Title:
Meetings-Management Meetings-Why are they a waste of time? The 80/20 rule and 5 steps to success

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Summary:
Meetings can be a waste of time. Find out how to make better use of your time as a participant or manager of meetings. The 80/20 rule is described to great effect with five helpful tips for designing and running more effective and rewarding meetings.

Keywords:
Meetings, leadership, time management

Article Body:

How often have you sat in a meeting thinking “This is such a waste of time. I have so many others things to do. I wish I could be somewhere else” Sound familiar? I’m sure we all have had these thoughts at one time or another and maybe for some of us, it has been very recent!

My experience as a line manager, senior manager and organisational psychologist over the last thirty years, means that I have attended and run many meetings. In my work, one of the most common complaints I get from all levels of the organisation, is that “We waste so much time here sitting around talking. Nothing gets done as a result”. Why are so many meetings a waste of time?

My conclusion is that the vast majority of meetings: • Cover information that could be distributed by other means • Focus too much on the past - what has gone rather than what is to come • Do not have a clearly defined purpose with intended outcomes

So, if you have to run meetings, the first decision to make is to decide what type of meeting it is - • Is this an information sharing meeting or a problem solving meeting?

If it is an information sharing meeting, then there are two guides to follow: 1. Can the information be distributed in another way (eg email etc)? In this case there is no need for the meeting, thus saving a lot of time. 2. If the need to share the information must be by way of a meeting, then the focus of the meeting (and time spent) should be • 20% past oriented - i.e. reporting on the information (e.g. results) and • 80% future oriented – i.e. deciding what we are going to do with the information.

Using the “80/20 rule” for your meetings will ensure that everyone participates and can see some real advantage to having the meeting. By the way, if you are a participant in one of those boring meetings we mentioned earlier, it is possible to have some influence on the meeting process. Keep asking “What are we going to do with this information?” or, “How should we proceed now?”. In other words, every time the meeting starts to focus on the past, redirect it to the future.

If it is a problem solving meeting, then there are five steps to follow to ensure the meeting is a positive one with some productive outcomes.

As with Information sharing meetings, quite often problem solving meetings don’t reach their full potential because the meeting dwells too much on the present or past situation, rather than “how things ought to be”. Using the following five steps will ensure that your meeting stays focused on the future and is productive.

1. Ask each participant to prepare for the meeting a few days in advance (one week is ideal, but not always possible) by jotting down some notes in answer to a short “meeting question”. They need to bring these notes to the meeting.

2. The meeting pre-work question must be framed on the assumption that the problem has already been solved – ie. it must be expressed at some future time. For example, if a telephone service department were looking for ideas on how they might improve their service, the question might be put: “Assume that we have just had a very successful year, and that we have received heaps of feedback which suggested our service given to customers has been first rate over the last twelve months: • What things did we do to get such great success? • What problems or challenges did we have? • How did we solve these problems or meet these challenges?”

3. At the meeting ask all participants for their ideas and list these on a whiteboard or flipchart paper etc. Note. It is very important to list these ideas so that everyone can see them – this helps maintain people’s interest, keeps people focused and is useful for keeping the meeting on track.

4. When the meeting has reached consensus on which items are worthwhile and achievable, two further columns are added to each flip chart page. One column

is headed “By when” and the other is headed “By whom”

5. It is important that the workload is shared by all participants. In the first column “By when”, the group is asked to allocate a time for when this aspect could be achieved. When this is agreed, people are asked to volunteer to undertake responsibility for ensuring particular items are undertaken (not necessarily to do them, but to take responsibility for them), by placing their name in the “By whom” column. Once this is done, the meeting now has an action plan for solving the problem. This can be written up and distributed to people following the meeting.

I have used this process at all levels of organisations and with mixed stakeholder groups with amazing success over the last 20 years. Whether your meeting is an information sharing one or a problem solving one, I’m sure that using the guidelines set out in this article will make them more rewarding for everyone. If you would like some free advice on how to construct your “problem solving” meetings, or to discuss any aspects of meetings, please contact me at www.nationallearning.com.au