

Conquering the Information Deluge -- Handling Meetings

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Meetings are generally one of the biggest time wasters in corporations and non-profits. Some of the usual complaints about meeting are:

- Too many meetings
- Meetings don't start and end on time
- Wrong people
- People waste time by going off topic
- Meetings are too long
- Too much time spent in detailing everyone's status

Many thousands of dollars are wasted daily due to poor meeting planning and facilitation. This article outlines some of the things you can do as an attendee or as a meeting planner to combat these ills.

As an Attendee

- Send discussion items to your meeting planner in plenty of time to include them on the agenda. Don't wait until the meeting starts, causing a potential re-prioritization of topics.
- Go over the minutes from the last meeting. Make sure you can account for your action items.
- Turn in the status of your action items *before* the agenda is scheduled to be distributed. This will allow the meeting planner to send out the status information along with the agenda, alleviated the need to go through the boring "status updates" normally handled during the meeting itself.
- Be prepared for the meeting -- bring the appropriate materials and information required.
- Be on time, or let the meeting planner know you will be late/absent. If you are late, don't expect the meeting to stop so people can update you -- have someone bring you up to speed after the meeting, or wait and read the meeting minutes.
- Don't hog airtime -- everyone should be given an opportunity to join in the discussions, and the other agenda items need time as well.
- Don't go off the agenda. Your meeting facilitator should catch this, but if not -- stop!
- Don't attend if there is nothing relevant to you being discussed. There is no bigger waste of time than sitting in a meeting where nothing pertains to your area. Read the meeting minutes to keep current.

As the Meeting Planner

- Become familiar with good facilitation techniques. Make sure everyone has a chance to speak. Keep the meeting on track and on subject. Learn brainstorming techniques and dispute management.
- Gather input for agenda items and project status from the team. Try to schedule the items so everyone need not be at the meeting for the whole period. However, schedule the most important items first.
- Send out the agenda with the status information several days prior to the meeting.
- Use an online meeting request to ensure the critical people can attend. If this is a recurring meeting, set the recurrence as part of the request. Include the location of the meeting.
- Let the attendees know what to prepare and what to bring to the meeting
- Only invite people who can make a contribution
- Stick to the time frame of the meeting. Call another meeting, if necessary, to complete the agenda.
- Don't hold a meeting if there are no relevant items to be discussed. It is good to have regular team meetings -- but there has to be information to impart and actions to be scheduled.
- Enlist team members to be the timekeeper and the note taker -- it is very difficult to be facilitator, timekeeper, and note taker. "Round robin" these functions among the members.
- Remember: more short meetings are better than fewer longer meetings.

When your meetings are more productive, you can save countless hours of time and frustration. It is up to both the meeting planner/facilitator and the attendees to make a successful meeting.

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