

## Keep Briefings Brief: The better way to really bad staff meetings

By Michael Stern



I am a great believer in the value of meetings. Sometimes. Personal relationships can be formed and nurtured. Productive

decisions can actually get made when bright people collaborate. That's when meetings go well. Most organizations could accomplish all that (and more) in far fewer, shorter, better-run meetings.

We've all been told for years to make sure meetings start on time, and to prepare detailed agendas with an estimate of the time it should take to discuss each item.

Yet, hardly anyone does this. We still sit in boardrooms making conversation for 15 minutes while latecomers straggle in, and people wonder what the point of the meeting was when they file out.

But why stop at boring, unproductive meetings? With a little effort, you can have agonizingly terrible, morale-sapping ones.

Here's how:

**1.** Don't provide a prepared agenda. They're too anal and restrictive. Meetings, after all, are for the spontaneous flow of ideas. You don't want to stifle creativity.

**2.** If you must have an agenda, don't distribute it in advance. People are too busy to read it anyway. Just bang it out at the last minute – if you forget something, well, there will be another meeting next week.

**3.** Don't start on time. Being stuck in traffic or a long lineup at Starbucks are perfectly reasonable excuses for being late. Besides, the people who arrived on time can sit around, chat and learn from each other. (Mainly, they will learn not to arrive on time).

**4.** Don't bother to identify action items that emerge from the discussion. Don't assign responsibilities. Next steps, like oil spills, should bubble up naturally. Let people choose their action items and they will own them forever.

**5.** Similarly, don't follow up on these action items at the next meeting. It just makes meetings last longer. Besides, you will embarrass several of your colleagues, and add to the depressed feeling of low morale already wafting through your offices.

**6.** Never cut off a speaker. Let people express themselves until you're sure you have wrung every possible thought out of them. After all, it's rude to interrupt. You might make people think twice about rambling on and on again the next time they speak.

**7.** When people are speaking, don't make eye contact with others around the table. What's the value of knowing whether your colleagues are engaged, bored stiff or downright suicidal?

**8.** Never call on someone for an opinion. Let people (...at least those who are still paying attention) volunteer. Why embarrass someone by asking for their ideas – even though

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many people are probably waiting for just that. (How will they ever learn to express themselves if you keep coddling them?)

**9.** Don't finish on time. Fixating on an end time may mean not every idea has been rehashed over and over again. You're the boss: Keep people alert and attentive by keeping them guessing as to whether they should cancel their appointments for the afternoon.

This can also be a useful exercise in employee assessment. If people start filing out to keep appointments, that should give you a good idea where their priorities lie.

**10.** Don't plan the next meeting in advance. Why do it now, when everyone is here with their datebooks handy? Send out an e-mail a day or two before you need to meet again. Then bemoan people's lack of commitment when they say they have a conflicting engagement.

Following these steps won't guarantee boring, unproductive, eye-glazing meetings. But it's a great start!

*Michael Stern is President & CEO of Michael Stern Associates., an executive coaching firm based in Toronto, with affiliates in major business centres worldwide.*

*If you wish to discuss this article, or the services of Michael Stern Associates, please contact Michael directly at 416-593-0100 or [stern@michaelstern.com](mailto:stern@michaelstern.com). We also invite you to visit our website at [www.michaelstern.com](http://www.michaelstern.com)*