

## MEETINGS WITHOUT MIGRAINES

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Dave Barry, a modern humorist, tells us that the modern corporate meeting can be compared to a funeral, “in the sense that you have a gathering of people who are wearing uncomfortable clothing and would rather be somewhere else.”<sup>1</sup> The major differences, he notes, are that most funerals: “have a definite purpose (to say nice things about a dead person) and reach a definite conclusion (this person is put in the ground), whereas meetings generally drone on until the legs of the highest-ranking person present fall asleep. . . . Also, nothing is ever really buried in a meeting.”<sup>1</sup> An idea may look dead, but it will always reappear at another meeting later on.

### MEETING PREPARATION HINTS

- Things to consider:
  - What is the purpose of the meeting?
    - \* Hint: Be sure that it can be written in a sentence or two. If you have trouble writing it down, it is probably not clear enough.
  - Do we need a meeting or are there other ways to accomplish the goal?
    - \* Written communication
      - + Email
      - + Faxes
      - + Memos
      - + Letters
    - \* Conference call
    - \* Video conference
    - \* Stand-up meeting
    - \* One-on-one conversations
  - Are the potential benefits worth the cost of the meeting?
    - \* Analyze the cost from the point of view of how much each person in attendance makes per hour, in addition to what is not getting done by the meeting attendees because they are in the meeting.
  - Is this the right time for the meeting?
    - \* Are all of the needed people available for this meeting (including decision makers)?

- \* Do they have needed information?
- \* Are the attendees prepared to discuss the issues?
- \* Are the attendees psychologically ready, e.g. too close in time to a volatile situation, unresolved conflict, too much change, etc.?
- What will happen if we don't have a meeting?
  - \* Important decision will not be made in time
  - \* Project will not meet deadlines
  - \* Interpersonal conflict will escalate
  - \* Critical problem will not get solved
- What is the best physical layout of the room for this meeting?
  - \* Consider meeting objective
  - \* If you want to encourage interaction among the participants C use circle or horseshoe shape
  - \* If you want control of the flow of communication C use classroom style
- What meeting arrangements need to be made?
  - \* Name cards
    - + If the person conducting the meeting does not know the names of all of the attendees, it is helpful to have a name card in front of each person
    - + Name cards are also helpful when the attendees do not know each other's names
    - + Put the participant's name on both sides of the tent card – not because you question if the participant knows his own name, but so that the people on the same side of the table can see his name, not just those across the room
  - \* Refreshments
  - \* Name tags
  - \* Pens and paper

- Are you or any of the participants in the meeting going to need audio visual equipment?
  - \* Flip charts and markers
  - \* White board and erasable markers
  - \* LCD display panel
  - \* Lap top
  - \* Overhead projector and screen
  - \* Slide projector and screen
  - \* Microphone and speakers
    - + Stationary
    - + Lavalier
    - + Cordless
  
- Meeting notice – sent to the members in advance of the meeting
  - Rationale
    - \* If all attendees know in advance what is expected of them before the meeting, they are more likely to come prepared for the meeting
    - \* If all attendees know what they need to bring to the meeting, they are more likely to have what they need at the meeting
    - \* A meeting notice begins the process of sharing the responsibility of the meeting with all attendees
    - \* A meeting notice presents time wasted because of inadequate information provided in advance of the meeting
  
  - Content
    - \* List of attendees
      - + Remember the larger the group, the longer the meeting will probably last
      - + Are all decision makers included?
      - + Are people with important input included?
      - + Are there people who might gain from attendance at this meeting?
    - \* Indicate who called the meeting
    - \* Date, time (beginning and ending), and place of the meeting
    - \* Meeting objective
    - \* Whom to confirm attendance to

- \* Agenda
- \* Material to bring to meeting
- \* Material to read before the meeting
- \* Attachments
- \* Identification of minute taker
  - + So they will come prepared with pen and paper
- \* Identification of timekeeper
  - + So they will come prepared with timepiece
- \* Identification of meeting observer/evaluator
  - + For the purpose of improving the quality of the meeting
- Distribution
  - \* Be sure that the meeting notice is distributed in sufficient time:
    - + To fit into schedules of attendees
    - + For attendees to do preparatory work
    - + For rescheduling if key people can not attend
    - + For attendees to ask questions in advance of meeting
- Agenda
  - Preparation
    - \* Who is to prepare the agenda?
    - \* When do agenda items need to be submitted to the person preparing the agenda?
  - Content and format
    - \* Identify on the agenda who is responsible for each item on the agenda
    - \* Identify the time devoted to each item on the agenda
    - \* Identify and mark action items and information items
      - + Determine codes to use for action items and information items. E.g.:
        - ☹ action items
        - ☺ information items
      - + Consistently use these codes in front of each

item on the agenda

- The advantage of this is that if an attendee's preparation time is limited, he will know how to first prepare for the action items

\* Order of content

- + The content of the agenda should be in order of most important to least important
- + Then, if time runs out before the agenda is completed, the most important issues have been addressed

## MEETING PROCESS

- Start meeting on time
  - If you don't, attendees will learn that it is acceptable to be late
  - Starting the meeting late is sometimes viewed as disrespectful to the attendees who were on time
- Review meeting agenda and be prepared to modify it if necessary
  - If you have done an adequate job of preparing the agenda, the only things that will be added are last minute issues
- Follow the agenda
  - Much time is wasted because of not following the agenda
- Issue Log or Parking Lot
  - Get agreement in the beginning of the meeting to use it
  - Assign an attendee to record it
  - The Issue Log (or Parking Lot) contains items that are spontaneously brought up during the meeting which are important issues to address but are brought up at an inappropriate point on the agenda.
  - If time remains at the end of the meeting, refer to the Issue Log (or Parking Lot) for items that need the groups attention
  - Include on the agenda for the next meeting items from the Issue Log that did not get covered at the previous meeting.

- Keep meeting focused
  - Make sure that discussion on any one agenda item is pertinent to that specific agenda item
  - Don't allow getting off track. Stop it early!
  - If an action is decided upon, make sure the following are done:
    - A specific person is assigned to follow up on that issue
    - Date/time of the follow up report or action should be identified – even if it is a status report instead of the final report
- Evaluate meeting
  - Take a few minutes at the end of the meeting to evaluate what worked and what did not work for this meeting
- End the meeting on time

## MEETING FOLLOW-UP

- Minutes
  - All meetings should have minutes. Minutes assist the group in recording actions and preventing wasting time repeatedly discussing the same issue.
  - Minutes should include:
    - Introduction
      - \* Name of the team
      - \* Purpose
      - \* Date, time and place
      - \* Name of facilitator and recorder
      - \* Attendees= names
    - Body
      - \* Brief summary of reports
      - \* Decision on any action items. Care should be taken in the wording of the agreed-upon decision. If uncertain, check with the team to be sure the wording of the decision is accurate
      - \* Additional decisions
      - \* Assignments made Include name of person assigned an item needing follow up, its completion date, and the expected reporting date
    - Conclusion
      - \* Time meeting concluded
      - \* Date of next meeting, if known
  - Minutes should not include:
    - An account of what was said at the meeting
    - Opinions, interpretations, or judgmental statements by the person recording the minutes
- Between meetings, make that sure that action items are being completed
- Immediately after the meeting, begin the agenda for the next meeting using the Issue Log (or Parking Lot)

## ATTENDEES' RESPONSIBILITIES

- Advance preparation
  - Submit agenda items to the leader at appropriate time
  - Come to the meeting prepared to discuss important issues
  - Read and study distributed information and do necessary research
  
- Attendance
  - Attend all meetings
  - Arrive at meetings in time to be ready for the beginning of the meeting.
  - Arrange to stay until the end of the meeting
  - Attend not only in body, but in mind and spirit
  - Assist the leader in keeping the group on task
  
- Equality
  - Understand that in the meeting all attendees have equal rights but not necessarily equal responsibilities or authority
  - Understand that outside of the meeting, those same people do not necessarily have equal rights
  - Exert peer pressure on other group members to control excessive talking and other inappropriate behavior
  - Protect the rights of attendees with a minority point of view

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Be a leader in meetings. Even those you  
don't chair.                      Thomas L. Quick

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- Honesty
  - Say what you mean and mean what you say
  - Share ideas in an honest and open manner. If complaints exist, air them in the meeting – not after the meeting in the parking lot!
  - Do not allow the authority positions of other attendees to intimidate you into silence during the meeting
  - Keep confidentiality of meetings when agreed to
  
- Unity of action
  - Once an action has been decided upon, the decision should be supported by the whole group
  - Once the group has decided to conduct a test of a solution, the group should also agree to support the results of that test
  - Refrain from complaining about other attendees or the group when outside the meeting
  
- Follow-up
  - After the meeting and in a timely fashion, complete any tasks that were assigned or volunteered for
  - After the meeting, share with the group leader any evaluative comments

Dave Barry, the humorist, writes: “There are two kinds of work in today=s business. Attending meetings and taking messages for people who are attending meetings.”<sup>1</sup>

I hope that you will find this article will help give you more time to squeeze in your real work!

<sup>1</sup>Claw Your Way to the Top by David Barry