

MEETINGS

Set Ground Rules to Accomplish Goals

When taking on a new project or a new team, consider re-thinking your meeting structures. When people sit at your table, you don't have to go with the status quo. Meetings represent an opportunity to create.

When you have a few minutes, envision a meeting that would be really, really productive. How many people would be in the room? How much time would the meeting take? What would be the desired outcome?

Everything about meetings makes a difference, such as the participants and the size and shape of the room, but probably most important are the ground rules that you and the members of your team agree to honor.

All too often, endless meetings meander down life's path with no perceived outcome in sight. Too often, meetings can be worse than just a waste of time; they can cause damage and harm to a process, product or culture.

It's not that difficult to promote meetings that work. Ground rules about process and behavior create an excellent foundation for success. You will find that intentionally designed meetings can become the touchstones for creating a context for honest sharing of information and can enhance a culture of openness and innovation.

Sometimes the Tortoise Wins. Don't feel you have to begin a series of meetings with a bang. The kick-off meeting for any new initiative –



Donna Denio

even when you are a new person in a new job – could begin with everyone in the room making their introductions and telling the others what they believe they bring to the team.

Then you, as leader, could ask all participants for thoughts on meeting ground rules. How often should the group meet? How long should the meetings last? What type of protocol will the group follow when someone is not able to make a meeting? And, most important, how will the team make decisions and what will happen when people disagree?

It is usually good to discuss conflict when there isn't any. This creates a context for letting everyone know that conflict is an anticipated byproduct of teamwork that can often be healthy and create a catalyst for innovation.

Usually conflict is not quickly



Victoria Sirianni

resolved, so one approach is to "table" the discussion to a separate time when the disagreeing parties can have an open conversation with the support of a mediator or facilitator.

Ground rules are more than about conflict resolution. Have fun with them. This is where your cultural traditions are established.

One ground rule could be that every time the team reaches a milestone, someone, on an alternating basis, brings cookies to your brown bag lunch. Or, it could also set up a structure for a celebration event at the end of a successful completion.

Pat Heim and Susan Murphy, in their book "In the Company of Women," suggest pre-agreed ground rules for certain behaviors.

If someone is using a dominating, hierarchical style, the group agrees

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to make a pyramid symbol with their hands to call attention and help the speaker stay on track. Also, when someone on the team engages in equally non-productive self-deprecating behavior, the group agrees to use a flattened hand signal, placing finger tips together, to show the speaker that he or she has flattened the power structure.

Meeting Leadership. What else can you do as a meeting leader? First, ask yourself some questions before you set up a meeting.

Why do we, not me, need this? Here, "we" is the operative word.

Is there enough merit to justify having people come together? Could the desired outcome be achieved more efficiently in a different format? What's the perceived outcome and deliverable(s)?

Do you have a set process, ground rules and behaviors for the meeting and are you certain that you will adhere to them yourself?

This last question suggests that the convener of the meeting fully understands and commits to process steps in order to ensure the meeting's success. That means allocating a time and being mindful of it by cutting short, tabling or off-lining discussions that threaten the schedule.

You, as meeting leader, must be certain to circulate a draft agenda in advance and honestly request comments and feedback to your proposal, establish a clear statement about the meeting's objective, keep participants on topic, and ensure that the highpoints of the meeting are recorded and summarized, that clear action items are set, next steps established and follow-up actually occurs.

All of this is very helpful in estab-

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lishing a good open process and letting others understand that business is going to be done here, it's not just about hearing people talk or creating a platform for some members of the team to steal the show.

Sometimes meeting participants are similar to families at the dinner table, and the "children" often model the behavior they see in others. The meeting leader also needs to know how to control the behavior of others.

It gets a bit more complicated when meeting participants all come from different places and bring different mental models with them. The gabber, the tight-lipped, the bully, the braggart – they all sit at the table.

So while behavior is hard to legislate, this is one time when you can dictate what's acceptable at your table and what is not. Establishing the ground rules of behavior before-

hand and consistently reminding participants of their agreements radically changes the complexion of meetings.

Enforcing timeliness for meetings can be hard at first. It becomes easier when participants understand they can't come in 10 minutes late and so they start providing advance notice if unable to attend.

Treating all people with respect means that, as meeting leader, you ensure an equal voice for all participants at your table. It means that you draw out some and button up others.

Once again, this can be hard at first but when done consistently over time, it begins to become the new behavioral norm because it's in everyone's best interest. Voila, in short order, it becomes so clear that the purpose of being together is to get something done together and have a good time doing it.

Meetings, in summary, are about getting something done in a collaborative, open and inquisitive environment. Egos and destructive behavior don't have a place at the table when good ground rules are established, agreed to and enforced.

Try it. You'll be pleasantly surprised. Before long, you will see meetings hosted by others in your organization beginning to mimic the culture you designed.

Donna Denio and Victoria Sirianni are principals of Boston-based Center for Balance by Design, a consortium of business, academic and professional leaders who seek, develop and apply structures that optimize teamwork.