants to attend an inconsequential meeting."

- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

As a businessman, one of my favorite movies is "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" featuring Steve Martin as an advertising executive trying to return to Chicago during the Thanksgiving holidays. The movie opens with Martin attending a meeting in New York City where he is pitching an ad campaign to the President of a large corporation, played by William Windom. The meeting is rather long and boring as Windom quietly agonizes over the layout of Martin's proposed ads. All of the meeting attendees sit quietly and patiently as they wait for Windom to make a decision (which he never makes). As it is the holiday season, they all have other things they want to do (in Martin's case, it is to return home to Chicago). Ultimately, the meeting is a colossal waste of time for all of the attendees.

We've all been involved with such meetings where the person running it is either insensitive to the needs of the attendees or the subject matter is painfully boring. It should come as no surprise that excessive or pointless meetings are probably the number one cause for decreased productivity in organizations, be it corporate or nonprofit (as Dilbert has pointed out to us time and again). Understand this, unless someone is looking for an excuse to duck a work assignment, nobody wants to attend an inconsequential meeting.

Remarkably, there are a lot of people who don't understand the basics of running a productive meeting, hence the problem as exemplified by Martin's movie. There is nothing magical about conducting a good meeting. It just requires a little preparation, along with some leadership and structure during its execution. Here are some simple guidelines to follow:

PREPARATION

First, determine the necessity of the meeting itself. Do you really have something important to discuss or do you just want to simply "chew the fat." Meetings are nice but we should never forget they distract people from their work assignments. Therefore, we should only hold a meeting if it is going to benefit the attendees and assist them in their work effort. Let us not forget there are many other communication vehicles at our disposal: memos, e-mails, web pages (including blogs and discussion groups), posted notices, general broadcasts over a PA system, etc.

If you are convinced of the necessity of the meeting, you will need to know three things:

- Your objective - Is the purpose of the meeting to communicate a particular message, develop a dialogue and reach consensus, educate/train people, or to offer a simple diversion for the attendees? People do not want to hear the boss pontificate on some trivial manner (a la Dilbert). Make sure you have a firm grasp of the purpose of the meeting and what you hope to accomplish. Ask yourself how the attendees will benefit from the meeting.
- Your audience - Be sure to understand the targeted audience, their interests, their work assignments, and their attention span.
- How the meeting should be conducted (this is critical). Should it be held on-site or off-site to minimize distractions? Who should lead the meeting? How should the meeting room be setup, such as required audio-video equipment, flipcharts/blackboards, computer equipment, podiums, and the setup of tables and chairs. A classroom setup is fine for lectures and presentations but not necessarily conducive if the participants are going to work in teams. For dialogs and strategy sessions, a roundtable or u-shaped layout is better. Even the chairs are important; everyone likes comfort but if you want to keep people's attention, there is nothing wrong with hard chairs that force the participants to sit-up and take notice during the meeting.
- Print up agendas in advance so everyone knows the meeting's purpose, the items to be discussed, the time table, and what is needed for preparation. It is not uncommon to also advise the dress code for the meeting. If possible, send agendas and any other items in advance for the attendees to adequately prepare themselves for the meeting. This will save considerable time during the meeting.

- Post scheduled meetings to calendars and, whenever possible, send out reminders at least one day in advance.

EXECUTION

Having a strong and fair leader for the meeting is essential for its success. This may or may not be the main speaker. Nevertheless, the leader has to play the role of traffic cop so the meeting doesn't get sidetracked and stays on schedule. Knowing when to defer peripheral discussions to a later time or place (such as after the meeting) is important to keep everyone focused on the main mission of the meeting. Being the traffic cop often requires skills in tact and diplomacy so the meeting doesn't spin out of control.

Here are some other items to consider:

- Stick to the agenda. Start and end on time and maintain order. Got a gavel? Do not hesitate to use it judiciously. Maintain civility and decorum. Allow people to have their say but know when issues are getting out of hand or sidetracked.
- Follow the old military principle of: "Tell them what you are going to tell them; Tell them, and then; Tell them what you've told them." Developing a punchlist of action items at the conclusion of the meeting can be very useful for certain situations.
- Introductions are important so participants know the cast of characters involved and their interests. But do not waste an inordinate amount of time here. Also, name tags or name cards are useful to avoid the embarrassment of forgetting names and titles.
- Make the meeting worthwhile. Keep it interesting and informative; Heck, make it fun if you can. Make it so the attendees feel that they are not wasting their time.
- Again, know your audience - speak in terms your audience will understand. An eloquent vocabulary might be impressive, but it may also intimidate and confuse the attendees (beware of the "verbosity of bullshit" phenomenon). Also, read the body language of the attendees to see if they are paying attention.
- I am not a big fan of histrionics. Many lecturers like people to get up, stretch, shake hands with everyone or hold a group hug. This can be downright embarrassing to people. Get to the point and move on.

REVIEW

All meetings should be reviewed, either formally or infor-

mally, to determine the success of the meeting. Informal reviews are used for short meetings to determine action items to be followed up on. Formal reviews should be considered for all lengthy meetings. Standard critique sheets should be used for attendees and the leader to evaluate the meeting. Prepare a summary and evaluate the meeting's success. More importantly, learn from the comments received. There is little point of going through the motions of a review if you have no intention of acting on it.

CONCLUSION

Mastering the execution of an effective meeting requires a little planning, a little organization, and a lot of management. Bottom-line, how do you know if your meeting was a success? People do not groan when you call the next one.

END

About the Author

Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for training and consulting on an international basis.

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