STOP WASTING TIME: KEYS TO GREAT MEETINGS

Whether it’s a gathering of health-care providers, faculty, students or a mix, here’s how to make your meetings productive.

BY JAMIE CHAMBERLIN

Meetings that start late, last too long and accomplish little can stress attendees far beyond that lost hour, says Steven Rogelberg, PhD, of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who studies meeting science. Research shows bad meetings can lead to job dissatisfaction, employee fatigue and what he calls “meeting recovery syndrome”—time spent cooling off after a frustrating meeting, which often includes destructive commiseration with colleagues.

“The next thing you know, the weight of the crappy meeting is higher, and it can spill over into other areas of work,” he says.

How can everyone make meetings more effective, even enjoyable? The best gatherings happen when meeting leaders view themselves as stewards of everyone else’s valuable time, says Rogelberg. Good stewards plan meetings thoughtfully, manage group dynamics, find out in advance why people want to meet and promote other people’s contributions rather than their own.

Here is more wisdom from experts for attendees and leaders on how to meet-up better.

■ Be on time. Arriving late to meetings undermines productivity from the start—and upper management members are often the worst offenders, says Daniel Post Senning, co-author of “The Etiquette Advantage in Business” and great-great-grandson of manners guru Emily Post. “Often, they believe the rules don’t apply to them.”

■ Late may cause more than irritation: In a paper under review, Rogelberg and Joseph Allen, PhD, found that when a person showed up less than five minutes late for a meeting, productivity didn’t suffer. But when an attendee or leader showed up five to 10 minutes late, “satisfaction, effectiveness and productivity of the meeting dropped dramatically,” says Allen, an associate professor of industrial-organizational psychology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Wallace Dixon, PhD, psychology department chair at East Tennessee State University, leads by example by starting and ending his monthly faculty meeting precisely on time. “If you don’t, you insult the people who got there on time, reward the people who got there late and convey to everyone their time isn’t that important,” he says.

■ Be prepared. Arriving “late, frazzled, with nothing but a leaky coffee cup doesn’t leave a good impression,” Senning says. Bring something to take notes with and a steady attention span. Complete any assigned reading in advance. “Nothing is worse than showing up to the meeting and finding that no one has read the documents that [you sent, and] you then have to explain to everyone what they should have read,” says Allen.

■ Make your phone (mostly) invisible. Despite the leave-the-device-at-the-door practice made popular by President Obama and Amazon, in most settings it is considered OK to bring your smartphone to meetings if you keep your attention on the speaker, says Senning. He recommends telling people in advance if you plan to use your phone to take notes or images of PowerPoint slides. But if people are gravitating to their devices in meetings, it may be a sign that the meeting needs to be more engaging, says Rogelberg. “Devices are signals,” he says. “Psychologically, the person is trying to regain control of the time.”

■ Diversity the discussion. No one attendee should monopolize the conversation—and no good facilitator should let anyone do it. Dixon says he will pull faculty aside later if they are talking too much in meetings because it bores other staff and “they will lose faith in you as a leader if you don’t handle it,” he says. All attendees can share in that responsibility by making an effort to contribute even if public speaking isn’t their forte, says Allen. His research has shown that when people make an effort to participate in a
meeting—especially when there is a decision-making component—they are happier with the meeting’s result and the meeting is more effective.

- **Move It Along.** Dixon places a time limit on each discussion item when he plans his faculty meetings and enforces those limits with his smartphone’s timer. Another way to prevent run-on discussions and create a sense of urgency, Rogelberg says, is to switch from hourlong weekly or monthly meetings to shorter, more frequent “huddles”: 10- to 15-minute meet-ups designed to save time and boost efficiency. If a leader has a difficult time staying on task, any attendee can help move the meeting forward by tactfully redirecting his or her attention to the agenda, says Allen.

- **Be Constructive.** Meetings can unravel when attendees cut one another off, dismiss each other, hold side conversations or argue. Avoid such tension, such as by saying, “I agree with some of what you’re saying,” instead of a short-tempered, “I just don’t agree with you,” says Brendan O’Farrell, PhD, of the Hass School of Business, University of California. Along those lines, Dixon advises the department chairs he mentors never to put a contentious issue to a vote in a meeting because it makes people uncomfortable. “Voting only divides, it never unites,” he says. “When you resort to a vote, you have stopped talking.”