



## Getting Unproductive Meetings Under Control

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It seems like more and more things these days are out of control. Gas prices, healthcare costs, global warming, and unproductive meetings. Unproductive meetings? How can I possibly equate unproductive meetings with healthcare costs, you ask? Well, think about the amount of time

managers and employees spend in meetings. According to a 2005 article in *The Ayers Report*, some 25 million meetings take place in corporate America daily. Roughly half that time is wasted. If you think about the average hourly wage, including benefits, of the people in those meetings, the length of the meeting, and the time wasted, that becomes an extremely alarming figure.

So what is the basic problem with meetings? Take a moment and write down three of your biggest frustrations with meetings that you attend. Now, compare them with the Seven Deadly Sins of Meetings according to *Leadership IQ*, 2007:

1. **Treating meetings as free.** At your next meeting, add up the hourly salaries that are present in the room and multiply times the length of the meeting. At the end of the meeting, ask the group if the time invested was worth the money spent (including doughnuts)? If the answer is no, begin to investigate how to achieve a better ROI.
2. **Confusing activity with achievement.** When meetings participants were asked "Did this meeting accomplish its objective?" the most common answer was "I have no idea." Be sure that all meetings have a clear statement of achievement that is clearly communicated to everyone attending. "As a result of this meeting, we will \_\_\_\_\_." "We will accomplish this by \_\_\_\_\_." If you can't answer this, you can't meet. At the end of the meeting, ask the question again. Structure the meeting with the objective in mind. Be certain that all participants understand what the meeting is for and what is expected of them in the meeting. Without clear roles defined, it's Blackberry time!
3. **Winging it.** 60% of meetings have agendas. 90% of those agendas do not provide enough information to allow attendees to adequately prepare for the meeting. Remember the 5 P's: proper preparation prevents poor performance. Let meeting participants know the questions that will be discussed, what they need to bring, what they need to read, and the decisions that will be made along with the process for making them. These should be clearly outlined in the agenda and distributed at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting and sooner where feasible.
4. **Poor prioritizing.** Only 5% of senior executives say that their meetings focus on the most important issues. A common complaint I hear from managers is that meetings are simply status reports that could easily be accomplished via e-mail or the company intranet. Author Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, suggests doing "lightening rounds" where each person gets 60 seconds to give a brief status of his/her action items along with a color of red, yellow or green. Red means that the task/action is in serious jeopardy of being completed and there are problems that need immediate attention. Yellow means that there are some issues and progress is still being made. Green means that all is well. After the lightening round (approximately 5-10 minutes depending on team size), the team spends the majority of its time discussing first the red light issues and then yellow. Never let things that matter least come before things that matter most. Another tip is to schedule your most important items earlier on the agenda when the productive and creative energy of the group is highest. Usually such items should be the second or third item to discuss. Also, allow enough time for those items that require healthy group discussion and participation. If there are 7 people in a meeting and you need to really hash out an issue, allowing 10 minutes on the agenda is setting yourself up for failure.
5. **Inviting the wrong people.** 99% of managers and executives say they have been invited to, and participated in, a meeting to which they could contribute nothing. Be sure that every person understands why they have been invited and what they are expected to contribute. If key people are not able to attend, reschedule the meeting. In preparing for a meeting, remember that the most effective size is 5-7 people. Prioritize who needs to be there, keeping the meeting to a reasonable size to effectively manage group dynamics.
6. **Minutes vs. Decisions.** Minutes are a testament to our activity. Decisions are a testament to our achievements.

Can you remember the last time you really made a sincere effort to read every paragraph of five pages worth of meeting minutes? Keep the minutes short, concise, and bulleted so they are easy to absorb. Be sure that decisions are clearly highlighted separately with a listing of the topic, the decision made and who said they would do what by when. Accountability demands clarity. Refer back to these decisions often and follow up on them at the next meeting.

7. **Failing to Improve.** I wonder how many of your organizations have the “weekly staff meeting.” And how many of those meetings are held whether there is anything to discuss or not? Why? Because it’s the weekly meeting, of course. According to Leadership IQ research, only 5% of meetings involve a formal review of the effectiveness of that meeting. What would happen if you would ask three simple questions at the end of your meeting: How well did we accomplish our objectives? What is one thing you would like to see more of in this meeting? What is one thing you would like to see less of to make the meetings more productive? What we pay attention to gets done!

I have two other sins that negatively impact meeting performance. They are not starting and ending on time and allowing negative behaviors (reading e-mails, one person dominating, getting off track, etc.) to derail the process. A key culprit for not starting meetings on time is scheduling back-to-back-to-back meetings. Make it a priority in your organization to make it mandatory that there be 15 minute intervals between meetings. When you can’t avoid a back-to-back meeting, be sure to leave one early or communicate to the next meeting that you will be a few minutes late and why. Never wait for people to arrive before starting a meeting. You reward the people who are late and disrespect the people who are on time. Define expectations regarding what meeting behaviors are acceptable and what are not. Hold people accountable. When I’m facilitating meetings, I ask the participants: Tell me about the worst participant behavior and the worst leader behavior you have ever seen in a meeting. After brainstorming the list, I say, “Ok, I won’t do this (pointing to bad leader behaviors) if you’ll agree not to do this (negative participant behaviors)”. It usually solicits laughter and gets the point across. If we can’t engage in open conversation in our meetings, what is the point of being there?

One person can make a difference. I know I’m one small voice in the fight against global warming however I know my voice can be heard much more clearly and loudly when I’m making suggestions on how to improve meetings with my organizations. Start today. Identify an unproductive meeting sin and let your voice be heard!