

TRANSCRIPT

PODCAST #6: MEETING YOUR GOALS THROUGH MEETINGS

VOICE-OVER: Here is this week's Raising The Bar podcast for Business To Business Magazine with Business Development Coach Robin Hensley.

ROBIN: If you believe that "a meeting is an event at which the minutes are kept and the hours are lost," then you won't be surprised to learn that, of the 11 million meetings that take place everyday in the U.S., over 50% of the time spent meeting is wasted. Research shows that most professionals attend a total of 61.8 meetings per month. Isn't that astounding?! Assuming each of these meetings is one hour long that means those individuals lose an average of 31 hours per month in unproductive or non-billable time. That's the equivalent of four workdays. Yipes! When you consider that time is our most valuable resource, isn't it about time that we stopped wasting it on meetings?

Hello, I'm Robin Hensley and this week I'm stepping onto my soapbox about meetings -- how to make them more useful and productive, yielding results that will make them worth the investment of your time and talent -- in other words, "Meeting Your Goals through Meetings."

Let's start by asking -- what really goes on at a meeting? Survey results say that 91% of professionals who meet on a regular basis spend some meeting time daydreaming, 96% miss meetings altogether, with 95% missing parts of meetings. Bringing other work to a meeting is the guilty admission of 73%, and 39% admit to dozing off during a meeting -- and those are just the ones who will own up to it!

So why do we even have meetings? With technology serving our communication needs, must we meet? The answer is yes. There are some very good reasons to meet, which technology only reinforces. Here's what I mean:

Telephone tag is one very compelling reason to meet. (You call and leave a message. They call and leave a message. You call back and leave a reply. They call back and respond). And so it goes, around and around, wasting time and accomplishing what? Maybe it's time for a meeting! The same thing happens with email. Around and around you go, with the threads getting further and further down the page and the effort required to compose an endless string of responses taking longer and longer. Maybe it's time for a meeting! "But Robin, didn't you just say a few minutes ago that meetings waste our time?" Actually, I think it's time to re-think the whole meeting concept, to turn "Ugh, it's a meeting" into "Wow, it's a meeting!" Face to face

meetings can actually speed things up. But how do you know when it's time to meet? There are four criteria for determining if a meeting is your best course.

- First, you have a specific goal or objective that only a meeting will facilitate.
- Second, you have an agenda that will focus your discussion and help those with whom you are meeting prepare.
- Third, the individuals who are key to the outcome are able to attend and,
- Fourth, the topics to be discussed cannot be handled through any other means.

The Harvard Business School Communication Newsletter suggests that the only real reason to have a meeting is to do something together that you can't do better alone. There are only three purposes for having a meeting: communicating, administering and deciding, with action as the principle focus.

Whatever the meeting driver, your meeting will be more successful and productive when you factor in the following essential elements:

The first is the time factor--time as it relates to scheduling and time as it may actually play out. Most meetings tend to be scheduled in multiples of thirty minutes, even if the subject doesn't require that much time. Make your meetings more effective by approaching time as a block of any size you want to make it provided it will be sufficient to accomplish your objectives.

That means your meeting may be for five minutes, ten minutes, forty minutes or something else. In some companies, meetings can be quite spontaneous, with the individuals involved text messaging each other to designate a meeting location where they come together briefly, accomplish their objective and return to their other tasks. That may not work in your organization, but the principle is the same. If it will only take five minutes to achieve your goal, then set the meeting for that time frame and stick with it.

The other factor in time is allowing for a meeting where no time limit is set. In fact, it's often better to plan a meeting that may require participants to stay until the goal is achieved versus setting an arbitrary time that will surely be exceeded. The point here is to manage expectations about time so participants are prepared for the long haul when they are invited to attend.

The second is the leadership factor. Meetings are an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, but that can be a double-edged sword. It's important to keep the meeting on track and if you don't, your reputation as a leader can suffer. Take for example, the "long-winded, contentious or self-serving" leader or individual whose participation takes over the meeting. Many companies

use a neutral third-party facilitator to keep things moving when a meeting may be tough to manage. I think that's a good idea and takes you off the hot seat in tense situations.

Then there's the preparation factor. Planning and distributing an agenda prior to the meeting helps others prepare and keeps things on track when the meeting convenes.

The Harvard Business School offers some additional "sage advice" on the subject of meetings:

- Always know what time it is. Start on time and end on time. Resist the temptation to fill up all the time allotted if you've achieved your goal in less time. End the meeting early if there is nothing more to discuss.
- Remember the main reason for your meeting. Stay focused and avoid becoming distracted with extraneous topics, questions or debates. Schedule separate meetings to cover those topics if they are sufficiently important to require further discussion.
- Refrain from publicly criticizing anyone in the meeting or allowing anyone else to do so. Steer the conversation back to the main purpose of the meeting. Save any negative comments for a private conversation later.
- Unless it's an emergency, schedule meetings during normal business hours only. Promote good will, encourage participation and demonstrate that you, too, have a life outside of work, by scheduling meetings on company time.
- Don't use meetings to pressure others into agreement. Group pressure is a powerful tactic and can be used very effectively to coerce agreement, especially in situations where jobs are at stake. Yes, it might work; but the downside is a work environment where ethics are iffy and the morale compass points in the wrong direction.
- Don't use meetings to destroy another person's career. This goes for you as the leader or as the participant. The transient nature of today's workforce can make it "seem" like this kind of behavior has no consequences for the person doing the destruction, but your reputation as someone who behaves that way will certainly precede you wherever your career takes you.
- Keep business and personal socializing distinct. While it is good to have friendly conversations, banter and chitchat at the start and end of the meeting, it becomes counter-productive when it reveals favorites or inside information only you and some others share.
- Don't use the power of your position to force a decision you want. If the decision has already been made, send a memo. If it is up for discussion, have a meeting and use your role as leader to bring the group to consensus.

- Always distribute a clear agenda in advance of the meeting. It is the roadmap that will take your meeting where you want it to go, while giving others the opportunity to prepare.
- Discontinue standing meetings when their reason for being no longer exists. Revisit standing meetings on a regular basis. If you no longer need to meet, then don't.

And here are a few more ideas from my own archives:

- Invite only those who need to be there. The more people in attendance, the more likely it is that the discussion will break down and decisions will be delayed. Meetings function best with six participants at most.
- Diffuse digressions with an idea bin. Use a flipchart or whiteboard to list all ideas the meeting generates. Use a separate flipchart for ideas that are not directly related to the meeting's goals. These can be used to acknowledge other subjects without letting them derail the primary conversation. Schedule subsequent discussions on these topics, if appropriate.
- Summarize all agreements, assignments and decisions at the end of the meeting, and follow up with a written summary that pins down agreed-upon action, assignments and deadlines.

“All these tips are useful,” you might say. “But what if you're not in charge?” What then? If you're feeling like a helpless participant, there are things you can do to make a meeting more productive, for you and the others in attendance. Take the initiative to facilitate efficiency by suggesting that you help prepare the agenda, take notes, act as timekeeper or prepare the final summary. If you can't get out of the meeting, then at least get more out of it. You'll increase your visibility in a positive way and make the experience more productive for everyone in the room.

Well, that's our “meeting” for today. Until next time, I'm Robin Hensley, with Raising the Bar.

VOICE-OVER: You have been listening to a Raising The Bar program on meeting your goals through meetings with Business Development Coach Robin Hensley. For a full transcript of this program, stop by the Business To Business Magazine website at btobmagazine.com or go to raisingthebar.com.

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