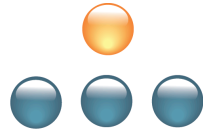Manager Tools

Effective Meetings Starter Model

[Blog Post]

This cast describes an even more basic model for effective meetings than in our original guidance.

[Cast]

We all go to lots of meetings, and most of them are terrible. They start late, they don't have an agenda, they get off track, they waste time. They finish late, but you can't leave early even if you have another meeting. Why is it that a meeting leader gets to stare daggers at someone who leaves when the meeting's supposed to be over, even though she didn't have a plan, didn't structure the time, and didn't cut off the same two people who like to bloviate?

And yet, even though many professionals beg us to solve their meeting purgatory, when we ask them, many of you say, *I haven't done the whole effective meetings thing, either.* We've been thinking about why, and asking folks why they haven't. A lot of you have been telling us that there's too much on the list.

So, we've shortened the list for all those of you who think that our previous prescription was too much to ask. But after this, you're on your own. ;-)

1. First, a Reprise of The Original Guidance
2. Start On Time
3. Announce a Rough Equal Agenda
4. Fix Responsibilities
5. Finish On Time

1. First, a Reprise of The <u>Original Guidance</u>. We're going back over this guidance for two reasons. First, a potential client asked us recently, *Hey, I'm a big fan, I've listened to all your shows, when are you going to do something on performance reviews?* We remember thinking, uhhhh, really? You've listened to all of them, but you missed the four in a row we did on reviews, in incredible detail, to say nothing of the one on how to prepare for your own review? That reminded us that a lot of folks have only heard some of our guidance, for whatever reason, so maybe they don't even know we've talked about meetings before. Second, we all go to so many meetings, when we look at our meeting guidance with fresh eyes, we still think it's pretty darn good.
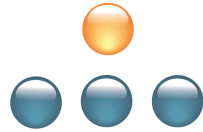
So, for those of you who haven't heard it, or have forgotten it, or just need a reminder, here are the ten recommendations:

- **Pre-publish An Agenda –** Let everyone know in advance what the schedule is. And, an agenda isn't just a list of the stuff you want to talk about. It includes start times for every item you're going to discuss. The biggest mistake managers make that we see with agendas is having a list, without allotting specific times to each item. When you have it all figured out, send it out to everyone coming.

- **Start On Time.** Why can't we seem to get this right? Everyone wants to, but no one does. [Maybe start times and diets are related in the cosmos, in some way? ;-)] It's really pretty darn easy to do it, too: just start. After a meeting or two, everyone will realize that you're going to, and guess what? *They'll show up early after that.*

- **Set Some Ground Rules.** There are some basic rules that everyone knows makes for smooth meetings. Or, conversely, at least everyone knows what they want to avoid. And, to make the rules you set more likely to be followed, ask for input on them from the group. It's a risk, but it usually works fine. If you're facilitating a meeting of your own team, it will go great.

- **Stick To Your Agenda.** Don't allow someone to bring up a point that isn't on the agenda. If you're supposed to be talking about X, then politely insist on *only* talking about X. If someone brings something else up, politely interrupt and tell them they're off topic. *Everyone hates rabbit trails, and the meeting leaders who allow them to happen.*

- **Use a Parking Lot.** A great way to handle rabbit trails or long-windedness or off-topic discussions. Set up a Parking Lot, where you put all topics, issues and ideas that aren't on the agenda. If you're talking strategy, and someone brings up budget, for instance, intervene and say, *hey, sorry, we're talking strategy. I'll write down budget in the parking lot, and we'll cover that then.* Then, at the end of each meeting, have 5 minutes dedicated to covering stuff in the Parking Lot.

- **Fix Responsibilities.** This is Mark's favorite, because of how beautifully it works. More on this one in a moment.
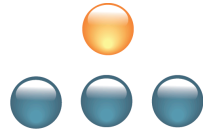
- **Finish On Time.** More on this one, too, in a moment. But if you start on time and manage the time in between, it's logical – *and courteous* – to finish on time. It's amazingly easy to do, too.

- **Publish Notes.** Yes, this means taking notes during the meeting. But note we don't call them minutes. Minutes are *very hard* to take – lots of details that are frankly unnecessary. Notes, on the other hand, are simple: what was decided, and who said they'd do what, and by when? Get them out fast, and attendees will offer to take them for you.

- **Continuously Improve.** Periodically, revisit what you're doing. Are agendas accurate and being followed? Are our ground rules appropriate? Do we have the right people here? Do we even need this meeting?

- **Use a Facilitator.** If you're a manager, this is a great tool. Have someone else run the meeting logistically: starting, timing, cutting people off, notes, follow-up. This frees you up to contribute to, rather than just run, your own meeting. You'll definitely see your directs more clearly.

We don't think all that's too much too ask. It will take a few meetings to get right. But does anyone really want to argue that taking a few meetings to get better isn't worth it?

But, some of you want it to be even easier than that. So here are some actions you can take, some abbreviated further, that will STILL make your meetings better than everyone else's. After all, in the land of the blind, the one-eyed manager is CEO.

2. Start On Time. To heck with sending out an agenda. Seriously. (Okay, not seriously, but for this stripped down guidance anyway). Lots of managers we talk to haven't implemented lots of this standard meeting guidance because they don't know how to create an agenda, or they don't want to go through the process of thinking what items will take what amount of time, or they're afraid they'll be wrong. And, we respect that.

But it saddens us that all the other parts of running effective meetings are being ignored because planning an agenda seems to be so hard. So we encourage you to try skipping it. And that means getting right to the meeting.

Lest there be any confusion, let us be clear about what we mean. If your meeting is scheduled to start at 10 am, be in the room at 10 am and say to whomever is already there, *Okay, we're starting.*
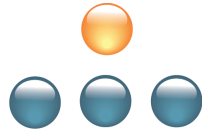
This is all it takes to start your meetings on time. ***And it is probably the single greatest improvement you can make with virtually no preparation, or insight, or knowledge.*** Your directs will *immediately* notice. They will immediately start *thinking about* being on time, and will soon start *being* on time if you do it 2-3-4 times in a row.

Some related points to starting on time:

- **Do this *even if no one is in the room.*** This is so important. Once we start asking for time on people's calendars, and holding folks accountable for their time and work, a meeting passes from not really existing to a measurable business process. A meeting is NOT just more than one person in a room if we've scheduled it. (We heard the "it's not a meeting if I'm the only one in the room" once, and we were briefly stunned to silence.) Frankly, we've seen it happen a lot that when you're in a meeting room, and you say, "okay, we're starting", folks within earshot then RUSH to the room.   And they often tell others, *hey, wow, the meetings is starting!*

- **It helps to be early.** If you're there 1-2-5 minutes before the start time, others will start to realize you're serious about starting on time.

- **Ignore naysayers.** There are going to be those who grumble. You can just ignore them with Mark's phrase, *Yes, well,* or you can address their specific concerns. It doesn't really matter – all the talk is much less important than your action – starting on time. Seriously – how long are you willing to listen tot, or worse, debate with, someone who complains that your meetings start on time? Is their next complaint that customers are served well, or that we deliver products on time, or we honor commitments?

  - *I have other meetings that go right to the top of the hour.* Okay, well, you can choose to leave that meeting early, or you can be late to this one. But we won't wait on you.

  - *Is this a new standard?* Yes. We're going to start on time.

  - *If YOU'RE late by 10 minutes, and we're on time, can we assume the meeting's cancelled?* Yes, if you like. I'll apologize for being late, and probably reschedule it. And, it's more likely that I'll send a message apologizing that I'm going to be late and ask
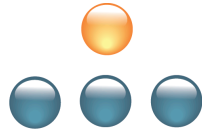
everyone to accept a 15 minute later start time. We'll start THEN on time.

- ○   *What if I know I'm going to be late and just can't make it?* Just send me a note letting me know. I know how stuff comes up. And, it's safe to say that we're going to start without you.

- **Assign a facilitator for when you're late.** This is more advanced than we need to be here, but have someone always ready to start the meeting in the event of your absence.

You might ask, why are people late? The easy answer is that they're not, because you haven't started on time. They don't think they're late if they walk in at 10:04 and the meeting hasn't started. *How can I be late to something that hasn't started?* [We recognize that we are a bit iconoclastic here, in much the same way that we believe that others don't interrupt us when we're at our desks, they just give us the opportunity to interrupt ourselves by looking up and saying, "yes?"] Further answers include there's no penalty for being late and there's lots of benefits to being late. Attendees the professional world over have done the professional and personal calculus and determined it makes more sense to be late, frankly. There are those who think not only that showing up late suggests you're important, but that showing up early (which is to say on time in today's world) suggests that you're completely unimportant. All this is terribly inefficient, but it's real, and we might as well recognize it as such.

3. Announce a Rough Equal Agenda. We get a lot of push back about agendas. A big one is that they're hard to create, having to think through how much time should be spent on each item, whether this item *should* get 10 minutes and this one *should* get 15, or do I think I can *finish in that amount of time, what if I'm wrong, I don't know what the usual standards are, etc.*

The way to really address this for future meetings is to get in the habit of creating agendas, and learning what works and what doesn't work regarding setting times for various items. We regularly tell managers, *there isn't a book somewhere.* What you do is practice at it, and get better. There is, however, such a fear of being wrong, that no one seems to be willing to *try something new.*

But this cast is about an easier way to get to that, and here it is. For whatever is on your list of topics, divide them up equally over the time you've got for the meeting. So, if you've got 4 topics you want to cover, and your meeting is an hour, give them each 15 minutes. Now, that leaves no time for a parking lot, or for admin at the beginning, we know. But for now, that's the way to start.
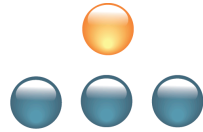
The point here is that you don't have to sit down and create the agenda in advance, and you don't have to think about it, and you don't have to announce it. **You just say** *this is our agenda at the start of the meeting.*

You then run the meeting with that agenda in mind. When your first 15 minutes are up, using this example, you close out that agenda item. It could be that you're done, or not. If you're not done, *you will be amazed at how often people will attempt to become done* when you announce you have to move on. And, as a general rule, you don't go over except in the case where you really believe 1-2-3 more minutes will finally get you to where you need to be. If it's just a briefing, you can probably wrap it up quickly – if you're not talking, just tell the other person time's up. If it's a decision or planning being done, you use our next tip to make sure you capture what's going on. Maybe the first few times some people who talk a lot will want to continue in a later meeting, but after 2-3 sessions like this, they'll learn that it doesn't pay to go long, the way they used to because you ran less than efficient meetings.

4. Fix Responsibilities. When you finish an agenda item, you need to be sure that the right things are captured/decided upon before you move on to the next item. *You need to close out each agenda item.* This way, you don't send a message of *oh, we'll just continue to talk about this next week, and everyone can avoid deliverables and actions and responsibility.*

How? Simple. You say, *okay, let's wrap up this item. Who's responsible for doing what by when?* And, you review the item. If it's just a briefing, you can either just say thanks, or you can ask the briefer, *what actions are we supposed to be taking? Who's on the hook for what? Are there actions?*

If the agenda item was designed to deliver a decision, make one, or ask for input. If you don't want to, make your decision an action item. *Okay, I'm on the hook to decide are we using A or B vendor, I have to have that done by Friday 10 am, I'll send a mail to everyone and we can reach out to both and start planning with the one we choose. Done.*

But the key here is, *assign the work,* **and make sure the person to whom you're assigning the work verbally agrees to the work they're on the hook for.** There' a big difference between saying, Bob's going to do X, and asking, *Okay, Bob, you're going to do X by Tuesday noon,* **RIGHT?** You must get verbal assent! We can't tell you how many meetings we've been in where it was mostly clear that one person was responsible for something, but as we watched, it sure seemed like that one person was laying low and hoping to have an out later. *Oh, you mean that was assigned to me? I don't remember it that way, but if that's what you're saying, I guess I can do my best….* Hogwash. They knew, and they were using the lack
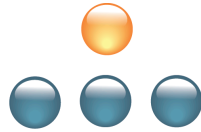
of crispness in the meeting to avoid having a deliverable. And that's your job to stop…and this is the way to do it. Each agenda item, each time you change items. Close it out by fixing responsibilities.

5. Finish On Time. This one is our most fun, and in a way the easiest to do. Finishing a meeting is probably even easier to do than starting on time, because you're already there.

To finish a meeting on time, all you have to do is ***stand up and say, okay, time's up, we're done.*** Now, it would be pleasant for you to say, hey, we're ending in 2 minutes to someone who is speaking. And we're not saying that this isn't a bit abrupt. It is, the first time or two until everyone figures out that you really intend to start on time, and finish on time, and have rough agendas at least, and fix responsibilities.

That's all you have to do to end the meeting. Stand up and end it. The first time might surprise, ***but it will also absolutely create different behaviors going forward, which is the whole point.***

Wrap Up

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Like it or not, you're going to spend a lot of time in meetings. Maybe you can't control others' meetings, but you can make yours work, and it's not that hard. If you can't do it all, choose these four – ***four! –*** prescriptions and make your meetings the ones folks want to come to. If this is too hard for you, think about getting out of management…or, stop complaining about meetings, because you're part of the problem.