

Avoid Meeting Death

For many people, meetings are a bore – they get in the way of urgent tasks and turn into talking shops that don't achieve any return for your time. Yet some are valuable – if you do them right.

The cost of some meetings is terrifying. There is now even a gadget that will calculate how much each meeting costs, according to its length, number of attendees and average hourly wage. Consider 10 people for 2 hours @ £20 per hour = £400

Then, why meet? Well, some of what you hate is why they can be valuable. That break from your in-box of urgent messages can free you up to consider larger issues in the business and find out more about how your tasks and challenges mesh with others. And we've all got a need to interact face to face with people we work with – to put a face to a name, build trust and cement relationships. Finally, it is a moment when a diverse group of people can really concentrate on a problem at hand and agree on collaborative action. So, how can you ensure that you lead a meeting that lives up to its potential? Here are 8 ideas.

1. Follow the Leader Instead of putting one person in charge and letting the rest doze off, doodle or dream the meeting away, pass the chairman's baton to a new person every 10 minutes (or at an agreed reasonable interval). This will keep everyone's head in the game and also head off meeting monopolisers.
2. Wander Wall Write each challenge on a piece of flipchart paper and hang them around the meeting room. Arm everyone with a marker pen so that they can walk the room and write up any solutions or ideas they have for each issue. Discuss them right away, or follow them up post-meeting, whichever suits your timetable.
3. Card Sharp Put everyone's business cards (or just their names) in a pile and pick names out for responses or opinions when it comes to making decisions. You'd be surprised how quickly that will focus people's minds!
4. Go No-Tech If the temptation to check a Blackberry is proving too much for those coming to meetings, put a blanket ban on technology next time. That said, if you have scheduled a marathon session, plan email breaks when everyone can quickly check-in.
5. Quick Start Assign everyone a pre-meeting project – researching an issue, brainstorming a specific problem, or gathering feedback on an issue from their team or department – so people arrive with ideas. Discussions can then get off the ground quickly.
6. Bring a Guest Let each person bring a plus-one who might be outside the team but have a fresh perspective on what you are discussing. It will help to get information and opinions flowing around the company.
7. Good to Great As your meeting breaks up, ask everyone to give feedback. What did we do well in the meeting? Or what could have been better? This can be anonymous so people can say if their boss needed reining-in, and will mean that you control the next meeting better.
8. Cut Your Losses Don't be afraid to end a meeting if the group isn't making progress, or to excuse people who have done their bit. It's not an endurance event, so if it just isn't happening, suggest other ways to continue the discussions outside the session.

DARE YOU TRY ANY OF THESE IDEAS

Take Two In his book *Up the Organisation*, Robert L Townsend suggests holding not one meeting but two. The first one gets reactions from those happy to give them; the second gets the views of those who prefer more time for decisions.

Stand & Deliver Toyota is widely reported to have made meetings without chairs a common practice, and it is a great (but potentially uncomfortable) way to encourage people to tackle a

particular problem very quickly.

Sound Off Software development firm, Menlo Innovations, uses meetings only if an issue can't be sorted by "High-Speed Voice Technology™" also known as conversations between those on the project.

Mak'em Pay Computer game guru, Will Wright, told the New York Times that he has asked anyone who wanted him to attend a meeting to pay him a dollar for his time: "It did make them think twice about calling the meeting."

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