The 7 Deadly Sins of Meetings

Meetings are where you're seen in action which is why great leaders who run mediocre meetings tend to have worse reputations than lousy leaders who run great meetings. **7 things go wrong in meetings:** 1) treating meetings as free, 2) confusing activity with achievement, 3) winging it, 4) poor prioritizing, 5) inviting the wrong people, 6) minutes vs. decisions, 7) failing to improve.

Meetings aren't free. Calculate the number of people in the meeting, the average hourly wage and the length of the meeting to find the cost. We don't think meetings cost because the direct cost doesn't show up in our budget. We asked a study group two questions: Was this meeting worth the money? (75% said "No") and "If you were paying a consultant this money from your budget, would you have been better prepared and made better use of their time? (92% said "Yes). **Discourage tardiness** by putting a penalty on being late (e.g. Broadway show seating procedure; at some CEO meetings, the last person to arrive pays for dinner).

Don't confuse activity with achievement. 90%+ of meetings fail to produce an identifiable achievement. When meeting participants were asked *"Did this meeting accomplish its original objective?"* the most common answer was "I have no idea." **A Statement of Achievement** requires answering: *As a result of this meeting, participants will _____. We will accomplish this by/through _____.* Once these two objectives are accomplished, end the meeting (even if your calendaring system allots the meeting 60 minutes!) Ending when you're done saves up to 17 minutes per meeting. Learn the one question that instantly improves accountability in meetings here.

A **long meeting agenda** is a courtesy and not an imposition on meeting participants. Agendas should clearly identify: 1) the meeting topic, 2) why this topic is on the agenda, 3) what the meeting hopes to accomplish, 4) how participants should prepare. **Maintain the flow** of the meeting by discussing critical topics first when team energy is high and the focus is sharp.

5-8 people on a team is optimal for creative thinking and healthy group dynamics. Use the **Two Pizza Rule** to keep your core team at the right size. Good people can go behaviorally bad in meetings (**The Comic, The Worrier, The Critic, The Mimic and The Bully**). Often, bad behavior results from a lack of meeting structure or focus or when these folks don't belong in the meeting (boredom). Learn how to control loudmouths in meetings here. Also, learn 3 tips for keeping your cool in tough meetings.

Three key phrases to use in meetings **when bad behaviors start to emerge**: *"Let's focus on what we can control," "Let's stay focused on our agenda and put all other issues in the parking lot,"* and *"I want to hear from every individual in this room."* Once you have a robust and clear agenda, you'll be able to **identify who can, and cannot, add value to your meeting.** For each participant always ask…*What special insight or power does this person have that I need to succeed?* and *Is this meeting the best way to access that insight or power?*

There are **four basic decision-making models**: **Power-based:** "I'm the boss, I'll decide" (or Curious Captain: "I'll consider your input, but as the boss, I still decide" **Rights-based:** "Let's let a third party

outside expert (the boss, a book, an answer key) decide," **Interest-based:** "I'll meet you half way" (includes consensus or bargaining), **Relational:** "I don't want to get into a fight so I will just let you have it your way." Define the model you are using up front and stay committed to the established rules. Read When Trying To Reach Consensus Makes People Angry.

Blind test decisions (e.g. deadlines/assignments) at the end of every meeting to ensure all team members are on the same page (everyone individually writes down what was decided, this is especially important with high-stake decisions).
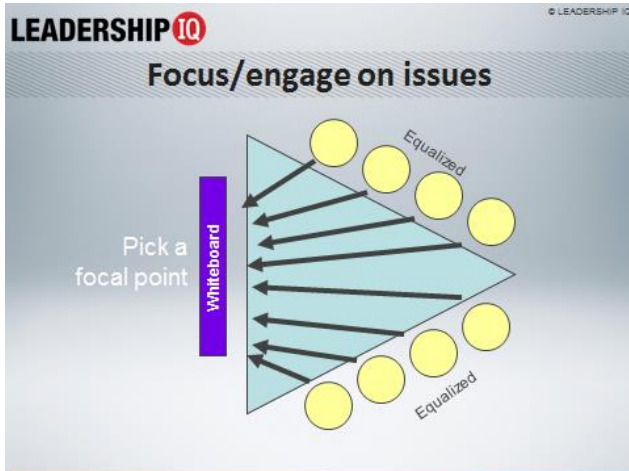
Staring across the table at each other polarizes people and splits them into teams. **Equalize the room** by picking a focal point, a central issue presented on a SMART Board, whiteboard or flip chart, instead of everyone squaring off across the table.

Use the **Nominal Group Technique** where everyone writes down their individual ideas (e.g. "should we raise our prices?") and passes them up to a leader to sort and share.

Encourage **idea sharing** by asking: *How would you answer someone who asked about the other ideas we considered but didn't choose*? (Lets you know how bought in folks are), *Are there any circumstances under which our current decision won't work?, <To each member> Pat, if you could create a solution from scratch, would this be it?* The more **choices** under consideration (always give more than two), the less likely you are to have polarized "camps" and contentious/personal conflict.

Occasional use of **No Homework Teams** (finish the work together during the meeting) put more focus on a collective generation of ideas. Learn 6 of the biggest meetings gripes (and how to fix them) here.

A Decision Grid (instead of minutes) ends every meeting by asking the team: What are you personally going to achieve and by when? Making the results transparent encourages accountability (peer pressure). **Improve meetings with three end of meeting assessment questions #1: "How well did we meet our Statement of Achievement?"** Ask as an open-ended question or numerically scaled. If feedback is negative, rethink the reasons you are having meetings and how well you are focusing meetings on selected objectives. **#2: "What's one thing you'd like to see more of?"** The flipside is: What's one thing you'd like to see less of? These two questions will really get people talking and involved. **# 3: "What's your takeaway?"** This can be part of your Decision Grid or it can be a separate item, but make sure that everybody is clearly articulating: "Here's what I'm responsible for."

Summary: Streamline meetings so they are value-added forums for making better, smarter decisions. Have definable objectives and clear agendas so people show up focused, engaged and prepared for meetings. Prioritize meetings effectively and get the right people in the room. Put a mechanism in place for tracking what was decided on and build in some accountability and responsibility.

Tip: Check out http://www.idearatingsheets.org/ (formerly dotmocracy.org) for free ways to make group decision making faster, easier and smarter.

Follow Mark is a regular contributor to Forbes.com. Follow him here.