

TIME SAVER



Sitting through dysfunctional meetings can feel like a marathon. But there are ways to save time and keep employees engaged, says **David Parmenter**

Meetings and human beings do not go well together. For the 40 years I have been working, I have seen very little improvement in the way meetings are run. For far too many of us, our working day is subjected to far too many meetings, scheduled across the day, that go nowhere quickly. Any agreed actions are soon forgotten.

Despite most managers at some point receiving training in managing meetings, the level of frustration with them remains the same. The problem has been that the training has not delved into the core reasons for failure. Even the legendary John Cleese's training video - *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* - serves to entertain rather than tackle these issues.

Dysfunctional meetings usually have the following characteristics: unclear agendas, lack of engagement, lack of linkage to the organisation's critical success factors, too many attendees, half of whom don't know why they are there, rambling discussions, a lack of understanding that some attendees' focus is elsewhere, poorly defined actions and no follow-through. Here are two ideas for more effective meetings:

THE SCRUM

Scrum meetings are 15-minute, stand-up project updates that are held first thing each morning. During these meetings, team members are asked to talk about what they did yesterday on the project, what they are going to do today on the project, and what the barriers to progress are.

The debrief for each team member is to take no more than a minute or so. Some teams even have a dumbbell weighing 5-10kg to be held out horizontally with the weaker arm; the rule being you can only talk as long as you can hold the weight horizontally. At the end of the session, the group ends the session by bumping fists, a homage to the source of this technique.

The manager - known as the scrum-master - notes all the roadblocks and immediately sets about removing them with appropriate action.

This method does many things. It replaces loads of emails as the team gets to know what has been done and what is going to be done and by whom. It also makes everyone accountable. There is no place for a cruiser.

You can watch Jeff Sutherland's presentation (available at tinyurl.com/BAM-Scrum) about scrums to understand more about this technique, or look on YouTube to learn more about the history of scrum (available at tinyurl.com/BAM-Scrum2).

ACTION MEETINGS

A methodology has been developed by two management consultants, Mike Osborne and David McIntosh, that is breathtaking in its simplicity, yet profound in its influence. The action meetings methodology has attacked the core of dysfunctional meetings and there are a number of key features.

The first is getting people properly in and out of the meeting. This is done through the introduction of a "first word" and "last word", allowing attendees to briefly say what state they are in.

First words can range from, "I am very time-challenged and this meeting is the last thing I need," to "I am eager to make progress with this assignment and to hear Bill's view on project development". Meanwhile, last words could be, "The meeting has once again promised little and delivered nothing" or "I look forward to receiving Pat's report and working with the project team". The key to the first and last word is that attendees can say anything about how

they feel at that point in time. Their comment is just that - a comment. It should remain unchallenged.

It is also important to construct an effective agenda based on three types of outcomes, which requires precise wording about meeting outcomes. You are discussing an issue to understand it, agree on a course of action, and finally assign action. Outcomes provide focus and the ability to easily check whether an item has, in fact, been completed. Thus, once you understand an issue, it may be closed if the agreed action is to happen at a later meeting. A major benefit of establishing meeting outcomes worded in this way, is that nominated attendees can decline the invite if they do not think they can add value or assist in achieving the outcomes.

Making meetings participant-owned rather than chairman-owned is also important. All attendees should be trained in the action meeting methodology. Therefore, meetings are owned and policed by all participants and are less reliant on the capability of the chairman.

Once an outcome in a meeting is closed, it should remain closed. If, during the meeting, someone opens a closed item, remind them that it has been closed. Furthermore, any issues raised that are not related to the outcome under discussion should be tabled for another, future discussion.

Finally, write action steps. These can be entered into a software application, so all attendees can see what progress has been made, and the follow-up meeting can be deferred if an action has not been completed.

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The length of scrum meetings - project update meetings that are held first thing each morning

There are other ways you can save time in meetings:

ABANDON AS MANY AS YOU CAN

Only participate in meetings where action occurs. Monitor the action after a meeting and if progress is not being made, make it clear that the next meeting will be deferred until progress has been achieved.

CEO of General Electric Jack Welch would stop presentations when he realised nothing had been achieved. He told the culprits to come back later that evening with some implementation to report.

BAN STAFF MORNING MEETINGS

A beneficial start to the day is to avoid having staff meetings during your productive time. I fail to see why senior management feel the need to have meetings with their direct reports at nine on Monday mornings. Such meetings are often followed with more meetings as the debriefing is passed down the chain in larger organisations. Why not schedule most of your meetings for during the afternoon?

DO NOT ALLOW LATECOMERS

Every late arrival creates a two-minute disruption. That is 20 minutes lost if 10 are in attendance. In some organisations, you are only important if you arrive late. If you can get agreement on this rule, you will be surprised at the change in behaviour.

ALLOW PEOPLE TO WALK OUT

Organise the agenda so people who can only contribute to one agenda item speak to this issue first and are then allowed to leave. This simple change has the added benefit of letting the junior staff speak first, thus avoiding their opinions being influenced by meeting bullies.

Nathan Donaldson, an entrepreneurial CEO, allows attendees to remove themselves from a meeting, with a cursory nod to the chairman, when they feel their time would be better spent elsewhere. After the second departure, you can wrap up the meeting swiftly, as Donaldson pointed out to me.

TURN MEETINGS INTO WORKSHOPS

If you are having many meetings with your staff, they may not be progressing. Turn more of your meetings into lock-up workshops with whiteboards and laptops, and push the project on by

completing a delivery. By doing this you will also give your direct reports some training as they see how the master does it.

DELIVER INSTEAD OF ATTENDING A BRIEFING MEETING

As a manager, monitor the number of meetings your team gets drawn into. One IT manager I met vetted all meetings and in many simple exercises, told the in-house client that they would deliver the solution rather than have a meeting to discuss it.

KEEP BELOW SIX PARTICIPANTS

After this threshold, the meeting becomes dysfunctional. Taking too long will affect engagement as some junior participants will not have the allotted time or inclination to participate fully. Also, make sure you get the sitting arrangement right. As chairman, it may be best to sit in the middle of the table as you will be closer to all participants, including any troublemakers.

FORTNIGHTLY ONE-TO-ONES

Schedule your one-to-one meetings with your direct reports fortnightly, as weekly meetings are too frequent. They do not give staff enough time to address any issues raised in the previous meeting. Consider holding some of these off site over lunch, which gives staff a chance to unwind and share more confidential issues.

TO DISAGREE MIGHT BE RUDE

It's best to ask them a question rather than ask if they agree - in some cultures disagreeing may be viewed as rude. As Eon Black, an international troubleshooter and a long-term executive for BP Oil, pointed out to me, whenever local staff reverted to their mother tongue he knew there was a problem that he had to unearth.

HOLD MORE VIRTUAL MEETINGS

This can be achieved by using technology, such as GoToMeetings. In GoToMeetings, all attendees are visible on camera and you are able to gauge their involvement. ●



David Parmenter is an expert in KPIs, quarterly rolling forecasting and planning. He is an international presenter of workshops and the author of four books.