

Meeting Cancelled!

The old proverb, as originally recorded in Benjamin Franklin's Farmer's Almanac, states that "a rotten apple spoils the barrel", particularly true for meetings in the sense that a few long unproductive conferences tarnishes the popular image of this otherwise effective managerial tool. Experience has shown that meetings run the whole range of effectiveness—from the very informative to the least helpful with majority of meetings falling somewhere in between. Clearly, most meetings are a good investment of time and they allow employees to better do their jobs more effectively. Unfortunately, the few meetings, which waste our valuable time and sap our enthusiasm, seem to catch our collective attention to the point that we delight when they are cancelled. For the purposes of this article, I would ask the reader to wipe the slate clean and review meetings with the aim of improving them. Certainly the incentive is there to make meetings productive since they consume so much of the employee's time (Fortune magazine estimates that personnel spend 15% to 25% of their time in meetings, which makes it incumbent upon organizations to make certain that their meetings are efficiently run and are value-added). Thus, it is obvious that meetings are here to stay, but there is much that we can do make the most of our time spent in attending meetings; That is, we should go to meetings and listen attentively when you are ordered by your boss, work hard to improve meetings when you are the organizer, and strive to use online (distance) conferencing whenever possible to save valuable travel time and expense.

Let us start with the most important reason that we attend meetings—because our boss directs our participation. While we usually have little control of these leadership-originated meetings, it is nevertheless important to listen carefully and note down critical information. It is a good investment of your time to learn firsthand of governing policies and the context these decisions are being made by your employer. These meetings provide a good way to forecast the future health of your organization and to determine for yourself on how to protect your own career.

Next, let us turn to meetings that you may control or have at least partial influence on how these conferences are set up and run. Here are some helpful tips on how to improve your meetings based on personal experience as well as the collective wisdom found in management literature:

1. Maintain Meeting Control—Start with a reasonable agenda to set boundaries for the meeting and work hard to stay on track by keeping off-the-topic conversations to a minimum. Do not be afraid to gently challenge people who monopolize the air waves or go off to very narrow areas of interest.

2. Set Reasonable Meeting Duration—My experience has been that most meetings can be concluded within 30-45 minutes (60 minutes being the upper limit for 90% of meetings).

3. Invite the Right People—It is critical to invite people with the domain expertise and authority to act to a meeting while leaving out people with tangential interest in the meeting topic.

4. Get Feedback from Meeting Participants—Ask for private feedback from a select set of trusted gray beards (or experts) on how the meeting progressed. Let us face it—you may be screwing up in spite of your best efforts, but would not know it unless someone you trust points it out to you.

5. Provide Meeting Summaries and Action Item List—Preparing these documents will help summarize the meeting for those who did not attend and set the stage for follow-on action. Circulate these documents to all meeting attendees. Remember that these documents are a good investment of your time and will increase chances of your meeting's success.

These suggestions are not a panacea or a cure-all to make meetings perfect each time, but these are common sense ways to make meetings more productive.

While this article focuses primarily on face-to-face meetings, the need to make certain that online or distance conferences are productive is equally required. Consider that almost every face-to-face meeting taking place today includes a telephone or internet link to allow distant attendees to participate in the proceedings. The need for firm start and finish times, clear agenda established before the meeting, and a moderator to keep the meeting on track becomes even more pronounced because distant attendees usually lack the ability to see visual cues and gauge the general mood of the meeting attendees that in-person attendees use to judge when and how much to speak. In my many years with teleconferencing, I have found that it is too easy for participants to start pontificating about some point that is "critical" only from their own point of view or to start discussing a narrow area of concern that generally should be relegated to another venue. Hence, the need for meeting control becomes even more critical.

I want to conclude this article with my observation that meetings are not inherently good or bad, but depend largely on how they are organized. Based on my attendance of literally hundreds of meetings, I can tell you that meetings run the whole range of quality, but most can be improved with implementing some of the steps cited above. But remember that even the best advice will go unheeded unless you win over your leadership to the cause of making meetings more productive. This is the key to bringing positive change because the most frequent reason people do anything is because their management finds it to be important. Conversely, consider that deeply imbedded institutional practices are difficult to modify since it requires conscientious effort to replace less productive practices with more effective ones. Most of all, please keep in mind that even a modest improvement will make your meetings more valuable and everyone will win in terms of more efficient use of their time. Hopefully the resulting culture of holding efficient meetings will cause meeting attendees to dread that their favorite meeting has been canceled! ♦

Akbar Khan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mr. Akbar Khan is a Software Systems Engineer with twenty-five years of experience and is licensed as a Professional Engineer in the states of New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware. He received his Bachelors of Science in Industrial/Systems Engineering from Polytechnic Institute of New York University and a Masters of Engineering in Systems Engineering from Stevens Institute of Technology. Currently, Mr. Khan is pursuing his Doctor of Science in Information Technology at Towson University. He is a native of New York City and is currently living near Baltimore, Maryland with his wife and three children.

Phone: 443-395-2191

E-mail: akbar.r.khan.civ@mail.mil

REFERENCES

1. How to Run an Effective Meeting. (n.d.). CBSNews. Retrieved April 4, 2014, from <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-to-run-an-effective-meeting/>>
2. Lipman, V. (2013, March 1). 5 Simple Steps To More Efficient, Effective Meetings. Forbes. Retrieved April 3, 2014, from <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2013/03/01/5-simple-steps-to-more-efficient-effective-meetings/>>
3. Nazar, J. (2014, April 3). Your Meetings Are Awful -- Here's How To Fix Them. Forbes. Retrieved April 4, 2014, from <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonnazar/2014/04/03/your-meetings-are-awful-heres-how-to-fix-them/>>
4. "Rotten Apple." <Dictionary.com>. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 08 May 2014.
5. Section 1. Conducting Effective Meetings. (n.d.). Main Section. Retrieved April 4, 2014, from <<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/main>>

WANTED

Electrical Engineers and Computer Scientists Be on the Cutting Edge of Software Development

The Software Maintenance Group at Hill Air Force Base is recruiting **civilians** (*U.S. Citizenship Required*). Benefits include paid vacation, health care plans, matching retirement fund, tuition assistance, and time paid for fitness activities. **Become part of the best and brightest!**

Hill Air Force Base is located close to the Wasatch and Uinta mountains with many recreational opportunities available.



facebook

www.facebook.com/309SoftwareMaintenanceGroup

Send resumes to:
309SMXG.SODO@us.af.mil
or call (801) 777-9828

