

# MAKING MEETINGS WORK

## *A New Approach to Effective Meetings*

By Lorna Riley, CSP

Certified Speaking Professional

760-639-4020

*"There is no limit to the good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit."*

Abraham Lincoln

There are over 11 million meetings taking place in the US everyday. It's a corporate reality that the more successful you become in your organization, the more meetings you will attend. Middle management spends about 35% of their week in meetings; top management may spend as much as 50%. If meetings aren't effective and efficient, they can cost organizations millions in revenue each year.

Meetings also have a ripple effect. A meeting of 15 can affect how 300 work, or don't work, for the rest of the day, or longer. Harold Reimer, a researcher in the field of meetings, estimates that the cost of time lost after ineffective meetings can amount to \$800,000 per year for every 1,000 employees. This is called the meeting "recovery syndrome." People have to work harder to make up for lost time. When meetings work well, they not only build the bottom line, but also improve morale, interpersonal communication, productivity, and teamwork.

### **Why Have Meetings?**

Given the time and productivity eaten up in meetings, they should be a strategy of last resort. The best litmus test for meetings is to answer the question:

*Is there any other way to accomplish what needs to be done?*

If the answer is "Yes," then do it. Too often people schedule meetings to update others

with “status reports.” If the report requires discussion, have a meeting, otherwise send out the report and follow-up if and when need be. There are only four reasons for running a meeting. If it’s not on the list, don’t have one.

### **Four Reasons for Running a Meeting**

1. problem solving (brain storming, decision-making, creativity input)
2. motivation/inspiration (speech, incentives, rewards, building morale)
3. education (training, orientation, coaching, mentoring)
4. team building (forming, creating missions, goals, assigning roles etc.)

Schedule a meeting only when there’s no other way to achieve your goals, or *when what you say depends upon what another person says*. If it’s only going to be a one-way street with no interaction, why not just record your comments and send out the tape! When conducted effectively, the result of the meeting produces synergy—the outcome is *greater* than the result any *one* person could achieve on their own. The group becomes more than the sum of its parts.

### **Criteria for Successful Meetings**

There are two ways to tell if a meeting has been successful.

1. Were your objectives met?  
Did a problem get solved? What decision did the group make? What new ideas emerged?
2. How were your objectives met?  
Examine the process of *how* the meeting was conducted. Was there input from all those involved? Were people prepared with a detailed agenda before hand? Did the meeting stay on track? How well did the group work together? How

did the people feel about the meeting? Did the people draw upon each other's ideas or was it a battle of egos? Did everyone get an opportunity to participate or did one person dominate?

If your meeting was effective in both areas, the time was well invested. This may be the only time employees come together and therefore can be very motivating for making new alliances.

## **A New Approach**

An effective approach to making meetings work is called the "interaction" method. Like the name implies, it is a sharing of ideas and not a one-way lecture. Here are some pointers for running an effective and productive interactive meeting.

### ***Before the meeting:***

1. Decide whether the meeting is necessary or not. Could the objectives be achieved more effectively through another process?
2. Establish the purpose of the meeting. Answer the questions: What are you trying to achieve? What decisions need to be made? What actions need to be initiated?
3. Prepare an agenda. Include only those items relevant to the purpose of the meeting. Prioritize items in order of importance. Group related items together. Indicate time allowed for each item.
4. Collect all available information relevant to agenda items. If lengthy, summarize into briefing notes, outlining salient points.
5. Circulate agenda and supporting documentation well in advance of the meeting.
6. Restrict attendance to those people affected by the issues to be discussed.
7. Just before the meeting, check for new information which, if to be presented at the meeting, should be simplified and summarized.

### ***During the meeting:***

1. State the purpose of the meeting.
2. Check attendance and make a note of those present.

3. Set the scene for each new item on the agenda and then open discussion by inviting specific contributions from the members.
4. Let everyone who has a pertinent contribution have ample time to make his or her point without repeating previous ground unless it's done for summary or review.
5. Control the conversation. Don't be afraid to bring it into line if it starts to drift into excessive detail or irrelevances.
6. If a discussion becomes too complex and a wide variety of views are being expressed, summarize to review your own understanding and that of others.
7. Stick to the time allotted. Note unresolved items needing further discussion for another time. The "Parking Lot" technique is effective for storing ideas for later discussion. Put the idea(s) in the upper corner of a flip chart and address if time allows, otherwise set another meeting time for discussion and resolution.
8. At the end of each agenda item's discussion, summarize any decisions made and conclusions reached.
9. Summarize what has been achieved at the end of the meeting. If further action is required, specify who is to do what and agree to deadlines.
10. Agree to the purpose and date of the next meeting, if one is necessary.

Following these steps will greatly increase the likelihood of a successful meeting.

### **Facilitated Meetings:**

Interactive meetings are generally not run by the manager, but by an appointed facilitator. This allows the manager to remain neutral as well as contribute ideas. Furthermore, the facilitator appoints a recorder to keep notes on a flip chart or white board. These notes act as a "group memory," help clarify thoughts, and keep people on track. The facilitator must also remain neutral, meaning s/he doesn't evaluate contributors' ideas, censor, or contribute ideas regarding content.

### **Solving Problems in Meetings:**

Try defining the problem you're attempting to solve by putting it into the form of a

question. A clearly defined problem is half the success in creating workable solutions. For example, someone might state that the filing system isn't working. A more targeted problem statement asked in a question might say: "How can we modify the filing system *so that* we can find everything we need?" Be on the look-out for "so that" sentences. These reveal objectives of what you really want as an end result. Also avoid putting possible solutions into your problem statements. State the problem as simply as possible. Also be aware that the problem will change according to different perspectives.

The purpose of meetings is to solve problems, inspire and motivate people, to educate, or to build teams that perform at higher levels. When you apply a few simple strategies, meetings not only make money, but save valuable time and build a quality of life for all those involved.

Contact Lorna Riley for a complete list of training programs and speeches:

[Lorna@lornariley.com](mailto:Lorna@lornariley.com)

Or call 760-639-4020.

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