



LEARNING TO LEAD

Five Steps to Pain-Free, Productive Meetings

By Suzanne Bates

Do you think all meetings are painful, time wasting, poorly run and unproductive torture sessions? If you hate meetings, you're not alone. Practically everyone does, and although businesses have to run meetings, very often meetings run businesses. They're more than just a drag; bad meetings can have a tremendous negative impact on productivity and the bottom line.

You may think that the only thing worse than sitting through meetings is having to lead them. After all, you don't want all that wrath and boredom directed at you, right? But rather than dreading running meetings, you can embrace them as an opportunity to polish up and show off your leadership skills. The style in which you lead a meeting will establish the meeting's tone and influence the overall culture. People will take their cues from you, adopting your good practices. Different types of meetings require different approaches. You must be flexible and adapt to the purpose and participants in a meeting. While there are different meeting styles, some practices and policies make all meetings better. The following five steps will help you to lead great meetings:

1. Prepare for Productivity

As the meeting leader, you must determine why the meeting is taking place in order to know who to invite, what to put on the agenda, how long to discuss each item and even what methods to use to come to a decision. Productive meetings begin with good pre-meeting communication. Several days or even weeks in advance of the meeting, call, e-mail or speak in person with the influential people who will attend. Identify which issues will need to be addressed. This checking-in process will help you to anticipate and deal with objections and build consensus.

2. Stick to an Agenda

Without an agenda, participants cannot prepare so time is lost while people read or catch up. Missions fall by the wayside as people talk about whatever is on their minds instead. As the meeting wanders, some may start whispering side conversations and anyone dominant enough can easily hijack the meeting. Agenda-less meetings often end before decisions are made, or decisions are made after key people have already left. Sound familiar? Realize that you can't solve all the problems of the world in one meeting. If you decide to spend 10 minutes on something, and the 10 minutes is up, it's your responsibility to move on. You may be amazed to find



what a difference just starting and ending the meeting on time and keeping it clipping along will make in participants' morale and willingness to participate now in future meetings.

3. Encourage Participation

Your most valuable resource is the collective knowledge of others in the organization. A good leader encourages participation in order to harness others' creative power. Everyone will benefit when you make the atmosphere safe and easy for everyone, even the shy ones, to get involved. Take note of those who remain silent, and make it a point to ask them what they think. You don't want those who disagree with you or with the group's decisions to not say anything, and then leave the meeting and attempt to undermine the decisions later.

Encourage participation by saying: "Stan, you shook your head just now. What else do we need to consider?" "I would like to hear from Karen on this." "Becky, you and I talked about something before the meeting. Would you share it?" "Do we have all the issues on the table, Barrett?"

4. Listen Actively

Listening well and being able to provide a brief but accurate review of what has been said sets great leaders apart from the rest. To summarize effectively, you must hear everything that is said, and even more importantly, notice what is not said. Take notes or listen in a "note-taking" mind-set to key words and phrases. Put ideas you hear into the context of the whole discussion, and you will find that this creates accountability. Ask questions and then truly listen to the answers.

Questions that will yield valuable insights are ones like these: "What's your reaction to ____?" "What's your view on ____?" "What led you to ____?" "How could we ____?"

5. Manage Conflict

As a meeting leader, if you ask good questions and make it safe to disagree, participants will debate issues on the merits. You can't allow discussions to get personal or let issues go unresolved. If this occurs, you risk damage to the whole organization, not just the individuals involved. Meeting leaders must promote positive conflict while avoiding personal attacks. While debate is usually healthy for organizations, some people in the group will test the limits. Because they are angry or feel ignored, they will argue miniscule points, be unable to see others' views, or fail to recognize the value of compromise. They may be poor listeners or have hidden agendas. Most of the time, difficult people are unaware of how they affect others, or what a serious impact they have on their own careers as well as on the effectiveness of their teams.



To keep difficult people from derailing your meeting, intervene in advance. Speak with them one-on-one so that they can vent or discuss what's on their minds outside of the meeting context. During the meeting, allow them to have their say, ask a few questions, and then move on. Remember, your role as a leader is to enforce time limits.

Learning meeting skills leads to great opportunities. Good meeting leadership is not as common as it should be. Few people have the skills, and even fewer are taught how to lead meetings effectively. Rather, like most of us, they sit through many bad meetings, develop a lot of terrible habits, and when it's their turn to step up and lead, they just don't have the skills to do it.

Your ability to run a meeting well is a direct reflection of your leadership skills. Your staff, your peers, and the people you report to will all judge how you lead meetings and, in turn, whether your meetings accomplish results. In other words, your leadership skills will have a direct impact on the organization's bottom line because the meeting is not an end in itself – it is a vehicle to accomplish the work of the organization. By following these five steps, you can learn how to lead productive meetings and demonstrate that you have the leadership qualities to position yourself for promotions and advancement in your organization.