Stop the Meeting Madness

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Memo to the boss: Our weekly supervisor meetings are a great tool for exchanging information and keeping the department moving in the right direction. Would you be surprised to learn, however, that they cost our department over $7,500 per year due to wasted time and inefficiency? Several problems exist that are reducing the productivity of these meetings and costing us time and money. The primary offenders are late arrivals by some participants, failure to receive talking points ahead of time, and inconsistent follow-up.

First, late arrivals directly reduce the productive portion of our meetings because we often carry on personal conversations while waiting for the late individual to arrive. Reclaiming this time will either reduce meeting time or allow for more discussion. Second, talking points are rarely distributed ahead of time. By receiving this information in advance, we will be able to come prepared with specific examples and feedback. Finally, because minutes are inconsistently distributed after the meeting, specific policies and decisions become cloudy and must be readdressed at future meetings.

These problems are not only an inconvenience. They cost our department more money than you probably realize. In our short, two-hour meeting alone, over $7,500 is wasted per year ($28 average pay x 8 participants x 50 weeks per year x 0.33 percent of the two-hour meeting that is wasted time = $7,504). To begin the improvement process, I have included specific suggestions in my attached proposal. Our department is great at overcoming obstacles; improving the efficiency of our meetings will be no exception.

<u>Overview of the Situation</u>

According to Administrative Professional *Today* (2010), managers spend as much as 50% of their time in meetings, and two-thirds of those meetings end before key decisions are reached. In addition, 85% of managers report feeling dissatisfied with the effectiveness of the meetings they attend (p. 5).

Clearly, ineffective meetings are not limited to our department. By addressing a few key issues, though, we can achieve significant gains in efficiency. We can improve out meetings immediately by arriving on time, coming prepared, and following up with our team members.

Tardy Team Members

Some team members are consistently late to the meeting. A few minutes may not seem like a serious issue, but wasted time adds up. Time lost at the beginning either cuts into the discussion topics or makes the meeting run long.

Fetzer (2009) has advised that starting a meeting on time is vital and should be a rule for all meetings. Participants who attend must take responsibility for being on time. If they are not punctual, the meeting should start without them. With consistent enforcement, people will learn to be on time (p. 1,826). Because it is helpful to use a SWOT analysis when considering new plans, I am going to include one for the recommendations in this proposal. **S**trength: Wasted time will be cut out of the meeting. **W**eakness: Tardy team members may miss information at the beginning. **O**pportunity: By consistently starting on time, team members will have to adjust their habits to arrive on time. **T**hreat: we must be firm without embarrassing team members.

Balgobin (2013) has described the tardy team member, somewhat comically, as Miss Tardy. Her recommendation is to try to understand why team members behave as they do. It may be a basic character trait or a manifestation of an underlying issue with a specific person or group (p. 17). **S**trength: Attempting to understand why negative behavior is occurring is often the key to correcting it. **W**eakness: Becoming too lenient may give the impression that punctuality is not important. **O**pportunity: If tardiness is a symptom of a bigger problem, addressing the underlying issue may have a broader impact. **T**hreat: Tardiness may not be due to a deeper issue; therefore, we cannot allow team members to take advantage of us.

Unprepared Participants

We often hear of issues for the first time in the meeting. Alternatively, we would be much better prepared to discuss the issues and offer solutions if we have had time to reflect on them beforehand. A simple email that lists the topics to be discussed, along with requests for any relevant information, would go a long way toward producing more effective meetings.

Ross (2012) has recommended creating an agenda ahead of time that will help the group to achieve desired objectives. It can include simple information such as the date and time of the meeting, items to be discussed, and relevant background information. The agenda should be distributed beforehand and followed closely once the meeting begins (p. 28). **S**trength: Knowing the topics ahead of time will allow team members to come prepared. As a result, less time will be devoted to bringing team members up to speed during the actual meeting. **W**eakness: Developing an agenda ahead of time will create work for the preparer. **O**pportunity: By cutting out time spent describing issues, more time can be devoted for team members to offer ideas and solutions. **T**hreat: The agenda will take time to develop, and some individuals may still fail to read it and prepare.

A strategy that has been given by Gilmore, Mukrone, Doyle, Jakobson, and Ng (2012) is to create an outcome-focused agenda. They argue that the best way to conduct a successful meeting is to keep the goals of the meeting in alignment with broader corporate goals. It may take more work on the front end, but outcome-focused agendas will lead to a higher level of measurable achievements (para 15-23). **S**trength: Keeping a broader perspective will help to weed out unimportant discussion topics. **W**eakness: Team members may be more motivated to focus on the immediate issues. **O**pportunity: If we begin thinking in a larger context, our department can reach new levels of growth and success. **T**hreat: Focusing on the big picture will take hard work. It will be easy to slip back into the day-to-day grind.

Failure to Follow-Up

Nothing is worse than discussing a topic at length, coming to a decision, and then being unable to remember what was decided. Also frustrating is finding out at a subsequent meeting that the next steps decided upon were never followed through to completion. Creating a document of meeting minutes and decisions will give us a future reference point, and it will also help to avoid wasting time readdressing the issue.

Anderson (2013) has given a simple suggestion for following up with participants after a meeting. He recommends using a pre-prepared form to fill in during the meeting that will allow for a quick return to the participants. His form includes three items: next steps, by whom, and when (p. 45). **S**trengths: Team members will have in writing who is responsible for taking action on which items and when. **W**eakness: The document will be useless if team members do not get into the habit of using it. **O**pportunity: The time saved on readdressing old issues can be used to tackle newer problems. **T**hreat: The facilitator of the meetings has to be on board with the changes and willing to create a new habit.

Follow-up not only outlines the next steps to be taken. It also recaps the decisions that were made. Gregory (2010) has recommended following up in writing. She points out that while one person may take notes during the meeting, another may not. Written follow-up should include the decisions reached, questions that were raised, and what steps to take moving forward. In addition, the composer should include a request for feedback in order to make the document a collaborative effort (para 12-13). **S**trength: A written document will help individuals to remember what was discussed and decided. **W**eakness: Participants may ignore the summary of the meeting, thus defeating the purpose. **O**pportunity: Making follow-up a collaborative effort will keep the meeting an ongoing dialogue. **T**hreat: Team members have to be held accountable for the information in the follow-up or they may not put the necessary time into absorbing it.

Recommendations

We can reclaim our ineffective meeting time by following a few simple steps. First, meetings must begin at the scheduled time. This practice by itself should begin reducing tardiness, but if it does not, we will need to talk with repeat offenders. Second, leadership must prepare all team members ahead of the meeting. An email including the agenda for the meeting, as well as anticipated information, will reduce the time currently spent on briefing participants in the actual meeting. In addition, ensuring agenda items are relevant to the larger picture will help to cut out unnecessary meeting topics. Finally, the facilitator must send follow-up material to all meeting attendees. The follow-up should include specific decisions that were reached along with next steps to complete by whom and when.

Following these ground rules will help to reduce inefficiency and costs. As mentioned earlier, our department stands to recoup over $7,500 from the supervisor meeting alone. If we apply the same principles to the department's other meetings, the cost savings can multiply exponentially. The money we save department-wide could be used to justify the weekend equipment position we desperately need, along with the 3:00 AM lab technician. I am excited to speak with you about this proposal and eager to see our department become a leader in reforming ineffective meetings system-wide.

References

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