

FEWER MEETINGS, MORE ACCOMPLISHED



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Fewer Meetings, More Accomplished

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Paris is a frequent presenter at the Academic Leadership Series workshops and has spoken on strategic planning in higher education at national conferences such as The American Association of Higher Education (1996 and 1997), North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (1997), and the Society for College and University Planning (2000). Paris has authored a number of publications on planning and improvement in higher education which are available from the Office of Quality Improvement.

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"Why can't you do your work at work?" the grumpy wife asks the husband who is propped up in bed reading a report. "There isn't time!" he tells her. "I have to go to meetings!" Thus opens *Meetings, Bloody Meetings*, a video on leading productive, efficient meetings.

It is true, according to Sharon Lippincott, a Pittsburgh business consultant that many people are meeting more and accomplishing less. She says that people find themselves dealing with trivia under the pretense of collaboration (1994).

Results of a survey of 1000 executives and managers from top American companies reported by Antony Jay, co-writer of *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* (1994) showed that these leaders felt that at least one third of the time spent in meetings is wasted. This translates easily into thousands and millions of dollars in wasted time.

As a consultant for the Office of Quality Improvement at UW-Madison, I have been told that an office or department leader wasn't interested in planning or process improvement because it required too many meetings. "You people meet all the time, don't you?" someone asked recently. It is true that we make a sincere effort as an office to model best practices in process improvement, planning and sound decision-making.

However, our office staff meets only twice a month for 1.5 hours. In addition, we have a planning retreat in the summer and one in January to check our progress and regroup as needed.

We use quality tools such as flowcharting, affinity and interrelations diagrams, and systems thinking archetypes, but we use them like we use our pens and computers—as tools for daily work. It is not uncommon to see several of our staff members drawing out a process on a flip chart as they discuss it.

We use our staff meetings to do these kinds of things: generate solutions to a particular problem; establish a framework for a smaller group to go off and work on a project and bring results back to the larger group; check our progress on accomplishing our plan, and put difficult issues on the table. We seldom use our meetings solely to share information as that is done so much more expeditiously by E-mail, phone, fax, or mail. Other alternatives to meetings suggested by Kayser (1990) include round-robin memos, informal conversations/hall talk, executive summaries, bulletin board messages in high traffic areas, and newspapers/newsletters for one-way general information sharing.

What are some bad reasons to meet? Sharon Lippincott lists these: They are always held at a certain time, these things have always been done in meetings, to look important and in control, to get out of the office for a while, to look busy. One exasperated executive said recently, "We meet so we don't have to make any decisions."

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Associate Dean, College of Letters and Science, formerly chaired the Communication Arts Department, UW-Madison. As a department chair, she says, you must think carefully about what are you doing with time, both your own and others

people's, because time is a critical resource "When I first took over as chair, we had a two-hour faculty meeting every month, whether we needed one or not. We had about 25 faculty members. Think about that -- that was 50 hours of faculty work time each month. We decided to meet only when we needed to and we used those meetings as opportunities to work together to get things done. It was not a case of having to shove our regular work to other times -- we used those meetings for our work."

Warren Porter is a former chair of the Department of Zoology. When he assumed the position, his goal was to engage the faculty and staff in a strategic planning process that would move the department into the future. "I knew that doing new things would take time, so I did away with the weekly routine faculty meetings and basically gave back time to the faculty to do other things. We met once a month as a faculty with an agenda and had progress checks on our strategic plan at one of those meetings in the spring and the fall."

There are many excellent resources available on the mechanics of running effective and productive meetings. The first and foremost requirement of any meeting is a clear understanding of purpose. Kaiser (1990) says, "If the group leader cannot clarify the session's purpose and desired outcomes before bringing the participants together, that person does not deserve the right to hold a group session!" (p. 25)

Kaiser (1990) recommends that once the purposes and outcomes are established, the decision should be made as to whether a meeting is really required. "This question must always be answered second, not first...Reversing these first two steps creates the deadly trap of a self-fulfilling prophesy. In other words, I've decided to have a meeting. Now that I've determined

I need a meeting, I'll figure out my reason for calling it and what outcomes I hope to achieve". (p. 28)

After you have decided that a meeting is required, ask yourself if you are the best person to conduct it. Perhaps an assistant or superordinate should lead the meeting. Given a high stakes decision or a large group, it may be most productive to utilize a meeting facilitator. Mary Anne Fitzpatrick advises department chairs not to lead meetings dealing with issues on which they feel strongly. Simultaneously leading the meeting and advancing a particular view invites resentment and can result in groupthink.

The Software Engineering Institute, Carnegie Mellon University, has been working for several years to improve meeting effectiveness. Meeting agendas are now considered so important that employees are allowed to walk out of meetings that convene without an agenda.

In *Meetings, Bloody Meetings*, the hapless executive has a nightmare in which he is found guilty of a variety of meeting crimes, one of which was a too-brief and vague agenda. "An agenda," bellows the judge, "is not just a chairman's crib sheet. It's a brief for all others to work from. It's got to define the direction and the area of the discussion and its end purpose."

I have found it immensely useful to put the aim of each meeting at the top of every agenda. It is also useful to employ verbs in articulating agenda items--decide on, review and revise, plan, debrief, and the like. Some facilitators indicate whether each item on the agenda is for decision, discussion, or information. If everyone does not need to be involved in all the items, the agenda can be designed accordingly.

The Futurist magazine (1996, November/December) predicts that as

organizations become flatter and more work is accomplished in temporary, project-specific teams, meetings will become even more significant. Meeting consultant Jim Creighton, Los Gatos, California, says, "Management will be as concerned with 'meeting systems' as they are now with information and accounting systems. Meetings will loom even larger in organizational life. And if they're going to get done, they'd better be done well" (p. 45). Creighton predicts that future meetings will be shaped by trends such as meetings held by facilitators other than the formal leader, workshop formats becoming more interactive, methods for summarizing group discussions visually, groupware for networking and joint tasks, presentation software, videoconferencing, creativity research into group processes that stimulate innovation and the "skunk works" concept in which temporary teams come together in a highly interactive setting. Creighton says that even with increasingly sophisticated communication technologies, for some meeting purposes, personal, face-to-face interaction will remain essential.

We primates are social creatures. As organizations become more proficient in designing and conducting meetings, more of us will have the pleasure of experiencing the benefits: the opportunity for continual learning, to be part of a community, to share commitment to common purposes, and to accomplish our aims.

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