



How Meetings can Make you Money

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Looking to enhance business productivity and performance? This article addresses the best practices involved in holding great meetings.

Much of the popular press about meetings lament the time wasted in unproductive team gatherings. This may be true for the corporate world, but for my clients, effective meetings are an underutilized tool. Effective meetings give team members more clarity around expectations and appreciation for each other's roles. They help employees get more work done in a shorter time – and enjoy it.

There are a few keys to ensuring a meeting is effective.

1. Cover the right content with the right people in the right amount of time.

Effective meetings are not "one-size-fits-all." Rather, a meeting's length, frequency and attendees are matched to its purpose. One type of meeting many of my clients hold regularly is a stand-up or dispatch meeting. They are at the beginning of the day, in the shop or break room where folks clock in or begin their day. The purpose is usually to assign resources for the day – who is working on what project, who needs extra help, what parts or equipment are required, etc. The time frame discussed is short – a day or two. The meeting is short – usually 15 minutes. And the meeting happens frequently – every day.

The challenge begins when in a short, focused meeting, someone asks a longer-term question. "Should we replace the 7230 or do an overhaul this winter?" OR... "The way our coop is doing the soil sampling maps isn't very helpful to getting our fertilizer bids in. What can we do differently?" As the meeting leader, if you engage in this question, you have just sunk your meeting's effectiveness.

In the first example, the decision can't really be made in this meeting. In the second example, the topic is very specialized and only affects one or two folks. Both cases can cause attendees to "check out" of the meeting because the topic isn't relevant or they can't influence it.

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These discussions more appropriately belong at a monthly or quarterly planning meeting where attendees are prepared to make a capital replacement decision. Or, a topic that only affects one or two people should be tabled and discussed later with only those affected. However, if your daily meeting is the ONLY meeting you have, it's hard to move the discussion to an appropriate setting.

The mix of meetings you need for your business depends on its size and complexity. Here are a few kinds of meetings.

- Daily stand-up or dispatch meetings as described above.
- Monthly or quarterly financial and planning meetings cover financial performance, anticipated capital purchases, talent discussions (raises, recruiting new employees, and incentive pay), marketing plan progress and decisions and updates on progress in each business unit or on special projects. These meetings generally last 1-3 hours.
- Annual long-term planning meetings develop strategic priorities. Topics could include landlord relationships, succession planning, expansion planning, or a review of key opportunities and challenges faced by the business. These meetings should be ½ - 1 day long.

2. Prepare for the meeting – have a facilitator, assign a purpose and develop an agenda.

A facilitator owns the meeting process – of starting and ending on time, of knowing and achieving the purpose, of ensuring everyone has an opportunity to contribute and of following the agenda. Obviously, for a facilitator to be effective, someone (or the group) has to set up these expectations ahead of time!

Many of my clients are challenged by the need for a meeting agenda. It's hard to get into the habit of bringing up topics ahead of the meeting. Note that the daily meetings can be effective without a new agenda each time – the topics covered are routine and you can stick to a standing agenda that is consistent. An agenda for the monthly or quarterly planning meetings can be developed by attendees at the beginning of each meeting. Two standing topics at monthly/quarterly meetings ought to be confirming the purpose of the meeting and reviewing the action items from the previous meeting. For long-term planning meetings, an agenda should be developed in advance.

3. Record decisions and action items.

While tough to get done, this practice has a big impact on efficiency. Recording decisions allows attendees to avoid re-plowing ground covered in prior meetings. The ability to refer back to previous action items can speed discussion and helps avoid conflict over differing recollections. Rather than attempting to record all the discussion, I suggest simply recording decisions and action items (who agreed to do what by when).

The facilitator and recorder fill an additional function in the meeting aside from providing content. These additional functions often diminish their ability to share in the discussion. I suggest rotating this role, but not for every meeting. Allow someone to practice their role and get a rhythm going before shifting the responsibility.



It takes time, commitment and persistence to build the habit of effective meetings. Be ready to adjust the agenda, frequency and timing of your meetings. Your first try won't be a perfect fit...but don't throw the baby out with the bathwater! Be persistent and adjust to meet yours and your team's needs. Often, spring planting and fall harvest change the nature of daily meetings and make monthly meetings difficult. It's okay to take a break for part of the year. Just ensure the facilitator is responsible for getting the group together again.

They may not be a very glamorous new practice, but I have seen meetings energize employees, create momentum and increase team productivity. Over time, folks enjoy the opportunity to come together, plan their work, share accomplishments (and challenges) and feel like an interconnected and focused team. And a productive team that enjoys their work can certainly make you (and save you) money.

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