



Effective, Efficient Meetings

Bruce Taylor

Introduction

Most professionals report spending between 15% and 30% of their time in meetings. How about yourself - do you know the inside of the conference rooms better than you know your office? And of the time that you spend in the meetings, how much of it is really valuable to you, and how much does it cost?

Consider a typical status meeting consisting of one Vice President who earns \$100,000 per year, and six Directors who earn \$75,000. If the meeting runs for one hour, it costs the company about \$1500 in fully loaded personnel costs. If the group meets once per week, the status meeting costs the company \$75,000 per year - or the cost of one Director's salary.

Kinds of Meetings

Think for a moment about the different kinds of meetings that you go to. Here are a few of the common ones:

- **Informational Meetings**
Status meetings, project meetings, and quarterly division meetings all fall into this category - the purpose of the meeting is simply to pass facts among the attendees and, if necessary, to answer questions.
- **Decision-making Meetings**
People go into these meetings with an unresolved issue, and expect to come out with a firm resolution, or at least with a better sense of direction.
- **Technical Design Meetings**
Engineers and product managers go into a design meeting with a set of requirements

and expect to emerge with a technical solution to the requirements.

- **Quality Review Meetings**
Engineers and Quality Assurance staff go to the meeting with a piece of product code, or a requirements specification, or a design specification and try to find as many defects as possible before they get into the product.

And the list of meeting types goes on and on. The type of meeting is important because there are different ways of running each effectively and efficiently; and if you can identify the kind of meeting before you walk in, you can choose just the right techniques to make it run smoothly.

Is This Meeting Necessary?

The first question about a meeting seems like the most obvious: is it really necessary to call a meeting at all? Some of the questions to ask yourself are:

- Can I pass on the information through email, or in a conference call?
- How much face-to-face discussion do I expect?
- What will we do differently based on the meeting's decision?
- Would there be any negative results if I didn't call the meeting? Do they justify the time and expense?
- Are we doing this meeting out of habit? Is it still valuable?

If you ask yourself these sorts of questions, it's surprising how often you'll conclude either that the meeting would be a waste of time, or that there are more efficient ways of achieving the same goals.

You might want to experiment with alternative ways of holding meetings. Rather than bringing people from all over the company into a conference room, could you arrange a conference call so that they didn't have to leave their offices? Could you use Instant Messaging to hold short, fast meetings online? Suppose you combined Instant Messaging with a Web Cam and used virtual meeting software like GoToMarket or WebEx? It might be worth doing the experiment just to see how it goes.

Who Should Attend?

Okay, you've decided that a meeting really is necessary - now you have to decide on the list of attendees. This is tougher than it sounds, because you have to balance a lot of factors:

- Who has a stake in the decisions made in the meeting?
- Who has knowledge that is important for the meeting?
- How costly is it to bring people to the meeting? (And cost may mean more than money.)
- How difficult is it to get time on people's schedules?
- What is the smallest critical mass of the meeting, and what is the largest size that can be effective?

If you'll think about the meetings you regularly attend, you'll realize that some people come to the meetings out of habit - they rarely contribute, but the meeting is part of their weekly schedule, so they attend anyway. Think about respectfully giving these people permission to dis-invite themselves.

Meeting Traps

There are lots and lots of ways that a meeting can go astray, but they seem to cluster into a few general problems:

- Unclear goals
Every meeting needs an agenda, but it has to be specific enough to tell when the meeting is over, but flexible enough to allow for exploring important side issues.
- Ineffective moderation
Every meeting needs a moderator, and she has a delicate task of moving the agenda along toward a conclusion, while making sure that all the important information is on the table.
- Trying to problem-solve
Engineers are especially prone to try to solve a problem in the meeting, when it would be more appropriate just to define it and designate someone to solve it.
- Unclear outcome
It should be clear to everyone what was accomplished, and usually this needs to be documented in the minutes.

If you're aware of these traps and plan to avoid them, your meetings will run smoothly and you will look like a genius.

About Bruce Taylor



Bruce Taylor is the principal of CoachingProgrammers.com, an executive coaching firm located near Boston, Massachusetts. Bruce helps software organizations of all sizes to create low-stress, supportive, adaptable working environments, so that the engineers, leaders, and managers can work as effectively as possible. He provides executive coaching for senior managers who are creating superior organizations, management coaching for technical leaders who are adapting to new agile practices, and individual coaching for engineers who are upgrading their skills. Bruce has a Masters in Computer Science from Duke University, a Masters in Community Psychology, and a Certificate in Job Stress and Healthy Workplace Design, both from the University of Massachusetts.