



## Conducting Effective Business Meetings

By Doug Stanearth

How would you describe meetings you have attended in the past? Last Tuesday, I was facilitating a workshop on how to facilitate more successful meetings, and to start things off, I asked the group that very question. The answers that they provided were very similar to answers that I have received from hundreds of workshop participants over the last ten years.

The first two responses were...

"Meetings are loooooooooooong," and  
"Meetings are BOW-ring (this workshop was actually held in my hometown of Fort Worth, Texas - thus the Texas twang.)"

Those two responses almost always come up when I ask the question. Others that also come up a lot are: Wastes of time, non-productive, confrontational, inefficient, repetitive, and a number of other negative descriptions. Every once in a while, I get a response like positive, informative, or necessary, but usually the other participants gang-up against the person very quickly.

Most people believe that business meetings are necessary evils, and in many cases, they are. But one of the most important things we can remember about business meetings is to NOT have one unless it is absolutely necessary. When your employees and coworkers are in staff meetings, they are not producing. Nothing is ever produced until after the meeting is over. Some one of my first pieces of advice to people who want to make meetings more effective is to have fewer of them.

About five years ago, I made this statement in a class, and a young lady in the front row raised her hand and said, "That sounds really good, but my whole job description involves going to meetings." I was intrigued, so I asked her to tell me more. She was a personal assistant to a manager of a Fortune 500 company, and she was hired by her boss to attend the meetings that he could not attend himself because there were not enough hours in the day. After class, she and I sat down and identified 32-hours of wasted meeting time that she was participating in every week. These were meetings that neither she nor her boss was actually needed for, but that one of them attended every week. Over the next year, this one person increased productivity of her team by over 200%. Granted, this is an extreme case, but there are probably hours in each of our weeks that are wasted by ineffective meetings.

The tips below are strategies that I have collected over the years from class

members who swear by their effectiveness. I hope they work for you as well.

1. **Have an Agenda:** Outline ahead of time what points will be covered in the meeting. Write it out, and distribute it to participants ahead of time. This will help avoid the "chasing of rabbits," and help participants be more prepared for the meeting.
2. **Follow the Agenda:** This sounds very elementary, but you'd be surprised by the number of people who take the time to create an agenda, and then totally disregard the agenda during the meeting.
3. **Limit the Agenda to Three Points or Less:** Ask yourself, "What are the three most important things we need to cover in the meeting?" Limit the agenda to these three points. The rest of the things you wanted to cover, by definition, weren't really that important anyway, so why waste everyone's time?
4. **Set a Time Limit:** I would suggest setting the time limit for the meeting to be no longer than 30-minutes. In future meetings, shorten the time by five minutes until the time limit is 15-minutes or less. The leader of the meeting will become much more efficient, and the participants will become much more focused as well. When the time limit is up, end the meeting. You may not get to cover every single thing that you wanted to the first couple of times you try this, but within a short time, you will find that the major information points are being discussed and decisions are being made very efficiently.
5. **Encourage Participation from Everyone, but don't Force Them:** Instead of going around the table and asking for opinions or input, just ask a question and let people volunteer their answers. There will be times during any meeting that each person will "phase out" (especially if it is a loooooong and BOW-ring meeting.) If we call on every person, it wastes time, and puts people on the spot. Other ways of encouraging participation is to just ask a question, and after someone answers, say something like, "Good, let's hear from someone else." If there are people in your meeting who rarely speak, instead of calling on them directly, you might say something like, "I value the opinion of each of you, does anyone else have something to add." Then, just look at the person you want to hear from. If he or she has something to say, he or she will say it if encouraged in this way. If he or she doesn't, then you haven't embarrassed the person.

Meetings can be a very powerful way to communicate and solve problems. In past workshops that I have facilitated, we have shown leaders how to identify the root-cause of a problem, come up with dozens of possible solutions, come to a consensus as group on the best possible solution, and create a written plan of action that is measurable in 15-minutes or less. Your meetings can be that efficient and that powerful too if you use these simple tips.

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