

management matters

➔ How to spot — and fix — the symptoms of a bad meeting

The Seven Meeting Sins

By Joel D. Levitt

The door to the meeting room opens and it's the person who called the meeting, running 10 minutes late because the previous meeting ended late, and he had to stop by his office to pick up some notes to remind him of what this meeting is about. The folks in the room are discussing last night's game and wondering how long the meeting is going to last. Only one person remembers getting the notes from the last meeting. And he's the only one who has a copy of the report they're supposed to discuss.

Does this sound or feel familiar? You're not alone. Unfortunately, meetings are often a waste of time and money. Scary meeting statistics abound. Software company Atlassian's infographic states that U.S. businesses waste \$37 billion a year.

Some of that meeting time may have been wasted in your organization. What is strange is why this situation isn't at the top of anyone's list of things to fix. If billions are being wasted, why don't corporations make the effort to fix the problem? Perhaps it boils down to a lack of accountability. This is something that is entirely within our control, however. Here are some symptoms of bad meetings and what you can do to fix them.

1 Your meetings ramble on without a clear purpose. If there's an agenda, no one follows it.

Good meeting practice says that a clear agenda will almost always reduce the time wasted in a meeting. A poll of 471 management leaders found that 90 percent of respondents attributed the failure of meetings to a lack of advance planning and organization. So, be sure to send out an agenda before the meeting. Review the agenda at the beginning of the meeting and gain agreement to follow it. It's also important to empower people to point out when the meeting veers off the agenda. That way, everyone can share the responsibility to keep things on track.

2 People are doing their own things during the meeting — texting, responding to emails, and carrying on unrelated conversations.

One way to avoid this is to establish ground rules that everyone agrees to before the meeting begins. These rules include setting limits on texting, email, and phone conversations, and requiring people to listen without interrupting. Even if people have agreed in advance to these rules, they may need to be reminded of them at the beginning of the meeting or during the meeting itself if the rule breaking is particularly egregious. Such reminding may be done by fellow members or by the meeting leader if there is one.



3 People arrive unprepared or confused about what will be discussed at the meeting.

A well-run organization holds staff members accountable for doing their jobs and keeping their promises. But real life often falls short of how we know we should operate. Holding people accountable should be part of any set of ground rules for meetings. When you distribute the agenda in advance, clearly state the preparation that is expected of each member who will participate. Even when you reiterate expectations, there might still be people who don't think they are the people who are supposed to be prepared.

In a separate setting, the meeting leader or manager needs to state the obvious: Meetings are places where people report on their work, share information, and so on.

When members fail to do what they promised, they are being disrespectful of other people's time — those who came to the meeting in order to participate and learn what progress has been made. Not only are they being rude to coworkers, they are also creating actual economic waste of organizational resources.

4 Decisions are discussed but not made, resulting in no closure.

A good business process gets essential activities done with a minimum amount of waste. A good meeting process requires decisions to close a topic (or a clear decision that the topic be continued at the next meeting). Create the expectation that a decision will be made during the meeting and drive for consensus. If a decision still can't be made, the decision might need to be kicked upstairs or assigned to a sub-group. Then, after everyone has their say and decisions are made, the decision needs to be supported by the entire group, even if some disagree. Otherwise the disagreements move underground and un-

dermine the workings of all. There is one special exception: if the decision is illegal, immoral, or dangerous. In such cases, dissent may be healthier for the organization in the long run than cooperating in the short run with bad decisions.

5 Meetings are dominated by a few talkers (not necessarily the leader) or there are knowledgeable people who never volunteer to speak up.

Facilitation can improve both the process and the outcome of meetings. According to an article in the Fall 2006 issue of *The Facilitator*, using a skilled meeting facilitator increases the productivity of a project by 25 percent. Of course, the magazine may have a bias, but having someone with training in meeting facilitation has the potential to improve most things. If that's not an option, help the meeting leader develop some basic facilitation skills that will help even out participation.

6 Meetings start and end late, or attendees arrive late or leave before the end.

Timeliness is a matter of integrity. Here we are using the word "integrity" in the sense of being unimpaired or sound. Consider the integrity of the steel beams in a building. If one or more was missing or askew, wouldn't the building sag or fall down? Similarly, the integrity of your work group or team is undermined when key people are missing during updates or moments of decision; it doesn't matter why or how. They will inevitably miss important communications, updates, reframing of the



issues under discussion, and waste everyone else's time when they have to be brought up to date. Because they missed the original sequence of events, they may also leave the meeting with an erroneous impression of what was discussed or agreed upon. Set the expectation for timeliness in advance and then start and end the meeting on time. If you respect peoples' schedules, they will be more likely to respect the integrity of the meeting and its objectives.

7 People leave meetings feeling physically tired, frustrated, angry, or depressed.

Your current meeting style might not be healthy for you. If your meetings include doughnuts, coffee, soft drinks, and bagels, they may spike your blood sugar and then cause it to crash. Are your meetings longer than necessary or are they run without breaks? Perhaps you're holding the wrong type of meeting for the particular time of day. Consider the logistics of the meeting to see if your meetings actually help or hinder the work of the organization. **SM**

Joel D. Levitt has more than 30 years of management experience and is a leading trainer of manufacturing, operational, and maintenance professionals. He has trained more than 15,000 leaders from 3,000 organizations in 25 countries. Since 1980, Levitt has been the president of Springfield Resources, a management consulting firm servicing clients of all sizes on a wide range of maintenance issues, and is currently the director of international projects at Life Cycle Engineering. Levitt is the author of 10 books, as well a frequent speaker at related industry conferences. His book *10 Minutes a Week to Great Meetings* is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com, www.maintenancetraining.com, and www.meetingdefender.com.