



## **Making Meetings Work**

By Karen Carney

Meetings are windows on the soul of business: they reveal the quality of its management. Well-organized, well-conducted meetings bespeak an effective organization. Meetings afflicted with sloppy planning, flimsy agendas, and fuzzy expectations indicate a not-so-effective one. Here are some tips for tightening and energizing your meetings:

**Prepare Smartly** At Intel Corporation (San Jose, CA.), those who call a meeting must first assess whether the meeting is necessary. They'll e-mail ideas to a few people for comments and suggestions, draft an agenda, then distribute it to a wider audience for revisions. The result is a one-pager containing the meeting's purpose and goals, subtopics with time frames for each, a list of attendees, and what each one should bring to the table. It's distributed in advance to attendees and to the appropriate business-unit chief, who might later check it for quality. "We know from experience that 80% of the hard work gets done before the meeting even begins," says Michael Fors, Intel's corporate employee-development manager. "We're all responsible for using our time effectively, and we're aware of the opportunity costs."

### **Let the Agenda Dictate the Setting and Pace**

You don't always have to meet in an airless conference room. Senior executives at Ritz-Carlton in Atlanta gather each morning in the hallway outside the president's office for a ten minute "quality talk." Managers at Cabletron Systems (Rochester, NH.) have mastered the art of the stand-up meeting – no seats, just solutions. The food teams at Whole Foods Market stores meet weekly to forecast the financials – but when they're behind schedule, they might meet in the frozen-food aisle. Get creative; shake things up. Consider hosting your next brainstorming session outdoors.

### **Roles and Rules**

Create roles and policies to stimulate discussion and keep it on track. A facilitator equipped with a watch or egg timer leads the discussion. A scribe takes notes on a dry-erase board. Intel also has a gatekeeper who makes sure everyone has a chance to speak. Of course, employees need to feel they can speak honestly without retribution. Springfield ReManufacturing Corp. (Springfield, MO.) has a no-gripping policy to ensure that comments are positive and objective. At Foldraft Co. (Kenyon, MN.), managers dressed as referees call timeout when speakers at all-company meetings stray from the topic at hand.

### **Follow Up**

At the close of Intel's meetings, attendees are encouraged to mentally answer questions posted on conference room walls. Why was I here? What was my role? Was I well prepared? What was resolved? The process helps people clarify their thoughts so they can contribute to the meeting-minutes document, which is posted on internal Web pages within 24 hours. This one-page summary lists key issues, decisions made (and by whom), action items by owner, expected results, firm deadlines, and the next meeting date – all for tracking purposes.

### **Challenge Employees to Improve Meetings**

Develop success criteria for each of your meetings. An executive briefing, for example, may have different objectives than a brainstorming session. Then get people involved in evaluation and improvement. "Meeting effectiveness is a line item on our team development scorecards because we want to know how it impacts team deliverables," says Intel's Fors. "We also have annual culture surveys at the business-unit level to assess how well we execute action plans."

### **We Have to Stop Meeting Like This**

According to surveys by the Wharton Center for Applied Research, managers report that only 56% of their meetings are productive – and that 25% would have been more effective as conference calls, memos, e-mails, or voicemails. Conclusion: the cost of misguided meetings is high. When meetings aren't paying off, explore your options and make substitutions, CEO Kris Kile of Total Restoration (Amherst, NH.) switched to a combination of broadcast voicemail and follow-up memos when the cost-to-payoff ration for weekly meetings shot up. "As we added people, our 30-minute sessions started costing us 10 hours of overtime per week, or the equivalent of 15 person-hours," he explains. "Now I deliver short, focused pep talks by voicemails whenever necessary, I'll describe our current financial picture and remind people of our goals. To reinforce the learning, we attach a summary of our critical cost-of-sales numbers to their weekly pay stubs." The system is easier – and much less costly.

### **If You Want to Learn More...**

*The Big Book of Business Games: Icebreakers, Creativity Exercises, and Meeting Energizers* by John W. Newstrom and Edward E. Scannell (1996-McGraw-Hill, 170pp. \$17.95. Tel. 800.352.3566 or 212.512.4100). An oversized paperback jammed with more than 70 games and activities designed to spice up meetings and presentations. A helpful first stop for managers who want to learn about the latest technology used to facilitate real-time (multi location) and Internet meetings.