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ARE YOU RUNNING MEETINGS, OR ARE MEETINGS RUNNING YOU?

Businesses have to run meetings, but often, meetings run businesses. In many organizations, meeting management has run amuck. Meetings are called back to back; they start late, lose focus, erupt in personal conflict, accomplish little and leave no one accountable. It is up to the CEO to exert influence to make meetings productive. Your meeting habits, policies and management training determine the effectiveness of meetings in the organization.

It's remarkable how many meetings some people attend. Some say there are so many meetings they have no time to do their work. It should come as no surprise that surveys show people hate meetings. One client tells me people in her office "do leg lifts and dig their nails into the palms of their hands just to stay awake."

"I have strong feelings about how meetings should be run," said Talbots CEO Arnold Zetcher. "You have to keep everyone on topic and keep it moving. It's easy to get sidetracked." However, if your meetings are all business, that too can backfire. It's about balance. "People need to enjoy the time they are there. I try to inject a little humor to help people have fun," said Arnold.

Getting people to be interested in meetings can be tasking. Here are some ways to get employees to contribute.

Encourage participation

Discussion is highly valued by top CEOs. Your most valuable resource is the collective knowledge and intellect of your employees. One CEO told me he encourages people to raise objections by taking note of who is quiet, and making it a point to ask them what they think. "Sometimes I take a vote and tell them they cannot abstain. I think you have to confront the silence. You don't want those who disagree to walk out and undermine you later," he said.

A good leader encourages participation. Participation is essential to harnessing the creative power of your organization. When you encourage participation, everyone benefits. You cannot afford to let a few individuals dominate the conversation. You must make it safe and easy for everyone—even the quiet ones—to get involved.

Here are some examples of ways a CEO can encourage participation:

- “Maureen, you shook your head. What else do we need to consider?”
- “I would like to hear from Bill on this.”
- “Jack, you and I talked about something before the meeting. Would you share it?”
- “Do we have all the issues on the table?”
- “Is there anything else we need to consider?”
- “What don’t we know that we need to know?”
- “Is there anyone who hasn’t weighed in on this issue?”

Stimulate discussion

Your language and tone of voice are important when stimulating discussion. Don’t give your opinion first. Let others speak. Tell them you want to hear from them. Make eye contact and ask people questions like:

- What’s your reaction...
- What’s your view of...
- How do you see...
- What led you to...
- What are some other ideas...
- How could we ...

One CEO says he always asks the group this question: “What do I need to know that I do not know?” That one question has made a big impact on the organization. Not only does he hear what he might not otherwise hear, people know that they can say what needs to be said, without retribution.

Meetings are an inevitable part of business, and therefore should be productive and engaging. Develop techniques to improve your meetings and focus on them. You’ll change your opinion about meetings and improve that of everyone else who attends.