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Ten Tips for a Terrible Meeting

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In this era of email, instant messaging, and other forms of machine-mediated communication, face-to-face meetings still represent the most effective way to share knowledge and facilitate collaboration among members of an organization while filling the fundamental human need for personal contact. A meeting may gather together a work team, community group, or one of the hundreds of committees, subcommittees, task forces, or working groups in a professional trade association such as the American Bar Association. As the appointed leader of a group that holds regular meetings, the chair is responsible for, yes, leading the meeting. This is true in both work settings and volunteer organizations.

Good meeting leaders take considerable time and initiative to solicit and synthesize group members' contributions and suggestions. They frame the issues for discussion and matters for decision, respect the group's rules and procedures for engaging members during and between meetings, and hold themselves and group members accountable for advancing the group's larger goals. Vibrant organizations depend on good meeting leaders at every level, from down in the trenches to up in the boardroom.

This article is for all those meeting leaders who abdicate their important responsibilities because they lack the time or the training, or worse, because they are uncomfortable and lack the confidence to lead any group, especially when they include members more senior in age, professional standing, or experience.

After 25 years in the workforce (only the last 15 of which I spent as a lawyer) and various volunteer organizations large and small, I've been subjected to enough unproductive, headache-inducing meetings in my life that I feel qualified to offer the following top 10 tips for terrible, positively dreadful meetings.

1. To ensure a terrible meeting, do not create and circulate an agenda to the attendees at least two days in advance. If you do create an agenda, do not write a short descriptive phrase for each agenda item that makes your meeting objectives clear by using words such as approve, plan, decide, generate, prioritize, and resolve. Do not indicate on the agenda how much time will be devoted to each segment of the meeting and, where possible, the start time of each segment, especially when it involves presentations by other attendees.
2. If your group needs to approve the last meeting's minutes, do not circulate the minutes in advance. Instead, hand them out at the beginning of the meeting and either devote

meeting time to waiting until everyone has read them, or, better still, rush everyone into voting to approve the minutes on the spot.

3. Everyone will dread your meetings if you begin and end late every time. Beginning late is easy if you are reluctant to call the meeting to order while people are chatting with one another. To end late, it helps to underestimate the amount of time needed to present, discuss, and if necessary, vote on the action items on your agenda. Make it a policy to recap everything that has happened so far for the benefit of latecomers and, when a half-day or full-day meeting starts to fall behind schedule, eliminate scheduled breaks and cut the lunch hour in half
4. Do not make it easy for meeting participants to prepare for and attend your meeting. Do not think about practical logistics, like arranging for a comfortable, quiet conference room or a telephone conference bridge for those who want to dial in; emailing reminders of the meeting time, location, and dial-in number; letting people know what preparations they may need to do in advance; and providing them with any written materials with which they need to be familiar.
5. Slip into the room at the last minute, do not speak with anyone one-on-one, and do not warmly welcome newcomers. Other ways to be inconsiderate of others include engaging in a long-winded conversation with one of the other attendees and letting everyone wait until you are done, reading emails on your BlackBerry or laptop computer instead of looking at the group, and taking cell phone calls in the middle of a meeting.
6. Never speak slowly, clearly, or authoritatively. Make your voice as difficult to understand and as painful on the ears as possible. Speak rapidly, murmur monotonously, and do nothing to reduce background noise or interference from nearby wireless devices. Annoy participants with your uptalk habit? Like you aren't sure if you should be speaking at all?
7. Rule with an iron fist. Deliver a monologue on your views of each agenda topic (and by all means, repeat the same points over and over) and then call for a vote to approve your recommendation. Do not let other participants get a word in edgewise.
8. Drift aimlessly from topic to topic, and take no responsibility for clear transitions between discrete agenda topics. Let group members interrupt others and change the subject as often as possible, rather than asking them to defer their comments to the appropriate time, or perhaps even the next meeting. Remain silent while others ramble on without stating their views clearly. Do not encourage input from new or silent participants by asking them whether they have any thoughts about an issue. Whenever possible, encourage meeting attendees to engage in making inside jokes, talking shop, and gossiping.
9. Apologize for doing your job: "I'm sorry, but we should probably start the meeting now" or "Should we begin now, or should we wait a few more minutes?" are great ways to kick off a meeting by letting everyone know that no one is in charge. Make sure every agenda

you write is a tentative draft and “subject to change.” Even if a break is already on the schedule, ask permission before adjourning the group instead of politely but assertively bringing the meeting to a temporary halt so that the group can take its break.

10. Always let confusion reign about whether a decision has been made, what the decision was, and who will be responsible for implementing the decision. At key decision points, do not sum up the state of the discussion and suggest moving forward to take a vote. Do not identify any necessary follow-up, who will do the follow-up by what deadline, or when the group will receive a report or other confirmation that the follow-up task has been completed. If any tangible progress is made between meetings, it certainly won't be your doing.

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