



If We Have to Have Meetings, Let's At Least Do Them Right...

In my more than a decade in the business world (OK, more than two decades), the single biggest productivity killer, besides a naked supermodel walking through the office, is the meeting. We all have them, and we all know how much time gets wasted. As a manager, I can't help thinking about the number of people in the room, the money we're paying them per hour, and the total cost of deciding whether to serve hamburgers or hot dogs at the company picnic. It boggles the mind that we spend so many man-hours (people-hours?) in meetings, and not always with stellar results.

We've tried not having meetings, unless everybody's standing up and waiting to use the bathroom. We've all read "The Two Minute Manager," and tried to keep our comments brief and to the point. We've done the seminars, hired the facilitators, lamented the time wasted and the dollars down the drain. But we still keep having meetings. Why? Because people need to communicate, ideas need to be shared, and plans need to be made. It just needs to all happen with less fuss. That's where "Kip's Rules for Having Meetings That Don't Stink" comes in.

The first of my rules is, as most first rules, the most important:

1. Don't Hold That Meeting Unless It's the Only Way to Get the Job Done.

We hold meetings for three basic purposes: To distribute information, to encourage discussion toward the resolution of a problem, and to gain permission or consensus to go forward with a plan. If the same objectives can be met by sending around a memo or an email, then do it. If you can, avoid meetings like the plague (or at least a bad cold). By making meetings that get held useful, efficient, and goal oriented, your team will know that when a live meeting gets called, it's for an important purpose, and are more likely to take the

meeting seriously and participate.

2. Set Objectives for the Meeting. When I say "Set Objectives," I don't mean things like, "determine how to increase sales." I mean things like, "Set an action plan for increasing sales to our top 20 customers in the Western region by 8% in the next 2 quarters." These objectives should be stated out loud at the beginning of the meeting, so everybody is clear why they are there. "At the end of this meeting, we will have at least 4 ideas for increasing market share with those top 20 customers, and everybody in this room will have a list of actions that they will take before the next meeting that will lead to that goal."

Clear objectives stated at the outset of the meeting keep the conversation focused and on track. When things wander off, as they almost always do, the chair can redirect the conversation back to the objective without offending anybody. "Those comments are great, but we really need to focus on that 8% goal."

3. Make Sure Everybody in the Meeting Understands, in Advance, What His/Her Role Will Be.

Passive meeting attendees are a waste of money. Make sure everybody has a part to play and a few words to say. Don't let anybody coast. Having your team prepare for the meeting in advance will keep the pace lively, and avoid blank stares. Remember, if there are five people in the meeting, and the meeting lasts 90 minutes, the total cost for that meeting is probably around \$300. Would you pay a consultant \$300 to come to that meeting unprepared?

4. Use a Written Agenda.

This is probably one of the most important of Kip's Rules, and the one that gets broken most often. Even if it's a last-minute meeting to discuss a single topic, spending 3 minutes to type and print a simple agenda will save many times that in lost focus and wandering discussion. The discipline imposed by having a written agenda will result in better meetings in less time, and will give the chair an 'out'

when dealing with an off-topic comment: "Maybe we can put that on the agenda for next time."

5. Every Item on the Agenda Must Have an Action Associated With It When the Meeting Ends.

How many meetings have you been in where no decisions are made, nobody is assigned to do anything specific, and the net results are little more than would come from an after-work beer chat at the local pub? Again, meetings are expensive, and should not be held unless there are goals to be met. All goals require action (except that one about inheriting the Father-In-Law's loot after he's gone), so assign specific actions to be taken for every agenda item. Those actions should not be mere busy work, but goal-oriented activities that will lead to a successful outcome within a specified period of time.

6. End Each Meeting With a Recap and an Assessment of How Well the Meeting Met the Objectives.

Summaries are the best way to recap a meeting. "OK, gang, I think we did some good thinking about those 20 customers, and here's what we decided to do today. First, John will...."

Make sure everybody knows what is expected of them personally before the next milestone (one of those buzzwords I swore I would never use).

As a manager, ask yourself, "Would I have spent my own \$300 to achieve what we did at this meeting?" If the answer is yes, you're probably on the right track and doing a good job. If the answer is no, odds are your boss or the stockholders wouldn't be too happy if they knew the details of the time (and money) you spent.

My bottom line: Meetings are much maligned, and often with good reason, but they can also be the point at which good minds come together to inspire creative solutions to challenging problems, or to take advantage of emerging opportunities. I only ask that if we have them, let's do them right.