



How to get a handle on internal gatherings by Ginny Jones, APR

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Are you on the meeting go-round? Do you have trouble completing assignments because you're always "in conference"? Are you asked to attend meetings without any idea why? It's definitely time to get a handle on managing those internal meetings better. Regardless of whether you're the chair or a participant, you can inject some discipline into your next meeting.

Every other Monday, Carol's manager, Susan, holds a one-hour meeting for her Hamilton hospital staff. After a 15-minute wait for stragglers, Carol, who didn't want to be identified, gently suggests to Susan that the meeting begin. An agenda, hastily constructed that morning without input from the group, is circulated. No times are allocated and before long, the meeting stretches to two hours before the roomful of healthcare professionals dart back to the clinic to attend waiting patients.

As far as Susan is concerned, she's just displayed the collaborative communication skills of a first-rate executive. But a straw poll of her staff would uncover a seething undercurrent of anger and cynicism – the very reactions Susan would be loath to elicit.

"By the end, you're more confused and even more frustrated," says Carol, a 16 year veteran. "No clear conclusions are reached and no responsibility is allocated for issues. Lots of opinions are expressed but there's no follow-up. You've wasted your time and now you have to catch up on the work. It's an expensive waste of time."

With fewer staff and greater work demands, Susan would be wise to reexamine the effect she wants to achieve within her department and consider alternative ways to motivate staff to reach those goals.

"Meetings are business tools and are most successfully used when your business' pace, objectives and culture

match your meetings frequency and style," insists Jennifer La Trobe, a partner in Toronto-based Creative Connections. "If a newsroom met only once a month to discuss editorial, we would spot the mismatch immediately. That frequency and style, on the other hand, might be quite appropriate for a board of directors that decides on direction and policy."

A consequence of not matching meetings to the rhythm of the business is that employees lose interest or get frustrated.

"Great effort goes into designing project plans, yet they are not reaping the benefits of their initial hard work when they overlook the implementation meetings phase," she adds.

Many executives today choose off-site locations such as hotels, golf clubs and convention centres for the more strategically focused meeting, where interruptions are less likely to distract the team. Close to 380 meetings were conducted last year at the Hamilton and District Chamber of Commerce. How does the chamber conduct its own staff meetings?

"We meet once a month and we rotate the chair," says Jim McDowell, director of communications. "That individual is responsible for collecting the agenda items and for consistency's sake, we have a regular staff member who keeps notes on the action items. When it's my turn, I e-mail the group and ask them to add their items to my list."

"Whenever I've been unable to attend because I'm away on Chamber business, I ask someone to bring up my agenda item and resolve it."

The Chamber is likely putting its own seminar tricks to good use. "A few years ago," adds McDowell, "we ran a course called, 'How to Chair a meeting.' It stunned us how many had difficulty with this role. My advice would be to find a mentor who does it well and can provide guidance."



Whether it is the large corporate event or the day-to-day, regular update, meetings build in certain expectations. Take it from Oakville communications consultant Tom McMahon, who wrote the workplace tome – *Big Meetings, Big Results*

"Everyone ought to come out of every meeting and know what the point was and what they should now be doing. But in fact, in 80 per cent of meetings nothing gets accomplished. If you calculate that the average meeting has five to 10 people and it lasts two to three hours, that works out to \$800 million person hours per year spent in meetings in North America."

With little experience and virtually no training, how can managers acquire the skills necessary to become effective meeting facilitators?

"You can't blame the participant. Companies still see training their managers to manage meetings as a cost. They think managers should learn it on their own. It's hard work – you're handling conflict and often you may not know how to deal with high emotional content. You need a good memory. You need leadership, yet still be part of the group. You can be trained," assures MacMahon.

To date, an interactive CD ROM that MacMahon and his two Hamilton partners have pitched to companies called, *Facilitator*, has been slow to catch on. What's unique about the program is that the manager can test his judgement in simulated real life scenarios, customized to the company. The manager receives crucial feedback – something the "real time" manager rarely gets. At \$50,000 to

\$75,000 for development, its creators at Wind Beam say the prospective company can use it permanently as it sends current and future managers through a systemic training process.

Perhaps one of the key problems management has in utilizing meetings effectively is that they see them as tactical tools rather than as strategic ones.

"Meetings should really be used," insists MacMahon, "to generate ideas, concepts and solutions. They are a way to develop management into strategic assets."

Hard to imagine that Carol sees herself as a strategic asset. As a participant, Carol feels unable to influence Susan's bi-weekly meetings. When asked why she doesn't push for clarity or at the least, for better time management during the meeting, Carol laments, "I don't feel that anything would come of it. Why bother?"

Carol's apathy could be jump-started if Susan's meetings had some discipline, including a few boundaries. Although not the facilitator, Carol has the right as a participant to insist that her time not be wasted. According to La Trobe, the introduction of a simple set of guidelines could begin to change things for Susan's group. No only would the meetings feel more satisfying, they would be instrumental in ensuring that meaningful work happens.

La Trobe provides a step-by-step meetings framework and meeting do's and don'ts that can be used as a starting point for any internal gathering to develop its own specific criteria. This tool was developed by a team answering that very question and was relevant to its business' needs.

Meeting Do's:

- Match the frequency and style of your meetings to the rhythm of your business.
- Use the power of the group to keep meetings on track and focused.
- Always know the purpose of the meeting.
- Allocate project responsibilities and time frames.
- Make a pact to resolve issues – they're too costly to carry.
- Minimize the use of jargon – when it appears, agree on a definition.

Meeting Don'ts:

- Let your fear of asking an obvious question stop you – chances are you're not alone in your confusion.
- Jump to suggesting solutions before you've checked if the others have the same "read" on the problem.
- Make assumptions that you know what something means – push for clarity.
- Edit the feedback that could help the group understand itself i.e. "I'm feeling anxious right now, why is that?"
- Presume your facilitating style is adequate. Check for feedback and look into courses, books and mentors as a way to improve those skills.