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### **What Great CEOs Know About Running Effective Meetings**

“Boring.” “Unproductive.” “Complete waste of time.” How many of us have sat in meetings that could be described with those terms?

Last week, I was an observer at a client’s leadership team meeting. I was struck by the fact that ten senior leaders devoted over two hours to what was essentially a “report out” of information that could have been disseminated in any number of other ways. The same two team members did all the talking and blackberries were buzzing every five minutes. No one took notes and needless to say, no decisions were made. And to coin a sports metaphor, “the ball was definitely **not** advanced.”

Does this sound like your typical business meeting? It doesn’t have to.

Putting into practice a set of meeting disciplines can mean the difference between a giant time wasting experience and a productive, effective team meeting.

Adam Bryant, **The New York Times** columnist, recently compiled some of the leadership and management lessons learned from many of the country’s most successful CEOs. Bryant’s book, **The Corner Office**, includes the results of interviews describing the common traits and best practices employed by these leaders.

Running effective meetings was one topic that Bryant covered. And you can imagine why. Time is a valuable commodity. None of us, including CEOs, has time to waste in meetings that don’t generate solutions to challenges, create dialogue and discussion and foster respectful rapport when discussions get heated. When done right, running effective meetings can actually save time, improve communication and create buy-in for your initiatives.

So based on Bryant’s interviews and my own experience in leading, and participating in, many years of effective (and ineffective) meetings, here are seven questions to ask yourself that will set you on the road to more effective and productive meetings.



### **Before the meeting:**

#### **1. Why are we here?**

What's the purpose of the meeting? Be clear and specific about why you've decided to meet and what you intend to accomplish. Meetings can be called for a variety of reasons. Making decisions, generating ideas, setting tasks and delegating are just a few of the many possible goals for a meeting. There may be meetings where all of those outcomes are desired based on the topic discussed. Whatever the reason, make sure the purpose and the desired outcomes are clear to all in attendance.

If your meeting is a regularly scheduled staff meeting, make sure that the purpose for each meeting is still valid. Can information be shared via email or pre-read that doesn't take up everyone's time during the meeting? What's the best use of the time?

#### **2. Do we have the right people in the room?**

Do you need to make a decision that requires input from someone else who's not included in the meeting? Or are there individuals in the room who have no real need to be there? Being clear about the purpose will enable you to determine who the appropriate attendees should be and what each person will be expected to contribute.

#### **3. Do we have a detailed agenda?**

Having an agenda is critical to the discipline. The agenda should identify the topics to discuss, correlated with the purpose or outcomes (see #1) with the allotted time for discussion. Allocate realistic amounts of time to each topic with the highest priority item handled first. Start on time, end on time.

### **During the meeting:**

#### **4. Do we have clear rules for respectful behavior?**

Do the team members know the boundaries for civil debate? Dialogue and discussion is the desired result of an effective team meeting but when vigorous debate gets personal, leaders must be disciplined enough to step in and keep the discussion civil and respectful.

As the leader or facilitator, you must make sure that the meeting stays on track and is not sidetracked with individuals who hog the discussion or send the group off topic.



## **5. How do we ensure that everyone is engaged and involved?**

It's your responsibility to make sure everyone is engaged in the discussion, not just a few team members. Solicit input from those who are hesitant to speak up. Make sure everyone's voice is heard. Encourage open dialogue and discussion and as the leader, don't dominate the discussion with your opinion and perspective. Your domination limits others' willingness to share their own opinion.

And make it clear that if a team member disagrees with a concept or decision, they are encouraged to speak up and voice an opinion. Silence assumes consent.

Blackberries, I pads, and other electronic connections to the outside world should ideally be turned off. For a meeting to truly be effective, each individual should respect each other by giving 100% attention. Focus completely for the time you're there. It's very difficult to respond to emails and listen attentively at the same time.

## **6. Who will be documenting our discussion, our decisions, and our action steps?**

Meeting minutes or notes are critical for managing the actions and decisions that arise from the meeting. They document who will be responsible for next steps generated during the discussion. They identify agreements that occurred. The minutes or meeting notes should be circulated to the team members as soon as possible and should be brief but clearly identify the outcomes and next steps.

**After the meeting:**

## **7. How do we follow up and hold individuals accountable for their committed actions?**

Meetings without follow up on agreed-upon action steps might as well not have happened. Team members need to know they can rely on each other to do what they say they will do.



Your time is valuable. Your team member's time is valuable. Meetings are not going away but they can be a much more valuable use of everyone's precious time. The best CEOs know that a clear purpose, agenda, team involvement and respect are all integral to an effective and productive team meeting. Documenting action steps, decisions made and holding team members accountable closes the loop on a format for a productive and effective team meeting experience. Regardless of your level, these are best practices that you don't need to be the CEO to employ.

For help improving your leadership effectiveness or the effectiveness of your team or organization, contact me at [Mary@wernercoaching.com](mailto:Mary@wernercoaching.com).

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