



The Balanced Lawyer

Jeff Davidson

Successful Staff Meetings in Your Lifetime

In a study conducted years back by InfoCom, the longer a meeting's length, surprisingly, the more likely it is deemed to be effective, based on the responses of all those who attend meetings. For meetings one half-hour or less, 58 percent of respondents indicated they felt they were extremely or very productive. The number jumped to 61 percent for meetings a half-hour to one hour, 67 percent for meetings one hour to five hours, and an astounding 80 percent for five hours or more. So, what gives? Don't most people loath meetings? Isn't spending half the day in meetings drudgery?

Perhaps for meetings of five hours or more, the preparation involved and the mere fact that the group has been sequestered for more than a half business day, help to increase everyone's focus.



Scheduled To Start

Regardless of your meeting's length, it is necessary for you, as the meeting manager, to steadfastly start meetings on time so that stragglers will realize that they are late and that the others, indeed, arrived as scheduled. This rewards those who have been prompt rather than make them wait around for those who have not been. Organized managers start meetings on time!

Robert Levasseur, in his little known but nifty book *Breakthrough Business Meetings*, suggests that at the start of any meeting, "participants reach a common understanding of what they're going to do and how they're going to do it." Hence, everyone needs to be *present at the start*. Levasseur says that this normally takes 10 percent of the meeting time, so if you're going to be meeting for 30 minutes, you

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only need three minutes or so to deal with some basic issues such as:

- The main purpose of the meeting;
- The participants' desired outcomes;
- The actual agenda itself; and
- The key meeting roles (in smaller groups this is easily understood at the outset).

Tardy and Tawdry?

Even after you illustrate how necessary it is to be on time at your meetings, some individuals may still arrive late. There are several techniques, which work to varying degrees of effectiveness, to encourage promptness:

- Require tardy people to apologize to the group. It then becomes their responsibility afterwards to catch up with the group for the parts they missed. Never backtrack for late arrivals, it will only force everyone to stop and wait while the guilty party receives a personalized briefing;
- Hand out plum assignments in the first few minutes so that tardy people are left with the least desirable tasks. This is a great incentive for arriving early.

In some practices, and this is not my preference, the tardy are the subject of early discussion. In other words, they are the target of gossip, innuendo, and outright jokes. So be late, and be vilified!

Find out what works for your participants, and what steps you are willing to take to encourage promptness. You may quickly catch on that none of these subtle coercions is as effective pre-circulating an agenda, and demonstrating on a repeated basis that the meetings start promptly as scheduled.

Your Agenda: The Game Plan

The winning formula for keeping meetings on track involves a strong agenda, organized in the best possible sequence, with estimated time frames for

each agenda item. Most participants do their best to honor time frames if they know in advance that a particular item will be allotted five or 10 minutes.

Follow the agenda strictly, eliciting the input of others as needed. Encourage the attendees to participate and as each agenda item is discussed, ask participants to keep in mind the following questions: what is the specific issue being discussed, what does the group want to accomplish in discussing the item, and what action needs to be taken to handle the issue?

Keep it Moving

When your group identifies the needed action for a particular issue, key questions include who will act, what resources he or she requires, when will the issue be resolved, and when will the group discuss the results? Upon successful conclusion of these questions, the group then moves on to the next issue, then the next. You will find yourself progressing in a group effort to get things done.

Every question does not always need to be addressed for every issue. Sometimes an agenda item merely represents an announcement or a report to the group that doesn't require any feedback or discussion. Other times the issue at hand represents an executive briefing, because the matter has already been resolved.

For those items on the agenda that have a corresponding objective, you have the responsibility to seek out progress towards the objective. What else needs to be accomplished, and by when, to meet the overall objective? As with any goal or objective they need to be written down, quantified, and assigned specific time frames.

Overestimate to Stay on Track

As the meeting planner, you might already know the wisdom building slack into your agenda. A wise meeting manager may allocate five minutes for a topic that he or she will personally be covering, knowing that it will actually require about three

minutes. Hence, several minutes can be saved and if somebody goes over the allotted time frame on item, the overall the meeting can potentially still end on time.

For a meeting that lasts long, schedule a break sometime in the middle. Otherwise you'll lose the attention of participants who are thinking about other extraneous topics, have to go to the bathroom, or have the attention span of a gnat.

Condition Your Meeting's Environment

The quickest way to lose the participants, other than being an interminable, crashing bore, is to conduct your meeting in a room where the environment can be distracting. This could involve the temperature being too high for participants or poor ventilation. That, coupled with a dark meeting room, encourages people to fall asleep. It's an anthropological phenomenon—as soon as it's dark, the brain gets the message that it's okay to doze off. A warm, stuffy room only aids the process.

Ensure your meeting room is well lit and has excellent ventilation. If you have a choice between having a room be slightly too warm or slightly too cool, opt for cool. A cool room will keep participants fresh and alert. The discomfort may prompt attendees to complain, but at least no one will go to sleep.

Regardless of where you're meeting, here are other room organizing techniques:

- Meet in a room where participants won't be disturbed by ringing phones, people knocking on the door, and other intrusions. You want to achieve a meeting of the minds and accomplish great things. Distractions do not help;
- Meet where there is wall-to-wall carpeting and walls adorned with pictures, posters, curtains, and the like to help absorb sounds and offer a richer texture to the voices being heard. Contrast this environment with a meeting held on a tile floor with cold metal chairs, and blank, thin walls. Participants can't wait for the meeting to be over when the meeting room feels like a holding cell, no matter what's being discussed;
- Meet where the seats are comfortable and support the lumbar region of the back. However, overly comfortable seats may have a detrimental effect and encourage people to nod off; and
- Finally, as often as possible, schedule meetings earlier rather than later. Most people have to get on with their day and hence would be glad to begin and end promptly. Also, some of the topics that emerge in the meeting can be carried out during the course of the day.