

Excellence in Management

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How to Have Successful Meetings

Editor's note:

Here we go again, adding more useful material to your monthly Journal. We developed this new monthly column, "Excellence in Management," in response to your feedback that information on this ever-important topic would be useful to you. Many of you have also expressed—with great emphasis—that you want more *SHORT* articles that are quick, easy, and enjoyable to read!

Author Dave Wiggins is an extraordinary speaker, trainer, and consultant on management excellence, sales, workplace innovation, and customer retention. Future articles within this column will address topics such as how to have productive meetings, how to give yourself a promotion and/or find a better job, and how to set and achieve high standards.

We have committed to bring you this column, "Excellence in Management," for at least one year. Your response will determine whether or not we continue this column thereafter, so please let us know what you think! Ask questions, make comments, and write letters to the editor. Not only will we use your feedback to determine the success of this new column, we will share it with your fellow readers—either in sidebars to "Excellence in Management" or as letters to the editor. We put our best effort into bringing you this new column, and **strongly encourage** you to let us know whether or not we have served you well.

One, two, three, YAWN! Inefficient, unproductive meetings may be the single biggest time waster in both business and government. In one poll, 90 percent of managers said that half the meetings they attended were either unnecessary or a complete waste of time. Nobody seems to like attending meetings, but they are an inescapable part of the job. In most cases, attendance is mandatory.

Do you lead meetings often? If so, conduct an anonymous poll among regular attendees and ask a simple question: "Are most of our meetings necessary and productive, or are they usually a waste of time?" Their responses may surprise you.

Meetings are quite costly in both money and time. For example, if eight company employees earn an average of \$30,000 per year and they meet for 90 minutes, the price of this get-together is about \$180 in salaries. This figure does not include the hidden costs of transportation and meals, the labor expense of sending out memos and faxes, the cost of room preparation, and so forth. Also, while the attendees are talking and listening, they can accomplish nothing else.

Indeed, meetings are quite expensive. They should be both necessary and effective, or they should not take place at all. Here are some tips to remember for making every meeting more productive.

1) *Know where you're going.* What do you want to accomplish between the beginning and the end of the meeting? What is the purpose? A meeting should always have a specific, clear objective (e.g., come up with a plan of action, brainstorm on a problem, educate, inform). Meetings without a clear purpose are often a huge waste of precious time.

2) *Have a set agenda.* A lack of thoughtful planning is the cause of failure in almost every endeavor. The same is true for failed, wasteful meetings. Before the attendees arrive, take the time to write out an outline for the meeting. List the issues you want to discuss and decide how much time the group will spend talking about each one. To the best of your ability, stick to the agenda.

3) *Limit attendance.* As a rule, meetings become less productive as the number of participants increases. When deciding who should attend, be selective. Keep the list of attendees

as small as possible. Also, is it really necessary for everyone to stay through the entire meeting? If not, have part-time participants who can leave when their presence is no longer required.

4) *Have a leader.* Meetings are like ships; sometimes they stray off course. To have effective, productive sessions, you need someone to "steer" the meeting and keep everyone focused on the agenda. A little small talk is okay, but participants should not be allowed to spend much time discussing subjects unrelated to the purpose of the meeting. A good meeting leader politely stops these digressions quickly and keeps everyone focused on the meeting agenda.

5) *Be prompt!* If you schedule a meeting to start at 8:00, then begin at 8:00 sharp every time. Do not wait until 8:05 or 8:10. To make people who arrive on time wait for those who do not is both unfair and inconsiderate. When people know your meetings start promptly, they will arrive on time more often. In other words, start every meeting on time, every time!

6) *Have a deadline.* Meetings not only should begin at a precise time but also should end on time, too. Time limits create a sense of urgency. Deadlines force people to concentrate on the important issues, especially as the end of the meeting approaches.

7) *Schedule intelligently.* The best times for meetings are at 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. People are more likely focus on the subject at hand before lunch and around quitting time. Try to avoid scheduling meetings right after lunch. Most people experience an energy dip after they eat. The larger the meal is, the less their ability to pay attention and participate.

Continued on page 60

Excellence in Management

Continued from page 31

Also, the best time to schedule a future meeting is at the end of one. Rather than making phone calls and sending letters announcing an upcoming meeting, set a time and place to meet again while everyone is together.

8) *Stand and deliver.* If you want to have a brief, "no-fluff" meeting that lasts no more than 10 minutes, do not sit down. Have everyone stand during the meeting instead. There is a correlation between comfort and the length of conversations, and standing up is less comfortable than being seated.

9) *Heaven (and everything else) can wait!* Never, ever permit an interruption during a meeting unless there is an emergency. Every minute the meeting is disrupted is a minute lost for everyone in attendance.

10) *Kill it.* An upcoming meeting that seems important on Monday sometimes loses its urgency by Thursday. Honestly ask yourself: Is the meeting really necessary? Is it worth the hassle and expense? If the answer is no, or if you have any doubts about the value or importance of the upcoming meeting, then do every-

one a favor. Cancel it! Remember, no one loves attending meetings. People do not fret when they find out a meeting has been called off.



Out of the In Basket

Continued from page 33

federal, state, and local food safety experts, along with consistent regulatory requirements at each level of government, provides the opportunity for a consistent, effective response to the risk of foodborne illness.

State and local health agencies are reinventing their food safety surveillance and compliance programs—and quite successfully. True, the risk of foodborne disease will not be reduced to zero. At the retail level, however, significant progress has been made in educating consumers and workers about food safety; acceptance by many facility owners and managements of responsibility for food safety within their establishments; disease investigation and intervention; risk communication; and the effective use of inspection methods. The net result is the improved safety of food as it reaches the consumer.

Only time will tell if FDA recognizes and will endorse the capacity that exists in state and local governments. That capacity can be expanded to take on greater responsibility for food protection nationally. Preferably, the food safety initiative will not become a top-down delivery of directives in which federal inspectors fill the current gaps in inspection capacity but fail to use new resources to enhance the state and local food safety infrastructure. A substantial cadre of trained environmental health professionals at the state and local levels must continue to be immediately responsive to community issues such as disease outbreaks, poorly operated restaurants, problems with a food manufacturer or warehouse, or removal of a recalled shipment of contaminated strawberries from the grocer's shelf. The federal food safety initiative has the potential to result in substantial improvement in the safety of our nation's food supply as the food reaches the kitchens of restaurants and consumers. For that potential to be realized, however, a true partnership of federal, state, local, and industry experts is needed.



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