



Tired of Time-Consuming, Unproductive Meetings?

Try These Rules.

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Meetings are called for the best of intentions: Let's get together. We'll hash out situations face to face and come to a consensus. But many meetings morph into calendar hogs with unclear purposes or unmeasurable results. They increase stress, strain deadlines and cut into productivity.

Think on this.

I have an extremely smart friend in the legal field who has a mandatory standing meeting each week. It runs about three hours each time. When I ask him what they cover in the meeting, he shrugs and says, "Mainly the department head likes to hear himself speak."

Based on a 40-hour week, my friend is spending 7.5 percent of his workweek held hostage in an overall unproductive meeting. Imagine what you could get done in three hours. Now imagine having to work late because you lost those three hours listening to someone pontificate about irrelevant topics. Not cool.

I'm not advocating business in a silo – a world where no one meets and important business decisions are made without the appropriate stakeholder input. As much as this dystopian Mad Max version of a meeting-less world can appeal to me on meeting-full days, even I know it won't work on a sustainable basis.

But let's be absolutely clear on one thing: If you are going to take time and productivity away from your employees, business partners and co-workers, you owe it to your attendees to clearly understand and articulate the purpose of the meeting, why each person is attending and what you will accomplish.

Here are the basic guidelines I recommend for conducting productive, efficient and respectful meetings.

Melanie's Mandates for Meetings* (The host version)

1. **Verify you need to have a meeting.** Are you meeting just to meet? Is there a way you can accomplish what you need without having to schedule a meeting? For example, can one or two independent conversations with stakeholders move the initiative forward rather than a meeting with 12 people? Or would an email accomplish the same results?
2. **Have a purpose.** OK. You need the meeting. Don't start the process without a clear vision of what should happen and the intended outcome. This will be critical when you get to the next rules.



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3. **Provide an agenda.** The agenda is basically a meeting purpose broken into steps and mapped toward progress. Your meeting attendees should have an idea of what the conversation will cover and how they can contribute. Even three bullets is better than a blank invitation.
4. **Be selective when inviting attendees.** Guess what – I bet you’re over-inviting. Try to think “lean” when you’re filling seats. You should have a feasible reason why each person is attending. If a person asks you in the hallway why they are invited, you should be able to immediately respond with one sentence explaining why. Another way to think about this is to ask yourself what each participant will contribute to the meeting. If the answer is, “Well, Tony is always at the meetings with Jody but no one really knows why,” then maybe Tony doesn’t need to come. This rule has a nice side benefit as well. The smaller the meeting (normally), the easier it is to keep on track and exit with actionable results.
5. **Underestimate the time you need.** Don’t default to an hour. Think purposefully about how much time will be needed for the meeting. Can it be accomplished in a half hour? Or even 15 minutes? This conservative method of scheduling meetings will, because of its shorter time span, usually result in a more engaged group. It’s easier to stay focused for 20 minutes than an hour.
6. **Ask for punctuality.** At one of my former companies, we had a seven-minute lag. Each meeting would start about seven minutes late due to preceding meetings running over or breaks necessitated by back-to-back meetings. That normally resulted in three people sitting in a conference room (or on a call) twiddling their fingers or distracted with multitasking while waiting for the rest of the attendees to show up. Waste. Of. Time. When you send out the invitation, make it a point to ask attendees to be prompt so that you can end the meeting before or on time.
7. **Ask for attention.** In most businesses, time is the most important commodity. And everyone is always distracted. While the meeting is going on, they still have emails, texts, projects, questions, etc., that they have to handle. We’re like the [Borg](#), always plugged into the Collective. Just as you asked for their punctuality, ask for their attention. No one likes to hear or answer the same question three times. It’s a win/win for everyone – plus the meeting might end more quickly.
8. **Run the meeting.** Don’t let Don sidetrack the discussion as he complains about snacks in the break room. Don’t let Gina yank the group into a conversation about the Johnson project. *You* have an agenda. *You* know what you want to accomplish. Your meeting attendees know what you want to accomplish. If you aren’t directing the conversation and keeping it on track, then the meeting is, well, kaput.
9. **Assign tasks.** If no one walks away from the meeting with a to-do item, then you have defeated the purpose of meeting. I’m not suggesting that you create assignments just to have them. But since you had a purpose for the meeting and a projected outcome, it makes sense that there will be meeting attendees who may hold information or actions that will contribute to the outcome. Politely ask for their contributions and ask when you may expect their replies. Keep notes on what was asked, who was asked and what their deadline is to respond to that task.

10. Follow up. For many meetings, I'll send out a short recap that covers the discussion, who owns which tasks (even my own) and deadlines. If the deadlines pass with no response, I follow up. Another effective follow-up method is to either formally or informally ask attendees if they felt their time was well spent as a meeting participant. That feedback can help you refine meetings moving forward.

Meetings may be necessary, but they don't necessarily have to be evil. Buck the trend for time-consuming and mind-numbing meetings. By following these mandates for meetings, you'll soon have a reputation for running smart, productive and (hopefully) short meetings.

Now it's your turn to share: What are some practices you recommend for hosting meetings?

**I'm a sucker for alliteration.*



About the author

Melanie Brenneman joined Edge Marketing in 2010 after an in-house career focused on public relations, marketing and communications for private and publically traded technology companies. As senior account manager, she helps organizations successfully market their solutions to law firms, corporate law departments and accounting firms. A typical day for her can include everything from strategic planning to analyzing email or social media performance to drafting that urgent press release you just told her about five minutes ago. It is all about results.

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