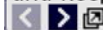


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Making meetings productive

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By JOYCE L. CARROLL

Although he was a man of many words, Noah Webster probably didn't attend many meetings back in the day: if he had, he likely wouldn't have used a phrase as benign as "to assemble" when defining the verb "to meet."

Flash forward 200 years to the present, when we live in an era where time management is elusive and information overload is pervasive. Companies are suffocating in meetings. Today, that verb is best defined as a four-letter word of the most despised kind. According to a Microsoft survey of more than 38,000 employees, almost 70 percent said they felt their average of 5.6 hours per week spent in meetings were unproductive.

And, employees aren't the only ones grumbling: of 150 senior executives who responded to a survey conducted by OfficeTeam, 28 percent felt meetings were a waste of time.

So, how does a business accomplish this necessary evil in a productive and thoughtful manner? The New England Business Journals queried half a dozen chief executive officers and others in leadership positions in Vermont and New Hampshire. If you call it, should they come?

Meetings come in all shapes and sizes. Smaller-staffed businesses may meet weekly or on an as-needed basis; larger corporations with multiple sites may meet quarterly. Staff meetings may follow a different calendar than upper-management meetings.

Still, there appear to be some core tenets that assure management is successful in accomplishing what it has intended and productivity hasn't suffered as a result. Sometimes, it means abandoning the status quo.

Dealer.com in Burlington has moved from weekly to monthly meetings, and, in some cases, quarterly meetings - although the schedule is a loose one. Employees, said Mark Bonfigli, chief executive officer, are strongly encouraged to call or request a meeting. The frequency, he said, need not be a prescribed thing.

"Don't create a meeting for the sake of having a meeting, which is what a lot of companies still do," Bonfigli said. If the question arises as to why a meeting has been called - but no one has a satisfactory answer - then it should be cancelled, he added.

Scheduling employee meetings works best when there are pressing issues to address, said Steve Bentley, president and chief executive officer of the Upper Valley Credit Union in Lebanon, NH.

"I try not to have a meeting for the sake of just having one, because people hate them," said Bentley.

Added Bonfigli: "There are some critical things like work force trainings or sexual harassment - to tackle those things, you really do need a meeting."

At Central Vermont Public Service (CVPS), safety director Ed McGowan schedules several hundred meetings throughout the corporation each year. He runs a full agenda at his monthly safety meetings, covering everything from compliance issues to boilerplate safety updates. While "as-needed meetings" works for some, a workplace void of meetings usually isn't in the best interest of management or staff. Peggy Lucci, a training specialist at the Heritage Family Credit Union headquartered in Rutland, has abandoned one of her four monthly training sessions to instead work with teams at several of the credit union's seven branches where meetings

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weren't being held.

The lack of meetings in a workplace, said Lucci, can lead to tension and water-cooler gossip. Lucci's role has been to model the skills required to facilitate productive meetings. Her efforts have been well received.

Meetings 101

A well-prepared facilitator is critical – perhaps even more so for gatherings that include participants from multiple sites or for groups that meet quarterly. Mack Molding, a custom plastics company in Arlington, holds daylong quarterly meetings for management from three regional plants. The meetings are held off-site to deter interruptions.

A weekend-long, quarterly meeting is also standard protocol for the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) in Montpelier, as board members come from New England, New York and as far away as Florida and Bermuda.

"One of the techniques we use is maybe a month before the meeting, we'll have a [conference call] that allows us to formulate things we may need to talk about," said Con Hogan of Plainfield, board chairman.

Wanda Knowles, director of quality and information technology at Mack Molding, also brings preparatory materials to the table. She asks for managerial reports beforehand. These reports are presented via PowerPoint and include opportunities for commentary. Agenda bullet points are checked off as issues are addressed.

While agendas are important tools, the use of formal minutes or post-meeting summaries varies. Hogan said their minutes are posted in a timely fashion, as they require approval. Moreover, correcting mistakes is easier when meeting material is still fresh in participants' minds.

Minutes also help prioritize topics for future agendas. A presentation by VCFA board member Chris Graff called attention to the importance of marketing and enrollment for the college. "He's one of the first presenters now. There's a natural sense of order and priority when it comes to thinking through the sequence of our presentations," Hogan said, adding Graff's input serves as a logical precursor to other agenda issues.

Minutes may be optional, but reiterating assigned actions is essential. Monthly e-mail updates at Dealer.com chart progress on action items.

"In this way, upper management sees things getting done – or not getting done," Bonfigli said.

Added Bentley of the Upper Valley Credit Union: "Things assigned out are placed on the next agenda and tracked." He conducts his staff meetings after work hours. "I bring food in, and give people a little energy," he said.

Holding participants' interest and enthusiasm is a priority, meeting facilitators said. Guest speakers, hands-on activities and a bit of sustenance go a long way.

"I set the entire forum up as if it's a college curriculum, never to exceed 50 minutes," said McGowan. "We take a break, go 50 minutes, take a break."

Sometimes, all it takes is a bit of upbeat news to set the tone. "I kick off every meeting with something uplifting," Hogan said. "We celebrate some major success, like the newly accomplished accreditation for the college."

Group participation

Interviewees agreed that engaging meeting participants begins with seeking their input before and during the meeting.

"The ideal is an open agenda that can be put in an area to be added to by anyone, not just management," said Lucci. "This is not the place to vent or point fingers – just address topics."

Conducting a meeting in a timely fashion while giving everyone a voice can be a challenge. "Having everyone be heard is reasonably tricky," Hogan said. "You're not going to be called on twice. We use Robert's Rules to keep things on track. It's a challenge being totally neutral on

content. There's no single secret."

When seeking agenda input to plan a meeting, Bentley said he prioritizes the concerns and sets time limits. "Quite often, if we can't resolve it, we'll either place it back on the agenda or assign it offline for others to deal with outside," he said.

Bonfigli likens the situation to the discourse at dinners held by a large Italian family. "Newer employees tend to be more shy. We sometimes need to shock them into telling what they think," he said, referring to the sometimes staged exchanges that exemplify the company's open-minded approach to communication.

A healthy pinch of self-restraint is encouraged to keep the meeting from turning into a free-for-all.

"Do all 50 people need to hear this? I never hesitate to say, 'This can happen between the four of you,' and I hit the pause button," Bonfigli said.

Added Knowles: "If it's a decision-making meeting, just [include] the individuals required to make the decision."

Lucci advocates for a consensus decision over majority rules. She encourages groups to try the best idea they've come up with, and if it doesn't work, to bring it back to the table. "That's the benefit of having multiple meetings," she said, referring to the reality that everything can't be addressed in one meeting.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Horror stories about meetings? Oh, there have been a few. Hogan recalled sitting on a hospital board with four different owners and, hence, differing agendas. Bonfigli recalled witnessing a piece of fruit hurled through the air at a wall during a particularly stressful time in the company's early history.

Still, in spite of dissention that may occasionally border on anarchy, meetings are useful for disseminating information en masse about policy and safety regulations, product development, a company's growth and decline and ultimately the bottom line.

The New England Business Journals appreciated the honest feedback received from chief executive officers, department heads and board chairs for this article – although sometimes, reaching sources for this article was delayed due to, well, meetings.

Such was the case with Bonfigli, whose meeting ran overtime. Was his a successful meeting? Yes, he said.

"We were figuring out a new way of getting food to our people by allowing them to place orders, so when they arrive at work they can have breakfast without having to wait in line," he said.

Now, that's a great reason to have a meeting.

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