MEETING MANAGEMENT:
LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE!

By Greg Giesen

I teach meeting management courses, have read most (if not all) the books on the topic, I facilitate meetings for clients on countless occasions and even play the role of critical evaluator for client meetings (sometimes whether they want it or not). Now, if I can say I'm from out of town, doesn't this make me an expert on meeting management?

Okay, maybe not, but I do think it's time for a reality check on the topic. I may not be a big stickler for formality in meetings, but I do believe that meetings need to provide a purpose and serve as an effective tool in meeting that purpose. Unfortunately, I'm finding that purposeful, well-run meetings are quickly becoming the exception to the rule in organizations today. Allow me to unfairly generalize (again) for a moment here. I see leaders (untrained in facilitation skills) leading (not facilitating) their meetings and never asking for feedback on their meetings. I also see meeting participants looking like zombies during the meetings yet suddenly finding the energy to complain about the meetings after the meetings. The worst part is, I'm seeing very little being done to change any of this.

Why do we allow unproductive meetings to go on in our organizations anyway?
Probably the biggest reason is ignorance. That's right. Meeting leaders are assuming their meetings are working just fine, particularly since no one is complaining directly to them about the meetings. The meeting participants, on the other hand, tend to believe that it is not their place to criticize how a meeting is being run, especially if it's their leader's meeting. Hence, unproductive meetings can easily become a way of life in a given organization.

Here are some other reasons as to why we allow unproductive meetings:

1) *In the scheme of things, meeting management issues are not a top priority for most people, let alone a perceived responsibility.*
2) *There is an advantage to a known entity (be it dysfunctional) over an unknown entity. At least meeting participants know what to expect and can bring in work to do during the real dysfunctional parts.*
3) *No one is quite sure what a productive meeting looks like.*

Given the reality of the situation, I've come to the conclusion that we can narrow all this *Meeting Management 101* criteria down to just three critical components that are a must for meetings. That's all, just three! In fact, just doing the first component could make all the difference in the world in meetings everywhere. So, I beg of you, please, please incorporate these into your organization, your culture and most importantly, into your meetings from now on. The future of meetings greatly depend upon it.

1.   The Meeting Evaluation

Dare I say the most important first step? You need to evaluate your meetings and on a regular basis! And guess what? This doesn't happen very often, yet this one factor alone could turn an ineffective meeting into an effective meeting. Here are a few suggestions on how to do this: First, add an agenda item (you do have an agenda, don't you?) for the end of your meeting called, *Meeting Evaluation*. Once you get to this agenda item, briefly discuss these three questions:

> 1. *What did we do that was effective in this meeting?*
> 2. *What did we do that was ineffective in this meeting?*
> 3. *What are two or three suggestions to improve our next meeting?*

A second method is to invite someone from the organization who is not directly involved with your meeting to the meeting for the purpose of providing the participants with his/her assessment of the meeting, again at the end of the meeting. Did you notice that I used "meeting" four times in that last sentence? Ouch! Anyways, it is pretty powerful to hear a meeting evaluation from an impartial colleague. And let's not forget about the option of passing out an evaluation form at the end of the meeting. Personally, I think we should get meeting participants into the habit of verbalizing their feedback instead of writing it down. This creates more shared accountability of the meeting, increases awareness of meeting dynamics and tends to be more powerful, just-in-time, feedback. Regardless how you choose to do this, just do it!

2.   Setting the Stage

The second most important component of any meeting is the Opening. Like a good speech, the Opening sets the stage. It provides the focus, the parameters and the intended outcome, all up front and at the beginning. Absolutely critical! I can't begin to tell you how many meeting participants go to meetings unsure of what the purpose of these meetings are, let alone why they were asked to attend.

The person calling the meeting does have the primary responsibility to ensure that each meeting is opened properly. In cases where there is a separate facilitator, then he/she assumes that role. Either way, it needs to happen. Here are some of the things usually addressed in an Opening:

- Purpose of the meeting
- Role of the meeting facilitator and/or leader in the meeting
- Role and expectations of meeting participants
- Meeting goals and outcomes
- Meeting timeframes
- Meeting norms and expectations
- Meeting agenda/topics

A poor Opening will set the stage for a poor meeting. Take the time to open your meetings with the suggestions above and you will notice immediate improvements.

3.   Group Dynamics

The group dynamics of a meeting can directly impede or enhance a meeting and even impact the outcome. When I talk about group dynamics, I am talking about HOW the group works together to accomplish the given task, as opposed to the task itself. Here are some examples of group dynamics that can disrupt meetings:

- Sara sits in the back of the room during the meeting reading reports
- Paul's cell phone continually goes off during the meeting
- Terry cuts people off every time he want to dispute what is being said
- Angie strolls in about 15 minutes late for each meeting
- Jim allows Harry to completely dominate his meetings
- Paula shuts down when she doesn't get her way and refuses to participate

I have found that the *group dynamics* component is probably the least addressed in meetings today. In my opinion, this is partly due to a leader/facilitator's uneasiness in addressing interpersonal issues plus a general lack in facilitation skills. Of course the meeting participants are not off the hook here either. They are as responsible for the dynamics of their meetings as is the leader/facilitator.

Probably the easiest way to create productive meeting behaviors, while eliminating dysfunctional ones, is through the establishment of behavioral norms for meetings. These are essentially group expectations on HOW the group needs to work together during the meetings. A code of conduct, if you will. Here's an example of a meeting norm:

"All participants must come prepared and be on time to meetings."

Norms provide the necessary framework for the meetings that enable participants to focus their attention more on the tasks at hand and less on *who is doing what to whom* in the meeting. Norms also provide a justification for holding the group accountable to the agreed upon rules of engagement. As one meeting participant said to me once, *"I am much more inclined to remind my group of a norm we are not following now since we all agreed to do that in the first place with each other."*

In summary

I do realize that there is more to having effective meetings that just the three components I've identified in this article. However, I also believe that these three components are by far the most important factors in establishing an environment for productive meetings. Once in place, I encourage each organization to further enhance

their meetings with additional *Meeting Management 101* enhancements. Until then, happy meetings!

Greg Giesen is a professional speaker, management and leadership coach, facilitator of the award winning program, Leading From Within, radio talk show producer and host, and the author of, *Mondays At 3: A Story for Managers Learning to Lead.* Go to www.TheLaughingLeader.com for more information.