Meetings in Academe: It's Time for an "*EXTREME MEETING MAKEOVER!*"

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Meeting Diagnostic

Before we blast off, it's probably best to do a quick diagnostic so you don't waste your time reading this article or prematurely skip over it. No skipping yet. You all have different experiences chairing and attending meetings of every size, shape, texture, density, girth, and hue.

Please answer the following five questions about MOST of the meetings you have attended:

1. Do they begin and end on time?	YES NO
2. Are they very to extremely productive?	YES NO
3. Do they engage most of the persons present?	YES NO
4. Do they complete all agenda items?	YES NO
5. Are they efficiently run by the chair?	YES NO

If you answered "NO" to two or more of those questions, you might want to stay on board and consider the ingredients in a "*MAKEOVER*." If you answered "YES" to all of them, it's safe to bail, pass Go, and checkout the other articles in this issue.

What's the Problem with Meetings?

Meetings have a bad reputation with faculty. Rarely do you hear a positive word uttered about an upcoming or past meeting. That reputation has metastasized throughout higher education. The primary reason is because meetings can be major time wasters, accomplishing very little, often deteriorating into just another social event, or they may be the omen for bad news announcements, such as more budget cuts, lay-offs, and furloughs. If you're a social butterfly or other insect, you may look forward to meetings; otherwise, you might endure them as one of the vast numbers of clock-watchers, tweeters, texters, day-dreamers, movie-watchers on your iPhone or iPad, chart-completers, grocery-listers, grant-writers, article-writers or readers, or paper-graders. On more than one occasion, I've contemplated that I would prefer to drink paint (semi-gloss) than sit through another meeting. This reputation and the negative images associated with meetings are well-earned. (*SIDEBAR*: Could this abysmal experience be similar to what students have to endure in some of your colleagues' classes? I hope not.)

Why does this happen everywhere? Several CAT-scan studies of meeting participants typically indicate high levels of brain activity at the start of meetings. After five minutes, brain activity and heart rates decelerate rapidly. What happens? Why are the meetings so boring with frequently so little being accomplished as attendees drift toward ComaLand? It's almost as though there was a DNR sign on the meeting room door.

My preliminary diagnosis is: PUTRID LEADERSHIP!! It's the leader or chair who is totally responsible. Although our colleagues who try to conduct meetings are usually well-meaning professionals from law-abiding families with pit bulls surrounded by barbed wire fences, most of them can't run a meeting properly. This behavior is usually not intentional. Failure is not premeditated; chairs do not plan to sabotage their own meetings.

The problem is that most administrators, faculty, and clinicians are simply not trained in meeting management. Where do you find "meeting management" taught in any academic curriculum? Meeting management is a business skill, not an academic one. A rather pervasive attitude is: "After all, how difficult could it be to conduct a meeting? Everybody does it." Chairs don't even give it a second thought, much less a first one. You're probably thinking: "It's as easy as nailing a triple axel or quad (if you're a guy) in the Olympic Figure Skating finals." You follow the Nike® slogan: "Just do it!"

(*PERSONAL SIDEBAR*: About a decade ago, I had the privilege of attending a presentation by Stephen Covey [the "*7 Habits*" guy]. He was invited to Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions to address administration issues for the hospital and university staff, including medical faculty, administrators, and staff. One topic covered was how to conduct meetings. As he described the key elements in managing a meeting, there was a lot of rustling in the audience, especially a high incidence of elbow-in-the-ribs jabbing. It was clear that most of us felt we violated and observed our colleagues violating every rule for proper meeting conduct. EVERY RULE!! That was significant. I learned sooo much that afternoon. *End of Lengthy Sidebar*.) We now resume this article already in progress.

Help Is on the Way

Given this ubiquitous problem with meetings, right now I want you to take your previous experiences in conducting meetings or just enduring them and *purge them from your memory*. Lobotomize them completely. Clinically, this is known as a "radical meetingectomy." Let's begin with a clean slate.

According to experts in business and management, there are right and wrong ways to conduct meetings (Harvard Business School, 2006; Henkel & Lujanac, 2007; Hildreth, 1990; Hindle & Heller, 1999; Lencioni, 2004; Smith, 2000; Streibel, 2002; Parker & Hoffman, 2006). In other words, there are "best practices." (*CODE TEAL SECURITY ALERT*: The principles to guide meetings are not hidden in a high-security, top-secret government installation in Langley, VA. We don't need to hire Jack Bauer of 24 out of retirement to find them, even though he is available since the untimely demise of his counterterrorist program. They have been documented in several books over the past two decades, almost all of which are available as Kindle Editions at Amazon. *End of Teal*.)

If you hop on my rollicking journey through meeting-management world, the time-management benefits will become obvious. Your department doesn't need another putrid leader. There are plenty already hopping around your hallowed hallways. Your institution needs competent leaders who can run meetings effectively and efficiently.

A Baker's Dozen Guidelines: It's *MAKEOVER Time*!

Before you start rollicking or hopping, as a meeting chair, you need to commit to doing your homework. Your preparation for the meeting is the most important determinant of its success. A baker's dozen, bite-sized guidelines are described next for your "*MAKEOVER*." These bites apply to large faculty or clinical meetings as well as small committee meetings. They are expressly designed to increase your meeting productivity. A few of these were also described by Olson (2010) in the context of collegiality. Here is my 30-year academic spin on the "best meeting practices" from the business experts:

1. Hold the Meeting Only If Necessary

If the information can be disseminated or a decision made without a meeting, cancel the meeting. Meet face-to-face only when the administrators, faculty members, and/or clinicians have to discuss an issue or engage in interaction that could not be effectively achieved online. As you are ready to schedule a meeting, think veeery carefully about whether it is absolutely necessary; then think again. Weigh the alternatives.

Given the increasing multigenerational composition of faculty and staff with GenXers and Net Geners added to the Traditionalists and Boomers, seriously consider "virtual" or Skype meetings. The difficulty of gathering everyone together in one location coupled with the "go-to-meeting" or "mobile" technology for teleseminars and webinars is a viable substitute for in-person, face-to-face meetings and easily accessible to more professionals. It takes traditional conference calls and online chats to another level, plus it can save a lot of in-person meeting time.

2. Invite Only Those Who Need to Attend

Try to restrict your "dream team" total to between five and 10 for most committee meetings involving faculty development planning, curriculum, progressions, promotion and tenure, faculty evaluations, clinical evaluations, research teams, grants, and admissions. This is the optimum range for reaching consensus and making decisions. Faculty senate and other super-sized meetings are a bit more difficult to manage, although these same rules apply. Groups larger than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir can impede the process.

3. Schedule Meetings When Most Participants Are Available

Survey faculty (and students') schedules to determine time blocks during which few have classes or other major commitments, such as watching "American Idol" or "Glee." Try to use those times for most meetings during the semester, if possible. This is an effective "NO EXCUSE FOR NOT ATTENDING" strategy.

4. Prepare a Detailed Agenda with Time Slots for Each Item

Provide specific information on each topic and explain how those at the meeting can be prepared to discuss or vote on an issue. Solicit input on the items and topics or issues that participants want to be addressed. Place the most important items in the middle of the agenda to allow attendees to warm up and arrive. Attach any documents referred to in the agenda so they can be read in advance. Allow a reasonable amount of time for each item to streamline the meeting.

5. Distribute the Agenda at Least a Week in Advance of Meeting Time

Send out the agenda to all participants. Tell them to be thoroughly familiar with all of the items and any support documents. If anyone is presenting an item, he or she should be prepared and cognizant of the assigned time limits. Make it clear that you will hold everyone to their respective time limits to keep the meeting on schedule.

6. Start and Stop on Time

Punctuality is extremely important! DO NOT reward faculty or students for coming in late by recapping what they missed. Instead, they should be horsewhipped in a back room after the meeting. I'm kidding, of course. You can use any room you like. If you do not end on time, attendees may be late for their next meetings, classes, or other commitments. It's a matter of respect for everyone present.

7. Enforce the Assigned Times of Each Agenda Item

Appoint a timekeeper, and make every effort to stick to the schedule. This is the most important time-management technique to get through the agenda on time or earlier. *Think of the agenda as a "to-do" list with all A items.* You must get through every item. Everyone has time limits, even you. Model the use of those limits. Use your discretion to cut off or summarize discussion. Stop filibustering-type wind-bags politely, if necessary. If that doesn't work, gag them with the agenda. They really need to be tasered, but don't do it. Try to keep pace with the original time slots. If you did your homework in preparing this meeting, you should be in control.

8. Don't Permit Agenda-Busting

Don't ask for items to be added to the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. The attendees already had input into developing the agenda. They had their chance. If new, important, and/or urgent items pop up at the beginning or arise during the course of the meeting, they should be (a) dealt with appropriately, (b) tabled until the next meeting, or (c) handled by an ad hoc committee, which can be created to examine the items and report its findings at a future meeting. Use your discretion in handling "emergency" items.

9. Try to Engage Everyone in the Meeting

Each faculty member attending the meeting is there for one of two reasons: Either she volunteered because she's interested and wants to be there and contribute OR he is required to attend. Your responsibility here is meeting management. If there is any shy faculty member or student, draw him or her into the discussion. Ask contentious questions. Play devil's advocate. Find ways to get as many faculty involved and contributing. The meeting should be engaging and interactive for everyone. After all, it's their meeting.

You are there to facilitate the proceedings, but don't let any "trouble-makers" pull the focus of the proceedings. Keep your taser visible. Politely request overzealous, time-eating contributors to meet with you and Guido after the meeting in the back room to discuss their concerns. Quell their zeal by asking them to prepare a written brief or position paper to be attached to the agenda item being discussed. Curb their enthusiasm. Stay in control of the "engagement."

10. Attain Closure on Every Item

Every item should end with a decision based on a vote, referred to a standing or ad hoc committee, or tabled until the next meeting. Nothing should be left hanging.

11. Give a 10-Minute Warning before the Meeting Ends

This is the "bell lap" that every racer hears. Use Pavlov's bell if necessary. It snaps everyone to attention and rivets their eyeballs on the remaining agenda items. Everyone shifts into high gear without meds. The last 10 minutes are turbo-charged. The participants know this meeting must end on the button.

As you wrap up the meeting, right before you end, review the specific tasks the participants are responsible for completing before the next meeting. Make sure everyone is clear on their follow-up job. You might want to send out reminders later after the meeting.

12. Prepare the Minutes and Executive Summary Immediately after Adjournment

Write up the detailed minutes of the meeting and also a one-page executive summary (if appropriate) of the decisions made on every agenda item. The minutes document "what was done" and "who does what next" by a given date; the executive summary simply lists the decisions reached for all items and provides a quick read for those interested who attended the meeting and who did not.

13. Disseminate the Minutes and Executive Summary

Send out both documents as drafts to all participants. While the meeting's actions are fresh in their minds, request their input on additions, omissions, and corrections to the minutes and summary with a clear deadline. After changes are made, send out a final version. Make sure to follow up on the tasks that need to be completed with the faculty and students who were responsible. These tasks should cover all actions taken at the meeting.

Epilogue

If this list raises your consciousness level the next time you plan, conduct, or walk into a meeting, it will be a win-win for you and the participants. If you attend, but do not chair any meetings right now, consider sharing the preceding list with any perpetrator who violates those rules. What do you have to lose?

Further, if you know of students who are having the same problems conducting meetings as your chairs, directors, deans, and faculty, refer them to my student version of meeting hints and protocol (Berk, 2009). Student leaders can benefit from these pointers early in their meeting life and careers to break the meeting mold and help them avert later problems, such as the ones we've encountered. Hopefully, they can contribute to a new and improved generation of meeting chairs.

Finally, meetings should not be perceived as a waste of time, a dreaded appointment in your "to-do" list, or a death walk. They can be opportunities to accomplish meaningful tasks with a positive team-building spirit. If you make the changes recommended in this article, your meetings may even inspire, challenge, and unpack and resolve problems so that everyone grows from the experience of tackling the agenda items together.

"HAPPY MEETINGS, COLLEAGUES!"

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