

Break Down the Boring Blahs of Meetings

By Jon Petz (975 words without box or bio)

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No doubt about it; people are creatures of habit. Nowhere is this more painfully obvious than in everyday office meetings. We march to the conference room (four minutes past the stated start time) and conduct brainstorming sessions that rarely amount to more than a drizzle.

Why? Because that's what our boss or supervisor does? Because we were never taught this in school? Because that's how meetings are always handled?

Well, make way for a new approach that will be welcomed, understood, and implemented by everyday workers. Otherwise, we'll go through another generation of finger pointing that makes boring meetings suck.

To alleviate the common meeting blahs before your next meeting, ask these three questions.

1. Why meet in the conference room? Sure, it's a meeting space, but so is my garage. Except my garage probably has more natural light than do most drab conference rooms. If you want your meeting to be perceived as blah, then hold it in the conference room down the hall where every other time-sucking, brain-dead session has already taken place.

Think of meeting spaces as places that enable collaboration, inspiration, and flexibility (depending on the mission of the meeting). Certainly, the word "conference" doesn't evoke much engagement or energy, does it? In fact, I vote we stop using the word "conference" altogether.

Consider these: (1) Let's roll with the term *collaboration space* in place of conference room. Dare you suggest that the next time around?

(2) Why not have your next brainstorming meeting in the lobby's lounge area, in the nearby coffee shop, or even in the park around the corner.

(3) As personal space gets smaller in many offices, collaboration space for team members needs to increase. Make it easy to run "Stand-It-Up" or "Two-N-Out"-style meetings. (Learn more about those at www.BoringMeetingsSuck.com)

2. Why do meetings last 30 or 60 minutes? Because it's a nice round number that slips easily into your calendar function? Or it's because the law of meetings states that *any meeting will proceed past its naturally occurring end time and be rounded up to the next common denominator*. But ask this question: If you can finish a meeting in 20 minutes, why automatically extend it to 30? To pointlessly fill the allotted time in your schedule?

Consider these: (1) Start your team collaboration at, say, 11:05 a.m. or 2:37 p.m. Start exactly on time and don't allow the end time to change. That forces you to be more succinct in your explanations—a win for everyone.

(2) Start on time, then get right to the point. Open with your intended point of action and tackle it head on. Save small talk for later. What if you finish early? Let the attendees who are on deadline with other projects leave. After that, you can chitchat about the ball game or the weather or whatever.

(3) Feeling confident? Conduct 10-minute meetings that rock. If only 10 minutes sounds aggressive, it is! When you have a common desired result defined, time pressure like this gets everyone right on point.

3. Why invite everybody? As the host who called the meeting, are you afraid of hurting feelings? Want others to see how busy you are? Playing the suck up game? Want your boss to see how great you are?

Please understand that, as you increase the number of attendees at a meeting, you exponentially increase your ability to end on time and reach good decisions.

Consider these: (1) Invite as few people as possible—like one single person from each department to fill the shoes of those who have real work to do. If a person's input is needed only for Agenda Item #4, provide an approximate time to be in the collaboration space and text that person five minutes ahead. (Nothing drives me crazier than attending a meeting in which I address the second-to-last agenda item, yet I'm there 50 minutes as a useless by-sitter. Instead, text me when you're ready and I'll be a happier person to be around.)

(2) Keep real-time notes on shared resources like wiki, Sharepoint, or team Facebook or Twitter feed. That way, team members not in attendance can follow the agenda and join in when something relates to them.

Beyond Robert's Rules of Order

With so many unwritten rules to address, let's attack some of the most abused problems that have been around since Robert wrote his classic Robert's Rules of Order.

If you must use the conference room, then give it lots of light, *natural* light. Open the blinds and windows; lose the overhead fluorescent tubes of turmoil; take time to bring in improved lighting. Does your meeting space invite participation, or is it a place where old furniture goes to die?

If you must have a 60-minute meeting, then absolutely start it on time and play by the rules. Use strong facilitation skills to ensure timeliness and keep people interested. When participants see you being serious about promptness, it keep their focus close in and their tangents at a distance.

If you must include a large number of people to your meeting and plan to make a decision there, invite attendees in groups that relate to specific agenda items only. Give them a warning text five minutes before you want them to join the meeting. Keep a running tally of what's been accomplished so they can read what's been accomplished. Or post the discussion in real time to a shared resource.

Whatever your scenario, these simple Suckification Reduction Devices will help break down the boring blahs of meetings and bring participants into a productive, collaborative space.

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Jon Petz is a [professional keynote speaker, master of ceremony](#) and author of *[Boring Meetings Suck, Get More Out of Your Meetings, or Get OUT of More Meetings](#)* (Wiley & Sons 2011). For info about books, speaking engagements, training or consultation, please visit www.JonPetz.com .