

How To Cure “Meeting Mania”

Bob Prosen

While “meeting mania” is certainly unproductive, frequent meetings focusing on performance against organizational goals are absolutely necessary – and absolutely productive. Managers, along with everyone else in the organization, must be held accountable. If goals aren’t met, there must be a penalty.

If an organization is gridlocked in too many meetings, then someone in that organization is afraid to make a decision. That someone is usually at the top, and unfortunately, this behaviour trickles all the way down through middle management to the line workers.

People want to work for leaders with the guts to make a decision and stick with it. If your organization holds meetings with lots of people to gain broad political consensus, then a leader is trying to ensure that if something goes wrong, there will be plenty of people to blame.

Instead, management must encourage calculated risk taking and truly demonstrate that people who take risks and occasionally miss the mark will live to try again. A culture of blame, fear, and meeting mania can’t flourish in that healthy environment. Gains in productivity alone are reason enough to put a halt to unnecessary meetings.

What leaders must communicate by example is that calculated risk taking, seeking expert advice, assessing the pros and cons, making a decision, and then vigorously moving forward are the behaviours that earn rewards.

How Meetings Support Accountability

It’s easy to shift the focus of every meeting to account-

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ability. First, require everyone to ask themselves why they’re there. Can they make a difference? If not, ask them to dis-invite themselves and get back to the tasks that can make a difference. The only people who should attend are those directly involved in achieving the goal that is the subject of the meeting. Make sure the key players are there. Publish a results-oriented agenda in advance so that everyone comes prepared. Begin and end on time. Then make sure someone in the meeting captures the action items. What needs to be done? What assistance is required? Who’s going to do it? And, by when? Meeting adjourned.

Next time the team meets, start the meeting by reviewing the list of action items and commitments from the previous meeting. This will ensure progress toward the ultimate objective. When you encounter roadblocks and objectives are at risk, the entire team should address the situation proactively and make substantive offers to help. Hold people accountable, and watch results improve.

For meetings to be truly effective, the focus must be on results rather than people. It’s fine to be hard on performance – you should be when results, commitments, and objectives are at risk or go unmet. But, you don’t want to be hard on people. Watch your language. Don’t make it personal. Instead, focus on removing roadblocks that stand in the way of accomplishing the goal, as opposed to the individual’s inability to achieve that goal. Also, be careful not to shoot the messenger. This will help people feel as free to talk about where they are failing as where they are succeeding. When there is a need to deal with a performance problem, do it privately. If you don’t, your people will clam up.

How many times have you sat in a meeting and worked on your calendar, read your mail, or messaged people on your PDA? The waste is staggering. I know an organization

that required everyone attending meetings to log in to the computer in order to calculate the fully loaded cost of everyone in the meeting. Throughout the meeting, the total cost was posted on the screen so everyone could see how well they were using the organization's assets.

Treat every meeting just like any other investment. And, ask yourself, what is the return?

Practice Conversation for Action

There are two types of conversations in business: information sharing and what I call "conversation for action." The first is a great way to stay connected, spawn creativity or debate. The second focuses on producing results. It's request driven and specifically involves asking someone to deliver something by a certain time. It's detailed down to the deadline. I need X by Y. And, in some situations, there is no room for negotiation.

Conversely, you should be listening for answers that are commitment based – either "I can do that" or "I can't." If the answer is "I can't," then an effective leader will focus on the roadblocks by asking the person what he or she needs to meet the request. An answer of "I can't" or "I'll try" without specific reasons is unacceptable.

Be direct. There's no room for vagueness in a organization geared for action. Often leaders hem and haw because they fear directness will be interpreted as either uncaring or intimidating, when neither has to be the case. To the contrary, directness often makes people feel more comfortable because they know exactly what's expected of them. Direct requests help people perform and prioritize. It's also important to provide ample opportunity for questions to ensure complete understanding.

The more direct and unambiguous you are, the more people will know what you expect of them, and the greater the chance for achieving your objectives. Success is not measured by determining who has decoded your secret desires and somehow solved your riddles. Success is based on your ability to tell people clearly what you want up front, so that everyone can win.

Employees' fears escalate when they don't believe "what you see is what you get." If they think there is an ulterior motive or hidden agenda, everyone will fail. So, it's important that you communicate thoroughly enough that people feel you are giving them all the information you have. After all, they are the ones who have to execute on your direction.

The same holds true when you are asked questions. Make your answers as direct and specific as possible. People are uncomfortable with vague responses. If you are not at liberty to answer, tell the person you can't and don't make up excuses. If you have a hidden agenda, it's a little like sending someone off with half a map and hoping they find the destination.

Listen for Those Who Love the Sound of Their Own Voice

We've all been a part of meetings where there are people who need to comment on every item, even when it's not in their arena. These are the people who love the sound of their own voice. Be sure to minimize this type of conversation. Otherwise, team members who should be talking will often get distracted and lose interest. When one individual stalls conversation, bring it back to the centre by letting everyone know that the conversation needs to focus on what must happen to accomplish objectives. If the same people continue to distract the conversation, call them on it.

Take Action

Make it a goal to eliminate ineffective meetings. People will applaud when you make this mandatory. They would much rather do something valuable with their time than sit in a meeting where nothing is being accomplished. The payoff is real, so shift gears now. I strongly encourage leaders to randomly pop into meetings strictly as an observer to make certain change is underway. Occasionally ask to see agendas and the action item log.

Even seemingly small changes have the potential to dramatically increase meeting effectiveness, improve morale, and bring the focus to achieving results instead of activity. *MW*

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