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Make Your Meetings More Meaningful

Escape from meetings hell – your team will thank you.

By Libby Gill

Meetings in many organizations have unhealthy hidden agendas, unhealthy conflict and competition, and a rush to action without appropriate dialog. It's every person for themselves, with those who speak the loudest all too often getting their way while the rest feel like they weren't heard. Participants leave these meetings depressed, angry, or worse, and their mood spreads throughout the organization.

I hear a lot about how we need to eliminate meetings in the workplace because they are tagged as "unproductive." Perhaps there are some meetings that are without redeeming value, but rather than outlaw them, what if you found ways to make at least some of them more engaging, interesting and helpful to build the relationships that make your workplace thrive?

What we really need is to have meetings that allow relationships to deepen, where participants help each other to grow and succeed together. These meetings would have listening and respect for all viewpoints as priorities, allowing the best ideas for the greater good of the organization to come forward.

Meetings have the potential to be productive if we're willing to shift our ideas to a broader definition of productivity. In addition to actionable items, a good meeting could increase trust among the participants, thereby promoting deeper relationships and more post-meeting connections and engagement.

These goals take more effort than simply having an agenda and wanting outcomes (although these are also important!). With some planning, you can have better meetings. Consider these ideas for starters:

- **Be clear about your intentions.** If your intent is to build relationships, cultivate participation, as well as come out with some actionable items, make sure you are clear about this. Consider letting participants know your intent so that you are all pulling together in the same direction.

- **Consider the space you meet in.** You don't always have a chance to choose where you'll meet, but meeting space is more important than you might think. Building relationships is easier in a more relaxed area, someplace where participants can relax and "let their hair down." Outside windows, comfortable chairs, and a round (not rectangular) table — or no table at all — are optional, but they all contribute to making the space informal enough for great conversations and building relationships.
- **Set explicit guidelines based on your intentions.** You might want these ground rules: laptops and devices to be turned off, attentive listening and respect for everyone's ideas. It only takes a minute or two to ask for agreement and any additions to your meeting guidelines.
- **Start with a personal question.** Start the meeting with a personal question that each person in the room can answer briefly. Even if the people in the room work closely together, you can ask a question that nobody else knows the answer to — thus providing new information for post-meeting conversations among the participants. They may find they have more in common than they thought. Some examples of questions might include, "What are you committed to?"; "What gives you joy?"; "What are your greatest strengths"; or "What new thing have you always wanted to learn?"
- **Make it interactive.** It takes a strong, courageous leader to allow others to do the talking. Let meeting participants know that you are changing the way you show up at meetings from a presenter to a facilitator of conversation. Sure, you'll still have to do some steering, but shoot for 80% of your time listening and 20% of your time talking. You can do this assigning agenda items to others and by asking some well-placed questions at the meeting to stimulate dialog.
- **Use smaller discussion groups.** If conversation seems stifled, you can pose a question for people to discuss in smaller groups — dyads or triads. This is often a more comfortable way for people to speak up. Give them a few minutes to discuss and then have a whole group conversation about what they discussed in the smaller groups.

Relationships are the bedrock of healthy, successful organizations. Why not use meetings as one way to build the connections between employees?

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