

“HOW TO KEEP YOUR MEETINGS FROM BECOMING A TOTAL BORE!!”

Let's be honest: How many meetings have you attended where you were this close to falling asleep on your face? No, it wasn't that you got three hours' sleep the night before or were caffeine deprived. The reason? The person conducting the meeting was either so disorganized that the meeting made no sense or he or she bored you to tears.

Of course you, yourself, had nothing to do with being attentive, finding interest, or looking for opportunities to engage. You were the victim – once again subjected to monotonous, repetitive discourse, forced upon you by a boss who said, “This meeting is mandatory!”

When we're part of a meeting audience, we have very high expectations. We know exactly what we expect from the meeting facilitator, what we'd like to hear, and in what manner we'd like the information conveyed. We might as well take out an evaluation sheet the minute we arrive to critique the presenter's attire, ability to implement high-tech slides, as well as his or her rapport-building skills. We believe as victims we're entitled – entitled to provide “constructive feedback” in order to assist the meeting facilitator in improving his or her future meeting performances.

Now for a bit of reality: The only way we can understand the plight of a meeting facilitator is to be one ourselves. Try getting up in front of a potentially dispirited group of individuals to impart news that is less than welcoming. Try coming to consensus with individuals who have no desire to reach consensus in the first place. Oh yes, and don't forget to make sure you connect with each and every participant in a meaningful way!

Over the years I've worked with hundreds of individuals who've attended thousands of meetings. Their biggest complaints? The meetings had no agenda, no

objectives, and no meaningful outcomes. The attendees felt as if their precious time were being taken up by some bureaucrat who thought he or she knew what was best for the group and for the company.

If you're in the position to conduct meetings on a regular basis, here are some tips for meeting success:

1. Know your audience! Know who is likely to attend and what you need to do to connect to those individuals.
2. Do a preliminary meeting survey, whenever possible or relevant, that addresses concerns, challenges, or issues the meeting attendees may want to discuss.
3. Set a clear, decisive agenda (including meeting objectives) ahead of time and disseminate the information to all attendees. Give the attendees enough pre-meeting time to digest what the meeting is about. BE SURE to list any expectations on your part concerning the attendees themselves. If you're looking for feedback, indicate in your pre-meeting information what you'd like the attendees to bring or add to the meeting.
4. Set a time limit for the meeting. Know precisely how much time to devote to each subject and stick to schedule. The last thing you want to have happen is to either run over time-wise or to have to cut out some important information due to your poor time management skills.
5. Draw out those individuals who rarely speak at meetings. In a low-key, non-threatening way ask for their opinions but expect nothing in return. Many times individuals who are shy or afraid to speak in groups may offer very little when asked a question. Give these people permission to say as little as they'd like.

- Make no assumption, however, that these individuals don't want to contribute. Just because an individual is on the quiet side doesn't mean that he or she isn't appreciative of a little attention.
6. Make sure your beginning, your middle, and your ending flow naturally. The meeting attendees want a meeting with PURPOSE. Show that there's a method to your madness and that you are leading to a conclusion.
 7. If you ask if anyone has questions, present a welcoming environment for people to feel free to ask. Many times individuals are afraid to ask a question because they don't want to be singled out as the one person in the room who didn't get what you said. Offer a humbling approach by saying something to the effect, "I know sometimes I can ramble or perhaps not make myself as clear as I'd like, so in case I'm guilty – please feel free to ask me any question you'd like." If a question or two surfaces, take the time to really listen and pass no internal judgments on what's being said. Consider every contribution as equally worthy and watch how you instantaneously become a hero in your colleagues' eyes!
 8. Make sure you're in control of the meeting. If two individuals become diametrically opposed in their viewpoints, be sure the tone of the meeting remains neutral. Be careful that no one interrupts anyone else and that you verbally set communication boundaries early in the meeting as to what is acceptable and non-acceptable behavior.
 9. In those cases where attendees may have negative pre-conceived ideas about why the meeting needs to be conducted at all, state early in the meeting the benefit(s) to the attendees for being there. If attendees believe they'll get something from

the meeting that's specifically meaningful to their jobs, they're more likely to be open and to contribute.

10. **BE REALISTIC!** Think of those times when you wished you were anywhere else but in another endless, fruitless meeting. Be a pioneer in showing others that meetings really can be enjoyable and lead to positive changes. Don't forget the humorous side of yourself that's just waiting to come out. Above all else, provide the group with a fun and uplifting experience. If you "leave 'em laughing", they might even look forward to another meeting!

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