

How to Run a Meeting That's Not Terrible

Five tips for engaging – not boring – your participants.

By Laura McMullen; March 18, 2015

Splinters, spiders and Outlook invites: tiny things that can yield various levels of turmoil for its victim. The third strikes when you're crossing off to-dos and notice a rectangle of horror pop up on your screen: a meeting in 15 minutes that you can't imagine would be more productive than what you're doing right now.

"Meetings are usually terrible, but they shouldn't be," says Patrick Lencioni, founder of The Table Group, a management consulting company, and author of "Death by Meeting."

Below, Lencioni shares how to run a meeting that your participants won't dread.

1. Avoid "meeting stew." A bad meeting is like a bad breakup: You end it feeling unclear why it happened, unsure of what to do next and with no closure. And, upon reflecting, you may feel it's all been a waste of time.

While who knows what went wrong with your ex, when it comes to bad meetings, Lencioni says they're usually the result of "meeting stew." The organizer mixes four different kinds of meetings together in one session, discussing basic updates one minute and long-term strategy the next. The result? Confusing, unproductive meetings, in which Lencioni says participants are "just trying to get through it and survive it."

He likens this kind of confusing meeting to another, more intimate kind of talk. Say a couple is going through their morning bathroom routine. As they primp and brush their teeth, they discuss how they each slept, what their plans are for dinner and if they want to have another baby. That's a lot to cover while flossing.

Lencioni has a better recipe for productive discussions: "Have shorter, more specific meetings, targeted around very clear objectives." He identifies the following four types of meetings, which should be kept separate:

Daily check-ins: Use these meetings if your team members need to update each other on what they're working on. Keep them to five or 10 minutes at most, Lencioni says, and discuss only administrative issues, such as daily activities and schedules.

Stand during these meetings, too, he says. Standing will help keep the meeting short, for one. (Who wants to stand longer than they have to?) Plus, booting the chairs may boost the engagement and teamwork of participants, according to a 2014 study by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Weekly tactical meetings: These 45- to 90-minute gatherings may be called staff meetings in your office, and they're often the ones where meeting stew is cooked, Lencioni says. Keep these meetings to the discussion of near-term conflicts and how to resolve them.

If someone brings up a strategic issue, it's up to the leader to stop that thread and stick to the shorter-term problem at hand. In the couple-in-the-bathroom example, that would be like one partner asking about if and when they should have a baby, and the other saying, "Hold on, we're talking about what we're doing for dinner right now." In a meeting, say, for a media company, that may be someone asking about the plan to keep up with a competing company, while the leader says, "Hold on, we're talking about how to boost our Web traffic for this week." There's a time and place to talk about strategy ...

Monthly or ad hoc strategic meetings: This is when you talk about your decision to have a baby – er – rather, your plan keep up with a competing company or any other issues with long-term implications. As Lencioni puts it, participants discuss, "big, hairy problems ... and wrestle them to the ground." As with any good wrestling match, expect (and encourage) conflicting viewpoints between participants, as well as high-energy brainstorming.

Strategic meetings should last two to four hours, Lencioni says, and occur either monthly or as necessary. So when participants in your tactical staff meeting bring up long-term strategy, for example, you could say, "Hold on, I'll schedule another meeting to discuss that topic."

Quarterly off-site meetings: In these meetings, participants can "step back and take a breath," Lencioni says. The leader should hold the meeting outside the office – somewhere, "out of your normal environment," he says, and last a full day or two. On the agenda: team performance, industry trends, company strategy, morale and competitive threats.

2. Ban cellphones. In whatever type of meeting you attend, consider asking participants to leave their cellphones at their desk – or at least in their pockets. For one, there are the distracting emails, text messages and Candy Crush that may steal participants' engagement and participation. And two, phone peeping will likely annoy other participants, adding to that "what are we even doing here?" lamentation common in bad meetings. In a 2013 University of Southern California Marshall School of Business study of 550 professionals, 3 out of 4 people said checking texts or emails in meetings was unacceptable.

3. Avoid over-inviting. This isn't a bat mitzvah; it's a meeting, so keep the guest list in check. Remember: The employees sitting in your meetings have sacrificed their time doing other work. Before going invite-crazy, consider who is legitimately necessary for the meeting. "Often, fewer people need attend than one might first think," writes career coach Marty Nemko in a U.S. News article about how to run meetings. "If a person might be offended at not being invited, explain why his or her time would better be used elsewhere."

4. Begin on time. As Nemko explains: "Starting late wastes time, punishes the punctual and conveys that in the future, attendees can arrive late."

5. Start strong. Begin most meetings (besides the five-minute check-ins) by "framing the issue as to what's at stake and what the pain could be if unresolved," Lencioni says. For example: "We're talking about Competitor X today, because if we don't start catching up to their numbers within the year, our company may go bankrupt." (Maybe this example is a little extreme, but you get the point.) He says when leaders point out the stakes in a meeting, it's like how screenwriters show tension in a movie; those tactics make the viewers (or in the conference room, employees) care about the outcome. Otherwise, he adds, "if you don't care, you're not engaged."

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