

It's Your Meeting, Too



Going to a lot of meetings that waste your time? Don't put all the blame on the leaders of the meetings. Part of the fault — and the responsibility for helping things work — may rest with you

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All the wasted time we spent in that meeting! We should have finished at least 30 minutes before we got out, especially considering we didn't get anything decided. As a matter of fact, I never did figure out why Bill even called it. If only he knew how to run a decent meeting!

Meetings for the job. Meetings for social activities. Meetings for organizations. Meetings for volunteer work. Meetings for . . . It's difficult — if not downright impossible — to escape what sometimes seems like a virtual plague upon the land — THE MEETING. Many of them don't seem to accomplish much except to create a need for yet another meeting to resolve what should have been handled in the first one.

Nevertheless, if a meeting doesn't work, blaming that solely on the leader is inappropriate, say Dean and Selina Herrington. The Herringtons are independent consultants who teach a class for Shell employees in how to conduct and participate in more effective meetings. "The trap a lot of people fall into," says Selina, "is taking the attitude, 'It wasn't *my* meeting! It was the leader's fault we had a bad meeting.' I suggest that it's not strictly the leader's fault; it's also your responsibility."

The Herringtons believe everyone who goes to a meeting is part of the meeting-management team. All should be participants, not just attendees resigned to showing up, making a few comments about the subject at hand and taking a mental siesta if the meeting goes awry.

"Aw, come on now," you complain. "Most of the meetings I attend are command performances scheduled and conducted by my boss. I don't have any real say in whether they succeed or fail."

Wrong again, say the Herringtons, who label this type of thinking the "traditional" outlook on meetings. As Dean describes it, when partic-

ipants adopt the traditional role, they expect to speak when spoken to and to confine their contributions to content — perhaps a discussion of the budget. They don't try to affect the process of the meeting. If they realize the group has wandered off the subject, they won't point out the problem and suggest returning to the meeting agenda.

"Our image of full participants is quite different," says Dean. "We believe they have the *right* to affect not only the content, but also the process, of the meeting. They have the right to expect their time will be used well. After all, their bosses expect them to get their work done on time and in spite of the meetings they're required to attend.

"With the onslaught of the quality improvement process and employee involvement, many managers are *very* receptive to having full participation. Others are even more than that — they're anxious — for people to take on more responsibility and to help out with meeting productivity."

Not surprisingly, when the Herringtons talk about what it takes to be effective participants, being active (versus reactive) heads the list. They expect participants to be "fully involved" from the beginning — when they're informed that a meeting is scheduled and they're expected to attend.

If no agenda is sent, they advise requesting one from the leader. If after reviewing the agenda you believe your attendance isn't essential, you should ask to be excused and to receive a copy of the minutes.

If you're attending, the Herringtons believe you should go prepared. That doesn't mean grabbing the appropriate file folder at the last minute as you're rushing out the door to the meeting.

To prepare appropriately, you've got to understand the purpose of the meeting, which may not always be apparent after reading the agenda. Dean says the leader may have sent a "noun-bound" agenda, one without verbs indicating what's to be accomplished. For example, the agenda may list "department budget," without saying whether it's merely to be discussed or whether a decision will be made about the budget for next year. You won't know how to prepare unless you call the leader and get more information.

Once in the meeting, the Herringtons believe you should inject thoughts and questions about the subject without having to be coaxed by the leader. Even if you're new to the organization and your content expertise is limited, you can still make a positive contribution to the content of the meeting. As an example, Dean says a participant may offer an idea that's countered by two other participants. As a newcomer, you can paraphrase and summarize what the three have said, followed by a ques-

tion such as, "Is this what I understand you've said so far? Am I clear?"

"This is very useful," says Dean, "because often you'll get two or three people representing opposing viewpoints who aren't listening to each other. This participant — through summarizing the ideas of others — can bring great clarity to a discussion. This demonstrates the participant is listening, getting his or her own thinking clarified, as well as helping members of the group clarify *their* thinking."

What if the meeting isn't going well? Perhaps the group is at a standstill. Or maybe Fred and Susan are shooting arrows at each other, while other participants become increasingly uncomfortable and withdrawn.

Under the old, traditional meeting rules, you'd sit silently, inwardly fuming and criticizing the leader for not fixing the problem with *his* or *her* meeting. The Herringtons, however, won't let you off that easy. Remember that as a part of the meeting-management team, you *too* are responsible for the success or failure of the meeting. How can you tactfully get involved in the process of running a meeting — the rightful domain of the leader — without looking like you're attempting a coup?

The Herringtons recommend using the DARE technique. Begin by *diagnosing* the problem you'd like to correct. Be specific about what's wrong: Has the entire group wandered off the subject? Or is one person the culprit? Is there a personality clash between Fred and Susan that causes them to go at each other whenever they're in the same meeting? Decide what changes you'd like see and who you want to make these changes.

Now you're ready to get real with yourself. Assess the positive or negative consequences of taking action. Would speaking up be akin to making yourself a villain? Would you be putting your career on the line? Is the timing right? Could you really help this meeting?

Dean says that although he sees a greater willingness by management to accept and encourage the active participant, you'll also find pockets that are extremely resistant. "They'll have no part of a management style built on anything other than a military model," he explains. "I'm the boss' is the end of the discussion. If the political risks are too high and you decide not to do anything, that's an appropriate choice." Even if you decide to sit this one out, he adds, you've gained self-knowledge. At least you were alert to the process problem you've just seen. When you run your own meeting, you can see and avoid that problem.

If you decide to *respond*, your success or failure depends on what you do and how tactfully you carry it off. The Herringtons point out there are many ways to transmit your message. Some are more subtle — and less public — than others. There are varying levels of inter-

vention which in turn, escalate in impact.

Say your part of the meeting is struggling. The time allotted for the meeting is running out. You decide that sending a subtle, non-verbal message is an acceptable risk. The Herringtons suggest looking at your watch or putting your watch on the table in front of you. A riskier solution involves speaking up: "What's our purpose in discussing this issue? Is it problem analysis or solution seeking?" If you aim your non-verbal or verbal comments at one person instead of the group, you've escalated your intervention and mounted a tightrope. For example, you establish eye contact with the participant who insists on continuing to discuss extraneous issues. Then you look at your watch and resume eye contact. Or you establish eye contact with the leader and ask, "Shouldn't we be moving on?"

Taking a more assertive stand may be the way to go, in spite of the greater risk. "If you've sent subtle messages (with no response) and it's still important enough to you," says Selina, "it's appropriate to send a stronger message that says, 'My time is as valuable as your time, and you need to understand that you're wasting it.'"

Obviously, the riskiest time to try to affect the outcome of a meeting is while it's being held. If you want to lower your risk level, you might want to respond before or after the meeting by suggesting improvements to the leader.

For example, you know Fred and Susan will be at the next meeting and you'll likely have to sit through another rerun of the local war. Selina suggests talking about the problem with the leader in his or her office and suggesting a different way of conducting the next meeting, perhaps the Pro-Con Approach. When the next confrontation occurs, have Fred and Susan list their opposing viewpoints on a flipchart with a line drawn down the middle.

"When people do this," says Selina, "they often find they have more in common than they realize. But they can't hear it because they're involved in this eye-contact, war-across-the-table scenario."

Using a flipchart with the facts, opinions and assumptions clearly listed also helps other participants make better decisions about what should be done, she says. By focusing on the flipchart instead of on Susan and Fred, the other participants aren't put in the position of having to take sides.

The final step of the DARE technique is *evaluation*. Did you succeed? If not, don't immediately accelerate to a higher level of intensity. The Herringtons advise recycling through the DARE. Perhaps you'll reach a different decision based on the insight you gained from round one.

What kind of feedback have the Herringtons gotten from class graduates who have dared to DARE? Dean says one employee of a major oil



When you doubt you really *need* to be there

Sometimes the appropriate thing to do as a participant is to question your need to participate in a meeting. Some of these ideas from The Herrington Group may help.

- Ask, "If I'm not there, what will my absence prevent you from doing (making a decision, laying out plans)?" This helps the meeting caller assess the real **NEED** for your attendance and link that need with the purpose of the meeting. This also communicates that you are not willing to spend your time in a meeting that you've been thoughtlessly invited to.
- Suggest, "Since I have so much to do, how would it be if I didn't attend but was on standby to come over if you really need me?" This lets you do your work, while assuring the meeting caller that if you are absolutely **NECESSARY** to the meeting, you'll be available. This is much better received than a flat "no."
- Suggest, "Since I have to be working in another building, could I agree to be available by telephone should you discover you need me?" This assures the meeting caller that even though you can't attend, your input will be available if absolutely required. — G.D.

company said she attended a meeting that was drifting and taking more time than was necessary. She told Dean she looked around the room and determined something could be done. She believed no one was doing anything because they weren't knowledgeable about the meeting process. But she hesitated to speak up because her manager and other people senior to her were there.

Nevertheless, Dean says, she told the group that it appeared they were running short of time. They needed to reach closure on the major issue they were discussing. She thought if they returned to the issue and worked hard on it, they could finish on time. Dean said she believed she succeeded, because members of the group seemed to feel she was being helpful and went along with her suggestion.

Even if you're a prepared, process-aware participant, you're not a perfect participant yet. The Herringtons also recommend being:

- **Punctual** — arrive at the meeting early or on time. Dean says some graduates of their classes have taken punctuality so seriously that, as meeting leaders, they emphasize the point by setting odd times to begin meetings, for example, 8:58 a.m. instead of the more traditional 9 a.m. He says he's been told this strategy works, as more meetings start on time.

If the boss is detained and everyone is sitting around waiting, Dean suggests you can make good use of the time. If the meeting is being held to update the boss about a project, for example, participants can give each other the high points of their presentations. Have a recorder log the high points on a flipchart. If the boss hasn't arrived by the time you're finished, you have the option of dismissing the meeting and having someone use the notes to brief the boss. If the boss has questions, they can be answered by telephone.

- **Self-isolated** — arrange not to be interrupted during the meeting. This may include having someone else take calls and deal with minor issues. If you're having trouble deciding whether an issue is worth leaving a meeting to handle, the Herringtons offer the 1,000-Mile Rule: If you are willing to fly a thousand miles to take care of it, the interruption is appropriate.

- **Focused** — confine comments to the topic and shun side conversations.

- **Concise** — avoid making rambling comments. Use the Pyramid Technique to structure your verbal contributions. State your main point in 20 words or less, then follow, as required, with the base of the pyramid — supporting examples or data. This helps others understand more quickly and saves time.

The success of your next meeting may well depend not only on what the leader does but on what *you* and the other participants contribute as well.