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LEAD

7 Tips for Leading Meetings More Effectively "Yay, another meeting!" said no one ever. Here's how to keep your meetings pain-free. [🔗](#)

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Why do meetings have such a bad rap? Because too many of them are poorly organized, overly long, and rudderless—drifting this way and that according to the moods of the dominant personalities in the room.

Even managerial and executive meetings, which should be more effective based on the amount of experience the attendees have collectively logged, are often more painful than productive. And these are meeting *professionals*. They (we) should know better.

Having both facilitated and participated in thousands of meetings in my career, with countless more looming in my future, I'd like to share my seven best tips for leading your meetings out of meeting hell and into—well, nirvana may be aiming too high. Let's just start with keeping your weekly budget huddle out of the everlasting abyss and then go from there.

1. State the Objective Clearly

Are you generating ideas? Trying to reach a decision? Making plans? Reporting status updates? A bit of each? No matter what the underlying goal of your meeting is, make sure it's clearly stated up front to all participants.

It's not easy to facilitate a productive conversation when half the room thinks they're brainstorming and the other half is trying to make decisions. The brainstormers will feel frustrated and shut down by the judgmental comments, and the decision makers will become impatient with the seemingly irrelevant ideas that are distracting from forward progress.

Brainstorming versus decision-making conflicts are a fairly common meeting hazard, even if you previously announced the meeting's objective. Keep an eye out for this kind of exchange, and steer the conversation as needed. Try, "Those are great ideas, but the brainstorming phase has passed. We're here to make decisions now." Or, "When we're brainstorming, all ideas are good enough to make it onto the whiteboard. For the next 30-minutes, this is a no-judgment zone. Decision making comes later."

2. Respect the Ritual of Recurring Meetings

I'm a big believer that there's a certain amount of ritual to meetings, and that the routine itself serves an important purpose. As much as people complain about being overly

scheduled, with too little time for their "real jobs," they do appreciate the chance to sync up on the same issues in the same way on a predictable basis.

Once you've established the protocols of a particular meeting type, you can quickly dive in to the real issues, rather than wasting time orienting everyone to a new agenda. Following a routine does not mean that equal time must be allotted for all topics every week, or that everyone present needs to report progress or provide updates. I advise following a repeatable structure for recurring meetings, while also allowing for slight variations—like skipping stagnant topics and rotating who goes first—in order to prioritize the most relevant and important issues.

3. Ask for Input a Day Ahead

Ask meeting attendees what's top of mind for them at least a day ahead, before you complete the agenda. This not only encourages team members to start mentally preparing, it also gives you advance notice of what issues might be percolating inside the different individuals, departments, or teams.

Just remember that everyone has different and often competing priorities. As the meeting leader or facilitator, you get to rank those priorities for the team at large. Distinguish between the issues that can be handled by a smaller group offline and those that need the full attention of everyone present.

4. Plan for Structure *and* Flexibility

I always plan for a structured portion of the meeting and a more flexible portion toward the end. Depending on the meeting type, I'm willing for half or more of the allotted time to be open-ended. Personally, I'd rather follow the energy of the people in the room than rigidly adhere to an agenda just because it's been typed and distributed. A sheet of universal, white, 20-lb. paper does not equal a stone tablet.

I don't have any problem vamping on an idea or shifting gears if that's where the enthusiasm is heading. I realize that this mindset can be frustrating to people who are

more rigid in their style (see item No. 6), and I also realize that it's impossible to please everyone (see No. 7). However, the willingness to shut down rat-hole discussions that stray too far from the central purpose of the meeting—no matter how much energy they inspire—is also essential.

5. You're the Leader, So Try Leading

You know how frustrating it is to sit through a meeting without a proactive, engaged leader. When you're in charge, think of yourself as the meeting's cruise director. It's your job to keep everyone apprised of where you're going and when. If there's a printed agenda, you need to both steer everyone toward the docket and clearly announce any departures from it. "Oh, it looks like we'll be skipping right past X and moving on to Y. Jennifer, you're up."

If the conversation is flowing in a different—and more productive—direction than your agenda allows for, don't be afraid to toss it overboard (see No. 4). Just tell everyone that's what's happening. Otherwise, you'll lose people in the incongruity between the expectations you've set for them and the reality around them.

6. Don't End Prematurely

No one likes a meeting that drags on and on, far beyond the point of productivity and team engagement. But I believe it can be equally frustrating to end prematurely just because time is up. "Yeah, we almost solved world hunger, but Bill has an 11:00, so let's pack it up."

If there's great momentum in the room, I'm OK with letting a meeting go over by 10 minutes or so, as long as it doesn't happen every week. If Bill really can't miss that 11:00, I'll do a time-check at 10:55 and excuse those who have to jet, keeping the relevant parties until they either wrap up the discussion or schedule a follow-up while everyone is still present and able to compare their calendars.

7. Don't Try to Please Everyone

Your attendees often have competing priorities and points of view, and there's no way to please everyone, all the time. You can't ensure that all parties get equal time, equal treatment, and equal accolades, so don't even try. You have your own leadership style and meeting preferences. Own them. If Bill doesn't like it, he can do things differently when he is in charge.

Leading productive meetings is an overlooked skill, but it doesn't have to be a thankless job. These seven tips may not result in gushing compliments over how pleasurable your latest executive meeting was. But if you can use them to steer your team out of meeting purgatory for an hour every other Wednesday, that's still something to be proud of.

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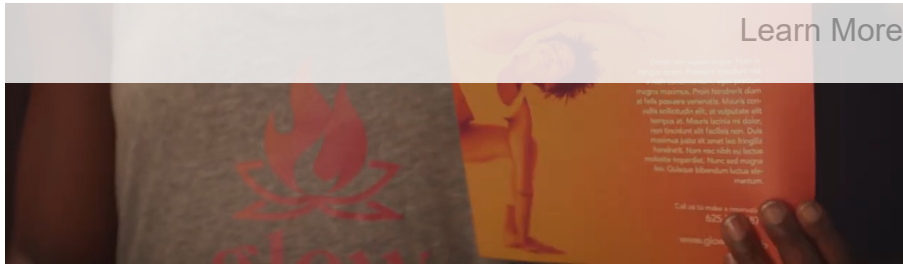
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