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7 Habits of Highly Effective Meetings

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Meetings are a powerful tool that are widely misunderstood. Like many professionals, I have read and enjoyed many Dilbert comics that point out the pain and frustration of poorly run meetings. In fact, I've been in my share of disappointment meetings. I'll share a short example with you and data showing that just how widespread bad meetings have

become. Finally, I will cover the seven habits – the most powerful meeting tips I have used – that will set you up for success.

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The Meeting That Never Ended

It was a Friday afternoon in the fall several years ago and I had a meeting scheduled. There were two other people in the meeting who did much of the talking. After about twenty minutes, it felt like the meeting was going in circles. After the sixty minute mark, I became frustrated and simply wanted the meeting to end. Unfortunately, the other participants simply continued to talk past the meeting's stated end time. The worst part? The meeting did not achieve anything particularly significant.

Sleeping, Waste and More: The Plague of Dysfunctional Meetings

Many people share my frustration with meetings. Consider the following observations about the plague of ineffective meetings in the modern workplace:

- The typical American professional attends over 60 meetings per month (Source: A network MCI Conferencing White Paper. *Meetings in America: A study of trends, costs and attitudes toward business travel, teleconferencing, and their impact on productivity* (Greenwich, CT: INFOCOMM, 1998)
- Approximately 50% of meeting time is wasted (same source as above)
- 39% of people attending meetings doze off during the meeting (source: [CBS News](#)).

Wow! Whether you are organizing meetings or simply attending them, you owe it to yourself to become more effective at this professional skill. Just imagine the gains you will achieve if you become 1% or 5% better at meetings over time.

7 Habits For Highly Effective Meetings

“A meeting consists of a group of people who have little to say – until after the meeting.” — P.K. Shaw

Some readers may consider these habits basic. I encourage you to ask yourself if you are actually applying these ideas to each and every meeting you attend. If not, you have room to improve. Implementing these habits is a great way to improve your effectiveness fast. If you maintain all of these habits, you will learn that meetings are an effective tool to get work done.

1. Obtain Written Agenda In Advance

Vague intentions to have a discussion on a topic rarely end on a productive note. If you are just getting started with agendas, start with a point form list of topics to be discussed and make sure that material is provided to attendees at least one day before the meeting. For better results, provide background information on the agenda so that everyone attending has the same information.

What about when you are asked to attend a meeting without an agenda? Ask, “Can you please send me an agenda for the meeting so that I can prepare?”

Tip: For frequently held meetings such as a weekly status meeting on a project, you can save time by creating a meeting template. Once you have that in place, preparing an agenda becomes a matter of filling in the blanks.

2. Review The Attendee List

The people in the meeting room make or break your effectiveness. I have been in MANY meetings where the key person – a manager or executive – is not present. As a result, no significant decisions can be made.

For Meeting Organizers: limit the number of people attending the meeting. The purpose of meetings is to make decisions and get work done. For the most part, meetings are not the best way to simply share information (exception: meetings are helpful to share sensitive information)

For Meeting Attendees: read the attendee list before you walk into the room. Do you see any unfamiliar names? If so, consider looking them up in your organization's directory (or on LinkedIn). Surprises are not your friend when it comes to meetings.

3. Manage The Meeting By The Clock

Watching the clock is important in an effective meeting. When nobody takes charge of managing time, it is easy to become careless and unfocused. Remember – when people attend a meeting they cannot do anything else. Make the time count!

For Meeting Organizers: starting the meeting on time and ending on time (or a few minutes early!) will quickly enhance your reputation as an organized person. If you are running a large or complex meeting, consider asking a colleague to serve as time keeper. If managing meetings to the clock is challenging for you, the parking lot habit (see #4 below) will be a game changer!

For Meeting Attendees: start by arriving early at the meeting (I suggest 5 minutes for in person meetings and 1-2 meetings for conference calls). That means avoiding back to back commitments on your calendar whenever possible.

4. Use The “Parking Lot” To Manage Off Topic Discussions

The first time I saw a meeting facilitator use a parking lot, I was impressed. This helpful device performs two useful functions. First, it serves to keep the meeting focused on the stated agenda. Second, the parking lot acknowledges important points raised by attendees.

Warning: The Parking Lot habit must be combined with the Follow Up habit if you wish to be truly effective. Otherwise, you are likely to gain a reputation for simply making a show of acknowledging other people.

As a meeting organizer, here are a few steps to use the parking lot concept.

1. At the beginning of the meeting, explain you expect everyone to focus their discussions on the agenda. Further, explain that this rule will help the meeting stay productive and end on time.
2. Keep the meeting agenda document in front of you as a guide.
3. Go through each agenda item
4. Monitor and contribute to the discussion
5. When someone raises an interesting point that does not relate to the agenda, say the following: "Thank you for that point, Tim. However, Microsoft Visual Studio tools go beyond the purpose of this meeting. Let me write down that item in the parking lot and I will include it in the meeting notes that I will send out by email so we can explore that point at the right time."

5. Prewire Important Points and Decisions

From time to time, major decisions will be discussed in meetings. It could be a decision on which projects to fund or which projects to cancel. Serious decisions like this require the pre-wiring habit. In essence, you communicate with people one-on-one before the meeting about the decision before the meeting occurs. While time consuming, this approach increases your chances of success (and avoids surprises other meeting attendees).

Tip: For an extended discussion of the pre-wire concept, I recommend the excellent Manager Tools podcast: [How to Prewire a Meeting](#).

6. Take Notes For Yourself

Taking notes in meetings is an essential skill yet I am often struck by how often people forget to do it. The key reason to take notes in a meeting is to record any questions or assignments that have been directed to you. Let's look at how attendees and organizers can act on notes.

Take notes in a paper notebook (e.g. a Moleskine notebook or something similar) rather than using a computer, tablet or other device. Even if you have fantastic abilities to focus on the meeting, other people may assume that you are "catching up on email" instead of paying attention to the meeting if you take notes on a computer.

Taking notes for Meeting Organizers: if you plan to send minutes or a summary of the meeting to attendees, say this at the start of the meeting and explain what you will include. Sending out meeting minutes, even a few paragraphs or bullet points, is a best practice.

Taking notes for Meeting Attendees: bring a copy of the agenda and use that document to guide your note taking. Focus on the decisions made in the meeting and items that require further investigation or action on your part.

7. Follow Up On The Meeting

The art and science of follow up is vital professional habit and it also matters in the context of meetings. When it comes to meeting tips, following up in a timely basis is a great way to manage stress and make a good impression on others. For the best results, I suggest following up (e.g. making a phone call, writing an email etc) the same day as the meeting. For very important matters, make a note on your calendar or task management tool of choice to continue following up until you reach a resolution.

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