Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects
Four Steps to Conquer Lousy Project Meetings

Death by Meeting

"Want to avoid work? Call a meeting!" I've seen that cynical comment on office posters. While I sympathize with it, I don't agree. Far from sapping productivity, a well-run meeting is often the most effective way to get work done. "Much teamwork is accomplished in meetings. We gather and distribute information, coordinate activities, uncover new problems, assign tasks, and make decisions." (Verzuh, p. 274)

The catch is leading a *well-run* meeting. Meetings are critical for communication on projects, so I'm mystified by how many of them are poorly run, often by project managers, the very people who should excel at effective meetings.

NASA program manager James T. Brown complains, "You would be hard pressed to identify a bigger consumer or waster of organizational resources than meetings. The fact is that a lot of meetings are unnecessary, and often the necessary meetings are poorly run." (Brown, p. 153)

No Excuse

Running a good meeting is not difficult if you invest in a bit of preparation and some simple facilitation skills. Meetings are a large part of our work life. Really, there is no excuse for running bad meetings.

The life of an effective meeting has four stages. Here they are, along what a meeting leader should do in each stage.

Prepare

Verify value. Is the meeting worth having at all? The best medicine for meeting burnout is to start a new trend - hold meetings that are valuable, not boring wastes of time. Patrick Lencioni says, "Boring meetings are indeed a big problem. The ultimate penalty of boring meetings is bad decisions, not to mention wasted time. When team members lose interest during a meeting, they fail to surface critical opinions, and they do not fully evaluate whatever opinions are aired." (Lencioni, p. 48)

Invite the right people. Attendees must understand why their attendance is important, so send a meeting invitation that clearly states the purpose of the meeting. Control attendance at meetings. Don't let people crash your meeting just because they want to see what's going on.

Publish an agenda. Make it complete. For each topic include a time

allocation, the name of the person who will lead that topic, and the goal of the topic. Include pre-work when appropriate. I use three topic goals: *inform, decide,* and *discuss.*

Lead

Begin on time. You may need some cultural flexibility here. Various national and organizational cultures have different ideas on what promptness means!

Start with a review. Review the agenda, ground rules, and roles. Get feedback from the meeting participants that the agenda is relevant and complete. Ensure that all participants clearly understand the ground rules that will govern behavior at the meeting.

Apply structure. Use the agenda to stay on track, and use time pressure, such as stand ups, to prod convergence when necessary. However, don't be a control freak. Allow sufficient time for productive discussions, and don't slavishly stick to the time frames on the agenda if the meeting is going off in an unplanned but productive direction.

Go for the close. Bring topics to closure by driving for one of these outcomes:
- a decision
- action items with owners and due dates
- an offline discussion or working session

Many meeting leaders fall down at the close. They allow the participants to wander off track, leading to a boring, unproductive meeting.

Actively facilitate involvement. Draw out the quiet participants. Control

domineering participants, or you will be blamed for lack of control.

Record important stuff. This is related to going for the close. Record decisions, key points, and action items in real time. Detailed minutes are overkill for most meetings. I make handwritten summary notes about key points. They resemble unreadable hieroglyphics, but are good enough to jog my memory after the meeting so I can email a summary of decisions and action items.

Some people use a computer and projector to take notes and project them on a screen during the meeting. That works fine if you are a good typist, but don't let this technology interrupt the flow of the meeting.

Close

Review decisions. I always reserve the last five minutes on a meeting agenda to review decisions and action items. This simple action consolidates the progress you've made in the meeting. It ensures that participants leave with a clear idea of what to do next. This avoids rehashing the same old ground at a future meeting.

Agree on next meeting date. If you will be meeting again, this step reduces administrative hassle. Trying to check everyone's calendar after they have dispersed is inefficient.

Evaluate. Periodically spend a few minutes at the end of standing meetings to evaluate their effectiveness. We all hate meetings that continue from sheer inertia long after they have outlived their usefulness.

Show respect. End on time! This shows respect for the participants. If

running long is unavoidable, ask permission from the participants to continue. Some of them may have to leave immediately. If too few remain for a productive meeting, end it and schedule a follow up meeting.

Follow Up

Be quick. Quickly send a summary of the meeting, preferably within four working hours of the end of the meeting. Don't worry about sending full minutes. That wastes valuable time - for you to create them and for others to read them. Just publish the decisions, action items, and possibly an updated issues list as soon as possible.

Pursue open action items. Action items often are dropped after a meeting, even when someone agreed to own them. As the leader of the meeting, set a good example by promptly following through on your own action items. Then follow up with the owners of other action items. This shows that you expect participants either to follow through on

the commitments they've made, or seek your help if they encounter unexpected problems.

Endpoint

In many organizations, problems with meetings are not so much a skill issue as they are a leadership issue. Show leadership by making your meetings a model of effectiveness. Others will soon follow you in ending boring, wasteful meetings.

If you'd like a copy of the meeting agenda template I use, contact me. You can also read past articles at http://www.spspro.com/SPS_cases_papers.htm

James Brown, "The Handbook of Program Management", McGraw Hill, 2008

Patrick Lencioni, "Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team", Jossey-Bass, 2005

Eric Verzuh, "The Fast Forward MBA in Project Management", Wiley, 2008

About the Author

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