

Luttrell on Leadership

Leading Great Meetings

by Mary Luttrell

Why do so many people say, "I hate meetings?" It must be because they've attended so many bad ones. A bad meeting can range from merely boring to one filled with acrimony. Indeed, these unpleasant experiences have given meetings a bad name. It doesn't have to be that way.

As long as there are issues and projects that require cooperative efforts, there will be meetings. They are a necessary and important part of our work lives. The upside is that it can be exciting and profoundly rewarding to participate in a meeting where important work gets done efficiently and sound decisions and agreements are made. Since the fundamental medium of leadership is working with people, and more specifically, groups of people, meetings are an organizational fact of life.

Like most, I have probably attended thousands of mediocre meetings, hundreds of good meetings and dozens of great ones. (I think one of the reasons I became a meeting facilitator is so at least I can increase the odds that most of the meetings I attend are satisfying and productive.) A great meeting is a challenging and satisfying social and intellectual experience, where one is engaged on many levels. It culminates in a sense of accomplishment. The synergy of the assembled participants creates an outcome that is far

superior to what even the most capable individual could produce alone.

When two or more people discuss an issue or project, it constitutes a meeting. It can be formal or informal, structured or not, depending on the context and purpose. If your leadership skills include being a good meeting facilitator, and/or if you have an exceptional group of individuals, you may get to enjoy many great meetings.

Also remember that anytime you are part of a meeting, you have a responsibility to do your part to make it work. It's not just up to the meeting leader or facilitator.

Here are my five basic attributes of a great meeting. As a leader, make your meetings:

PURPOSEFUL - Meetings must have a definite purpose and substance. If you don't have a clear purpose, don't have a meeting. Use some other form of communication. Each participant, and especially the leader, should be very clear about why the meeting needs to take place and what needs to be accomplished.

PRODUCTIVE - For people to feel good about the time spent at a meeting, productivity is essential. "Getting something done" is a baseline requirement. One of the biggest problems of poor meetings is the failure to make decisions. This is primarily a leadership issue, and requires that the meeting leader has the skill and resolve to see that decisions get made in a timely manner. (Group decision-making is an art in itself. In a nutshell,

the consensus model is usually the most appropriate for the workplace.)

STIMULATING - To feel good about the time and effort invested in a meeting, people need to be invigorated by the human interaction. The meeting needs to be at least satisfying and hopefully inspiring. Elevate the conversation to its highest level, not the lowest common denominator. Be intellectually provocative; challenge the participants to think. Frame questions in an open-ended manner that requires thoughtfulness. Encourage differing viewpoints, new ideas, healthy debate and open dialogue. All of this is within the context of a safe and trustworthy environment, which is a key condition for a good meeting.

EFFICIENT - Although each of us can easily find ways to waste our own time individually, it is somehow far less tolerable to have other people waste our time, such as when we feel “captive” at a poorly run meeting. Ideally, a meeting leader needs to be well organized and skillful in moving the conversation forward at a good pace, neither too fast nor too slow. In part this involves determining the appropriate duration of the meeting, the frequency of the meetings, and the relative importance of the various agenda items. For most meetings, having a basic written agenda is a simple tool that helps everyone stay on track. Some formal meetings require extensive planning down to the minute for each item on the agenda, while other meetings work well with just a list of

topics to be covered and a skilled facilitator.

FUN - Some meetings have a serious context that precludes much if any humor, but the majority of meetings can be improved with some lightheartedness. Take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the human connection and to see the humor in a situation, even if the overall context is serious. Sharing laughter in a group increases good-will, which in turn eases the sometimes difficult work of building consensus and making decisions. Having the opportunity to be intellectually creative is fun. There is tremendous potential for creativity in meetings, from exercises designed to elicit innovative ideas to brainstorming and problem-solving.

Using these five guidelines will help you design and conduct meetings that people will enjoy and look forward to attending. If you master these basics, you will be doing yourself and your fellow meeting mates a great service. The ultimate guideline is simple: If you’re going to have a meeting, make it a great one!

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