

Keep Meetings Productive and Meaningful

A short meeting that accomplishes what's intended serves to keep people informed and a long, drawn-out meeting during which participants wander from the topics at hand, no decisions are made, and nothing important is accomplished is a drain on productivity and can negatively affect employee morale. Fast Company, a New York City-based magazine devoted to covering the latest and best business trends and practices, developed a list of "The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings," along with some strategies to make meetings meaningful and productive.

The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings

Sin Number One:

People don't take meetings seriously. They don't arrive on time and often leave before the meeting ends. During the meeting, some employees doodle aimlessly, whisper to their neighbors, tune out or even try to complete other work. To avoid this, the meeting organizer should focus on meeting basics, such as an agenda, rules to govern the meeting and sticking to a process. Managers need to be trained in order to be able successfully facilitate a meeting.

Sin Number Two:

Meetings are too long. They should accomplish twice as much in half the time. One way to convince people to make meetings more productive is to track how much the meetings cost simply multiply the hourly rate of each person in the room by the amount of time spent in the meeting, and add the figures together. Often, after this exercise is conducted at several meetings, the organization will decide to offer meeting-management training.

Sin Number Three:

People stray from the topic. Participants spend more time digressing than discussing. The solution to this problem is to create an agenda in advance of the meeting, and to get buy-in on the input from others as to what the agenda should include. Some of the agendas record not only the topic but also the purpose. They inform participants which items are intended for discussions, which are for information only, or which requires a decision. Plus, they allot a certain amount of time to each item.

Sin Number Four:

Nothing happens once the meeting ends. People don't convert decision into action. A simple solution to this is to track the outcomes of the meeting on white boards and flip charts for all to see. A designated person should record the key points and required follow-up activities on a computer during the meeting. Distribute the follow-

up activities in bold, including the responsible party assigned, can go a long way toward improving meeting follow-up.

Sin Number Five:

People don't tell the truth. There's plenty of conversation, but not much candor. So why don't people speak the truth? The three most common reasons are that the meeting facilitator doesn't solicit opinions, dominant personalities are allowed to intimidate the rest of the group, and there is a general lack of trust among participants. People are afraid to speak up. Better training for the facilitator can help with the first two reasons. The trust issue is more difficult to solve. One solution is to allow anonymity by using technology to gather input from the group, prioritize, and record individual decisions. A lack of willingness to share ideas openly leads to poor decisions and a lack of support for the decisions once the meetings have ended.

Sin Number Six:

Meetings are always missing important information, so critical decisions get postponed. Meeting should be timed to include all the relevant people and necessary data.

Sin Number Seven:

Meetings never get better. People make the same mistakes over and over again. It's only through trial and error and continued effort to improve that this concern can be overcome. Leaders should make the time to evaluate each meeting as it ends and determine what needs to be changed.