

Leading Meetings 101

Transform them from dull to dynamic.



by Howard M. Guttman

HERE'S HOW MARS, Inc.'s president, Paul Michaels, describes his global team's meetings in the pre-high-performance days: "We wasted a lot of time in meetings. There was no rationale to the agenda, so we never dealt with the actual issues. We dealt with a lot of small issues, but not with the big ones or the right ones. . . People either didn't say anything or quickly became disengaged. Our global meetings were viewed as energy-draining and unproductive."

Now Michaels' team hews to a new high-performance, horizontal model. Meetings are no longer energy-drainers but swift-moving, productive sessions in which key issues are put on the table. If an issue isn't resolved on the spot, a plan for resolution is put in place and reviewed the next time the group convenes. As a result, the team is now working at peak efficiency.

How can you transform your meetings from dull to dynamic?

Start With Protocols

There are many meeting devils: weak leaders; unruly participants; unclear objectives; no agenda; cell-phoneitis; distractions, detours. Great teams eliminate such barriers by setting up specific, hard-and-fast rules for the following aspects of meetings:

- *How often will the team meet and how long will meetings last?* I once attended a regularly scheduled meeting of Ken Bloom's senior team at INTTRA, Inc., which had been working in high-performance mode for the past 12 months. The agenda, circulated in advance, called for eight segments, each laid out with subpoints; point person; length of time for discussion, status, and actions. Within each segment, the point person reported on the status of work on key issues and, where necessary, solicited ideas and assistance from the group.

In three hours, INTTRA's senior team discussed each issue—from IT to product management to ocean schedules. They questioned each presenter, made suggestions, and pointed out potential problems and opportunities.

It was an impressive testament to the speed and effectiveness at which an aligned team works to conduct business.

- *Where will the team meet?* This is not a big issue for teams located near one another. Here, the most attention needs to be paid to "hygienic" factors, such as meeting room atmospherics, layout, temperature and ventilation. But there's more to the "where" when dealing with a team whose members are not co-located. Global teams face special challenges when it comes to meetings, and creativity is a must if far-flung members are to become at-a-distance great teams. The team must meet face to face as often as possible. To do so, piggyback team meetings onto other functions. Consider meeting in regional offices to give personnel in remote locations a chance to meet the members of the global team and to showcase their operations.

When they can't be in one location, patching remote members in by phone or videoconference provides valuable interaction—if you keep in mind time zones, non-U.S. holidays, and local religious observances when scheduling.

- *Who will lead meetings?* As VP of Wal-Mart's Global People Division, Craig Williams describes how one leader's style compromised meetings where he once worked. The leader "went through agenda items one by one, asking for discussion. The people who were comfortable with him spoke up; the rest remained silent. He listened—although he often showed annoyance or frustration—then made a decision." Williams says that when the team became a high-performing one, you could no longer identify the leader during meetings. "A strong, effective leader is likely one of the least vocal people in the room. He or she doesn't hold court, direct conversation, or make decisions on agenda items."

On many great teams, there is a different "leader" at each meeting. Some teams rotate the role. Other teams let the content determine the leader: Whoever is most—or least—affected by or familiar with the issues to be discussed will lead the discussion. Still others employ the services of a facilitator, who "owns" the process of the meeting and keeps the group on track.

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- *How will the agenda be set? By whom?* Before the transformation of Williams' team, the leader set the agenda for meetings. Afterward, the agenda was "built by the team." That's standard on a great team: Whoever is leading the meeting sets the agenda, with the input of others on the team.

Ken Bloom's experience verifies the team approach to agenda setting. "We were planning a big meeting with all our ocean carriers," Bloom recounts. "When I queried team members about what the meeting objectives should be, I got a different answer from each person. It wasn't until we agreed on objectives that we came up with a tight, meaningful agenda."

An agenda for meetings might

include: review the goals; business update; progress-check on issues identified previously; reports of subteams assigned to them; decisions or next steps; identify new issues; identify players to resolve them; accountabilities and timelines; plan meeting follow-up; agreement on the

message(s) the team will convey; and check on protocols, asking "How are we doing?"

Note the *bias toward action* in the agenda. There is no time for the usual FYI round-robin reporting of activities.

Set Some Behavioral Protocols

Meeting protocols deal mostly with logistics. But as Williams points out, "You can be disciplined and still be dysfunctional. Some poor-performing teams have protocols around meeting times, agendas, and minutes, but none that address meeting behaviors."

Great teams insist on several behavior-related protocols:

- The meeting starts on time, with or without you.
- If you can't make it, send a substitute.
- Cell phones are off; laptops and handhelds are out.
- No digressions; if someone raises a new issue, it's parked;
- No side conversations.
- Everyone participates.
- Everyone follows the agreed-upon rules for conflict resolution.
- All players hold all others—and the leader—accountable for promised deliverables and results. Such protocols can transform your meetings from mind-numbing to memorable. LE

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ACTION: Make your meetings memorable.

