

“Communication Strategies for Successful Meetings”

by Mary E. Rauch

Meetings!

Most people hate them. They’re considered the scourge of daily business. They often waste time, are poorly conducted, and achieve little.

As a recent business cartoon observed, “You know it’s going to be a long meeting when you see halftime entertainment on the agenda.”

Not only do meetings waste time, they cost money. Mark Brier, author of *The 10-Second Internet Manager*, points out that “a meeting of 10 mid-level managers for a couple of hours sets a company back a minimum of \$1,000.”

In a recent Harvard Business Review study, managers and professionals identified 1,305 problems associated with meetings. Number 1 and 2? Getting off the subject and having no goals and agenda.

Besides the BGO’s (Blinding Glimpses of the Obvious)—such as, prepare for the meeting, include the right people, and circulate your agenda beforehand—what are some important guidelines for conducting successful, productive, and even interesting meetings?

- Sell your meeting beforehand. Pitch your product (the meeting) to your consumers (attendees). Why should they attend? What will they get out of it? And then deliver what you sell.
- Make your watch King of the Meeting. Start on time and end five minutes early....always, except in emergency meetings.
But even more important, make starting on time and being on time a key component of your corporate culture, i.e., punctuality equals professionalism. Say it loud and clear and often, but more significantly, live it in meetings, appointments, and interactions.
- Be aware of the messages your nonverbal signals are sending. If you want to be seen as the leader, stand at the head of the table while others are seated. On the other hand, if you want to be viewed as more collaborative, choose to sit on one side of the table with other meeting attendees. Or if you want to reveal a more supportive role, choose someone else to conduct the meeting.

As a meeting participant, you, too, must be aware of the nonverbals you are sending. Avoid doodling, playing with paper clips, and checking those cuticles when you're not engaged in the meeting. Appear to be "engaged," even if you're not saying anything.

Whether leader or participant, we are always being observed. Our credibility and professionalism are being gauged, whether we are listening or speaking.

- Don't confuse meetings with a social hour. Because we become so comfortable around our business "family," we sometimes become too casual and too conversational during business activities such as meetings. Encourage socializing—before and after the meeting—and certainly allow for the occasional humor break, but don't allow flippancy and sarcasm to become the primary, and even expected, tone of your meeting exchanges. In other words, cut the cuteness by half.
- Learn to self-edit. Choose when to speak, and when you do choose to speak, do so with force, clarity, and conciseness. Catch yourself if you're telling too many war stories or are inappropriately talking more than you're listening. (In other words, don't be one of those people who have people thinking, "Oh, not him again....we'll never get out of here!").
And, of course, certain subjects are better discussed in private one-on-one interactions, such as anything that is critical or sensitive.
- Vary your meeting environments and formats. For instance, have a stand-up meeting—or hallway huddle—as a meeting variation. It's amazing how much can be accomplished when standing. Comfort encourages long meeting. Standing seems to "focus" the mind.

One of the most impressive meetings I've ever attended was held several years ago at the San Antonio Marriott Riverwalk Hotel. Held under a stairwell, outfitted with its own whiteboard, the meeting was a regular weekly occurrence attended by the on-duty Room Service personnel.

Their "boss" sat on an overturned bucket, holding a mop in his right hand. The employees sat on the stairs, except for the employee who conducted the meeting standing at the whiteboard.

A 30-minute meeting, it addressed the week's room service problems, with employees brainstorming, formulating, and deciding upon solutions. Their "leader" (the boss on the bucket) joined in only to answer a question directed to him or to ask, "What do you think?"

At the meeting's end, the To Do list was summarized, actions listed, and people assigned to duties. The chairs were stairs, the "head of the table" was a bucket, yet it was the most efficient meeting I have ever observed. And it all happened in 30 minutes.

Too often meetings are borne of old and bad habits. Instead meetings must be planned and executed as carefully as business plans.

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