

Make your meetings more productive

Harold L. Taylor



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1 SHORT ON TIME? READ THIS FIRST

1.1 BUSINESS MEETING ESSENTIALS

To run effective meetings, you must control both the length of the meeting and the meeting itself. Regardless of whether you spend an average of one hour or six hours each day in meetings, there is considerable time savings to be realized by running them efficiently. Here is a summary of the most important things to keep in mind when calling a meeting.

Invite only those who are essential to the success of the meeting.

If people are unlikely to contribute to or benefit from the meeting, don't include them. Try to keep the total number of attendees fewer than 8 people. According to the book, *Decide and Deliver: 5 Steps to Breakthrough and Performance in your Organization*, once you have seven people in a decision-making group, every additional person reduces effectiveness by 10 percent. This is referred to as the "Rule of Seven."

Plan the meeting in advance.

Avoid last-minute agendas. Anticipate which topics will generate the most discussion, disagreement and time loss. Leave the contentious issues until last – when people are less likely to waste time. Put the priority items that will generate the least discussion near the start of the meeting. Allocate estimated time limits to every agenda item, and be sure to include an ending time as well as a starting time on the agenda.

Prepare, and encourage participants to prepare.

Insist that any suggestions for the agenda are submitted at least a week in advance in order to be included on the agenda. Have the agenda and any reports to be discussed distributed to the other participants at least 3 days in advance of the meeting. Discourage participants from wasting everyone else's time reading reports at the meeting. Meetings are for discussion and decision-making.

Start on time.

Don't make exceptions. If anyone arrives late, including your boss, explain that you are now on item two or three. Don't apologize for being prompt and efficient. Set a businesslike but friendly tone, keep the meeting on course, and encourage participation while maintaining control. Resist the urge to summarize the progress to date for every late arrival. If they ask, tell them you'll update them after the meeting.

Make notes at every meeting and encourage others to do likewise.

Record decisions reached, actions required, the individuals responsible for the various actions, and the expected completion dates. Review this information at the end of the meeting to ensure that everyone is clear as to his or her responsibilities. If everyone takes notes, there is no need to wait for minutes to be issued before taking action.

Don't waste the group's time on one person's responsibilities.

If you have made a group decision and provided input, assign the action to one person, not several. If a few people have strong feelings as to how something should be done, ask them to submit the suggestions in writing to the person who will be taking action.

Always take a few minutes after every meeting to evaluate how it went.

Jot down what you will do next time to improve the process. Continually strive to reduce the time loss and increase the value of every meeting you manage.

1.2 CHECKLIST FOR MORE EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

Time can be shaved from meetings if both the chairperson and the participants are well prepared and plan in advance. Here is a summary of suggestions for participants and leaders as well as some hints for drawing up a time-effective agenda.

1.2.1 ADVICE FOR PARTICIPANTS

- Prepare for each meeting by reviewing the agenda and support materials in advance and questioning anything that is not clear.
- Have any reports distributed to the other participants at least three days in advance of the meeting.
- Contact the chairperson the minute you receive the agenda if you spot an error or if something is to be added to the agenda.
- Arrive on time and be prompt returning from breaks.
- Be organized. Arrive with all relevant materials easily accessible.
- Take notes using a form similar to the *Meeting Participant's Action Sheet*.
- Participate actively at each meeting without feeling the necessity of speaking to each item.
- Refrain from side conversations, passing notes or otherwise distracting others.
- Respect the views of other participants and receive their suggestions with a positive attitude.
- Resist getting involved in discussing administrative work that is the responsibility of other people.
- Stick to the agenda; bring up new business at the appropriate time.

- Use visuals where appropriate to speed up communications.
- Never be openly critical of others.
- Give credit where credit is due; this includes other participants as well as staff who prepared reports or made suggestions.
- Immediately follow-up on any actions required as a result of the meeting. Don't wait for the minutes.
- Remember to communicate between meetings.

1.2.2 ADVICE FOR THE CHAIRPERSON

- Have agreement on how to handle interruptions such as telephone calls, etc.
- Contact participants in advance to confirm their attendance and clarify their roles and contributions.
- Prepare the agenda and see that it is distributed at least three days prior to the meeting.
- Schedule input from guests at the beginning of the meeting so they can leave when finished.
- Start the meeting on time, set a businesslike but friendly tone, keep the meeting on course, and encourage participation while maintaining control.
- Try scheduling meetings at odd times, such as 10:48 a.m. Companies have found that lateness decreases – probably because 10:48 or 3:45 sound more specific and urgent than 10:30 or 3:30.
- Resist the urge to recap for every late arrival.
- Spend time on each agenda item in proportion to the importance of the item.
- Remember that a chairperson is a facilitator. Make sure everybody else gets *their* ideas on the table first.
- Avoid covering anything in the meeting that can be read ahead of time.
- Watch for those nonverbal signals that indicate someone doesn't understand, objects, or wishes to speak.
- Call on newer employees to express their views first so the more senior employees don't intimidate them.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Finish on a positive note, summarizing the accomplishments.
- Ask for any reports to be submitted well in advance of the next meeting.
- At the end of the meeting confirm the time, date and place of the next meeting.
- Always evaluate the meeting immediately afterwards.
- Review the minutes to ensure their accuracy before being issued.
- Follow up with the people concerned to ensure that actions decided at the meeting are completed on schedule.

1.2.3 DESIGNING THE AGENDA

- Make the agenda items detailed enough to allow the participants to prepare for each item in advance.
- Build in frequent, brief breaks.
- Start with items requiring immediate decisions. Leave open-ended discussions until later.
- Highlight any changes from standard routine, such as date, time and location.
- Schedule topics requiring creativity and mental alertness early in the day.
- Avoid putting difficult topics back to back.
- Place time limits on all agenda items.
- Include ending time as well as starting time.
- Schedule items in reducing order of priority in the event that everything cannot be completed.
- Attach any paperwork that will be referred to during the meeting.

2 HOW ARE YOUR MEETING MANAGEMENT SKILLS?

2.1 ARE YOU AN EFFECTIVE CHAIRPERSON?

Rate yourself as an effective meeting manager by indicating which statements are true as they relate to meetings that you manage.

- I believe that excellent meetings are the result of all participants being committed to working together as a team to achieve the pre-determined objective as efficiently and effectively as possible.
- I prepare the agenda and see that it is distributed at least one week prior to the meeting.
- The items on my agendas are prioritized, with the approximate amount of time allowed for discussion on each item.
- I have meeting guidelines that I issue to everyone so they are organized and prepared for each meeting. (These could include advice such as refraining from side conversations, passing notes or otherwise distracting others, and respecting the views of other participants. Also you might emphasize that it is their responsibility to participate actively at each meeting without feeling the necessity of speaking to each item.)
- All participants at my meetings are asked to prepare for each meeting by reviewing the agenda and support materials in advance and questioning anything that is not clear.
- I have participants contacted in advance to confirm their attendance and to clarify their roles and contributions.
- I tell the participants in advance how we will handle interruptions such as the use of iPads, iPhones or other electronic handheld devices.
- I schedule input from guests at the beginning of the meeting so they can leave when finished.
- I start the meeting on time, set a businesslike but friendly tone, keep the meeting on course, and encourage participation while maintaining control.
- I resist the urge to recap for every late arrival. If they have missed something important I ask them to see me after the meeting.
- I spend time on each agenda item in proportion to the importance of the item being discussed. Any reports to be discussed at the meeting are distributed to the other participants at least one week in advance of the meeting.
- Participants at my meetings arrive on time and return promptly from breaks.

- I encourage participants to take their own notes during the meeting, and to record any action that they are to take following the meeting.
- I resist getting involved in discussing administrative work that is the responsibility of other people.
- I stick to the agenda and bring up any new business at the appropriate time.
- I use visuals where appropriate.
- I am never openly critical of others during my meetings.
- I always give credit where credit is due; this includes other meeting participants as well as staff who prepared reports or make suggestions.
- I support group decisions and actions publicly whether opposed personally or not.
- I immediately follow-up on any actions required on my part as a result of the meeting.
- I communicate adequately between meetings, and follow up on the commitments of others when appropriate.

If you have answered “True” to 18 or more of the above statements, you are an exceptionally effective meeting manager. If you have answered “False” to 4 or more of the statements, you are urged to read the rest of this book from cover to cover, highlight suggestions that make sense to you, make notes, and answer the review questions available for this book.

2.2 THE VALUE AND COST OF MEETINGS

Meetings *can* be effective management tools. Conducted properly they can be used to gain cooperation and promote team spirit, share information, solve problems and eliminate the time consuming repetition of individual contacts. They can be used to generate ideas, squelch rumors, assign responsibilities, gain consensus and initiate action. They can strengthen close working relationships, improve morale, motivate employees and improve communications.

With meetings you can apply the experience, knowledge, creativity and judgment of individuals to the achievement of a common goal. Several people can usually generate more ideas and make better decisions than a single person. And a meeting allows people to buy into the decisions that they collectively make.

But before calling a meeting, make sure that one is really necessary. Meetings are expensive, so if the objective can be met by sending an email, texting several people or making a few quick phone calls, or talking to a couple of people on a one-to-one basis, do so. Meetings should take place when they are needed, not because it is a certain day of the week or month.

When in doubt whether a meeting is necessary, ask yourself, “What would be the consequence of not holding a meeting?”

Meetings are costly. For example, assuming you spend four hours each week in meetings, over a ten year period you will have spent the equivalent of a full year sitting in meetings. Multiply that by your annual salary and do likewise for all the other participants, and you have a sizable cost. And that doesn't take into consideration the opportunities lost by not working on profit-generating tasks during that one year equivalent. According to Doyle and Strauss in their book, *How to make meetings work*, there are over 11 million meetings held every day in the United States alone. Don't add to that costly total unless absolutely necessary.

2.3 HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND IN MEETINGS?

Keep track of the time you spend in meetings for a month or more. If you have been following my advice in other books to block off time in your planner for planned projects and events and to write in the unplanned activities and emergency meetings in your planner even *after* the fact, you don't have to do this. Simply review the last month's planner pages. Otherwise keep records. After every meeting, jot down in a journal the amount of time spent. When you see large chunks of time being spent on needless meetings or inefficiently run meetings, it's time to take action. Time is too precious to waste.

Although most meetings are essential, most employees consider many of them a waste of time. According to a survey of US professionals by salary.com, meetings ranked as the number one office productivity killer. Also, according to the National Statistic Council, 37% of employee time is spent in meetings, and 47% of employees consider too many meetings to be the biggest waste of time during the work day – even more than social media and email. This need not be the case if you plan every meeting and manage it effectively.

3 PLAN YOUR MEETINGS CAREFULLY

3.1 WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO HOLD MEETINGS?

When scheduling meetings, take into consideration that everyone's internal clock is not set the same and the ideal meeting time will vary depending on the group. A study by the *Rotman Research Institute at Baycrest Health Sciences* in Toronto found that people aged between 60 and 82 were better able to focus and ignore distractions, and did better on memory tests in the morning – specifically between 8:30 AM and 10:30 AM – than in the afternoon between 1 PM and 5 PM. Functional MRI scans showed that in the afternoon, these people's brains were idling. Younger adults, however, were still attentive well into the afternoon. Generally, teenagers are night owls and do not operate on all cylinders early in the day. According to John Medina, in his book *Brain Rules*, only 20% of people are true *early birds* or *larks*, and only 10% are *owls*. The balance are somewhere in between.

You might want to schedule your meetings late in the day if you want them to be a short ones. Business has a tendency to move quickly as it approaches five o'clock. But balance this with the need to have participants at their energetic and creative peak, which might be around mid-morning.

You might be wise to avoid Monday mornings when most people are trying to catch up on your email. Friday afternoons are not recommended either since people are usually more focused on the weekend than on the meeting.

Luncheon meetings are not generally a good idea from a productivity standpoint. If you must have a luncheon meeting, get the important issues out of the way before the food arrives. Once everyone starts eating, talk comes to a standstill. And after eating, people get sluggish and find it harder to concentrate on the business at hand.

Successful meetings, like anything else, must be planned. And planning involves advance preparation, timing, attendance, agenda – and most important, a statement of objectives to be accomplished. Respect the time of others by inviting only those who can contribute to or gain from the meeting. Be prepared to excuse people early when they can no longer gain from or contribute to the remaining topics.

3.2 SUCCESS IS IN THE LITTLE THINGS

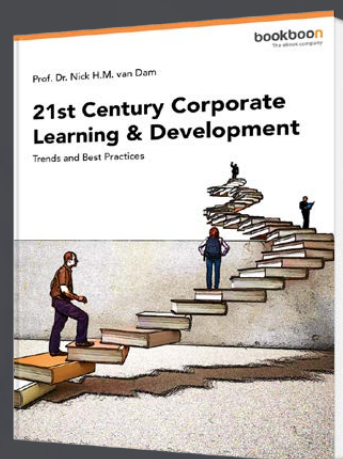
Create a checklist for everything you need to do, such as bring along extra copies of minutes, the policy binder, correspondence to be discussed, place cards, name badges, meeting evaluation forms, and so on. To create such a checklist, I first put myself in the shoes of the participants and visualize what they might be thinking as they walk into the meeting room. Where do I hang my coat? Where do I sit? Is there coffee? And so on. That reminds me to make up signs, arrange for the coffee and muffins, arrange name cards at tables, and so on. Then I visualize the chairperson (myself) walking into the room and facilitating the meeting. Where's the projector? Is there a flip chart, will the session be recorded, where's the information table etc. and jot down the necessary actions and items accordingly. After each session I edit that checklist, if necessary, for the next meeting – adding anything that had been overlooked.

When you are running a meeting, you want to focus on doing a great job, not duplicating notes or searching for an extension cord. Success is frequently in the details. A checklist will prevent you from overlooking the little things.

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3.3 PREPLANNED SEATING

You may want to control the seating arrangement as well. If you allow people to sit where they please, you may end up with “buddies” sharing experiences, extroverts sharing stories, or hotheads sharing arguments while the meeting is in progress. You could use place cards to predetermine the seating, and separate individuals you feel may come into conflict with one another or share jokes. Seat protagonists on the same side of the table so they won't have eye contact; separate comedians with a quiet, serious type, and so on.

Planned seating can help move the meeting along faster, with fewer distractions. Make the name cards big, and print the names legibly. They will assist the person taking the minutes as well as those participants who don't know everyone. Exhibit 1 illustrates a tent card which displays “Guidelines for Participants” to make everyone aware of their responsibilities during the meeting.

Exhibit 1: Copy on back of place cards (tent cards)

Guidelines for meeting participants

Speak up. Don't save comments until you walk out the door.
Don't monopolize the time. Give others a chance to speak as well.
Respect other people's ideas. When disagreeing, be positive and constructive.
If something is unclear, ask. It may be unclear to others as well.
Don't carry on side conversations. Maintain an active interest in the meeting.
Ask yourself how you can be better prepared for the next meeting.

3.4 PREPARING THE AGENDA

Set objectives in such a way that you can measure the results at a later date. Do you want people to understand certain procedures, increase sales, reduce costs, or solve a problem? Include the objectives both on the agenda and on a flip chart or blackboard in the meeting room.

Develop a detailed outline or agenda and send it out to all participants in advance of the meeting. Send it too soon and participants may lose or misplace it. Send it too late and they might not have enough time to prepare for the meeting. Usually three to five days is sufficient. Indicate the starting time, ending time, time allocated to each topic area and the individuals responsible for reports or presentations. Make it clear that any written reports should be distributed well in advance of the meeting so the participants can review them without spending valuable meeting time. These can be sent with the agenda along with any other relevant information.

When drawing up the agenda, make sure the most important items appear first. You may want to poll the participants in advance. Make sure you know what they want discussed and what they have to report. And tell them what you expect of them. They should be prepared and aware of the time allocated for their presentation or report. Above all, they should understand the objectives of the meeting.

Discussing tasks that require focused thinking drains your energy. So don't schedule one cognitive task after another on the agenda. There are three types of tasks – mental, physical and emotional. So rather than stack one mental task after another, give the group a “break” by doing something physical (such as standing up and stretching) or emotional, (such as discussing customer complaints) in between. These alternate tasks might take ten minutes or less, while the cognitive tasks could take up to 45 minutes at one sitting.

You don't want to waste everyone's time discussing trivial items. However, although in theory you could get 80% of the value simply by discussing those vital 20% of the possible agenda items, in actual practice this is not the case. Most of the 80% helps make the other 20% possible. The trick is to identify which activities and actions among those 80% are essential and which ones can be ignored or easily handled by others without being discussed at a meeting.

Don't cram too much onto the agenda. Skipping quickly over critical issues in order to finish on time is *not* a time saver. If it's a long meeting, include times on the agenda for brief stand-up breaks. The brain represents just 2 percent of the body's weight but requires almost 25 percent of its oxygen. Insufficient time for rejuvenation could result in poor decisions, lower creativity and drawn out meetings.

Adding an item on the agenda that simply states “Other business” is an invitation to waste time.

3.5 PLAN TO HAVE REFRESHMENTS AT ALL MEETINGS

Plan to have water at the meeting as well as coffee. You're doing more than just offering a fringe benefit when you supply a bottle of water to all your participants in addition to the usual coffee, writing materials and mints – at least according to research conducted at the University of East London. The UK researchers believe that bringing water into an exam room can raise students' marks – if they also drink it, that is! Studies indicated that those who drank water while writing exams out-performed those who didn't. In one study, the scores averaged 4.8% better.

One explanation is that students are in a mild state of dehydration when taking exams, and drinking water corrects this. This should also apply to improving thinking skills, decision-making and creativity of meeting participants as well.

However, don't eliminate the coffee break at your meeting. Although drinking too much coffee has been associated with stress, in moderation it seems to give memory a boost. A brief article in the spring, 2014 issue of Health magazine describes a link between caffeine and memory. Michael Yassa of John Hopkins University asked 60 people to view a series of images of different objects. Then, five minutes later, after receiving either a placebo or 200 milligrams of caffeine, were tested the next day on their ability to recognize images from the day before. More people from the caffeine group recognized that an image was similar to rather than identical with one they had viewed earlier.

Separate research published in the Journal of Public Health Nutrition also showed that one or two cups of tea a day can boost brain power and athletic performance. And researcher Rodney W. Johnson, PhD, claims that chamomile tea, rich in luteolin, is not only relaxing, but also protects you against forgetfulness. He says it works by preventing brain inflammation that contributes to age-related memory lapses. So, although the trend may be towards healthier refreshments such as fruit and juices at break time, consider continuing with the coffee and teas. And oh yes, plenty of water.

For shorter meetings, you may want to leave the coffee and donuts until after the meeting – in a separate room, and only have water at the meeting table. This is appropriate if you plan to have an informal session immediately following the meeting where people can get better acquainted, and build relationships.

3.6 THE MEETING LOCATION IS IMPORTANT

Select the meeting place carefully. Ideally it should take place away from the normal work area and needless interruptions. The room should be well ventilated, not too warm, and with enough space to allow the participants to stretch out. The room doesn't have to be luxurious. In fact, a study conducted by R.M. Greene & Associates indicated a direct correlation between room beauty and meeting efficiency – *the more beautiful, the less efficient*. Use visual aids of some kind, such as PowerPoint, flip chart or props to increase attention.

Your environment definitely impacts your productivity. Potted plants, white noise, music, natural lighting, air circulation, physical organization, windows facing the outside world, the ability to feed off the energy of others, and even a cheerful office decor with scenic pictures on the walls can increase productivity as well as improve mood and personal well-being.

Take plants for example. Based on recent research, it might appear as though your ideal working environment would be a forest with plenty of vegetation surrounding the boardroom table and a trout stream gurgling its way past you. Facetious as this sounds, you should not overlook the possibility of merging more with nature. Studies have shown that the presence of potted plants, for example, improves productivity, creativity, performance and learning ability. (In the case of schools, the presence of plants improved scores in mathematics spelling and science between 10% and 14%.)

Researchers have also found that plants act as vacuum cleaners removing pollution from the air. Exposure to indoor and outdoor pollutants in both home and offices has been linked to anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue and short and long-term cognitive decline among other afflictions.

Plants not only give off oxygen, they are able to absorb environmental chemicals and transport them to the soil, rendering them less harmful. NASA used plants to keep their astronauts healthy while working in enclosed places constructed of synthetic materials. Potted plants have reduced indoor pollutants by at least 75%.

For information on the impact of other environmental factors such as lighting, colors, background music on performance and productivity, refer to my book “*How work environment impacts productivity*,” also published by Bookboon.com.

3.7 FEWER PEOPLE MAKE FOR MORE PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

Theoretically, if you invite twice as many people you should have twice the results; but this is rarely the case. More participants increase the length of discussions, the number of suggestions, the amount of disagreement and conflict, the likelihood of irrelevant conversation, and the amount of time wasted getting started.

In many cases you must have a large number of people present, particularly when the purpose of the meeting is to communicate information or motivate people. But for decision-making and problem-solving purposes, the ideal number of people would probably be between five and seven. It pays to have an odd number when voting is involved.

If people are unlikely to contribute to or benefit from the meeting, they really shouldn't be there. The *Rule of Seven*, mentioned in Chapter 1 suggests that once you have seven people in a decision-making group, every additional person reduces effectiveness by 10 percent. Larger numbers allow less opportunity to communicate with one another and to come to an agreement when it comes to making a decision. And once the number exceeds twelve, you will find it very difficult to accomplish the meeting's objectives.

The effectiveness of a meeting usually varies indirectly as the number of people present.

4 CONTROL THE MEETING AT ALL TIMES

4.1 GET OFF TO A GOOD START

Start the meeting on time, and don't recap with every late arrival. Delaying the meeting simply encourages lateness. At the start, explain what will be covered and why. Restate the objectives. Keep to the agenda and don't allow participants to take off on tangents.

The role of the chairperson is to assist the group to achieve the meeting's objectives as efficiently as possible. This includes clarifying issues, moving the discussions forward, and making sure that everyone understands that the will of the majority should be accepted and supported. The chairperson is the group's servant, not someone who uses their position to impose his or her will on the group.

If someone starts a conversation about something trivial that is not on the agenda, stop it politely with a remark such as "I know that problem's in good hands with you, Jack. We won't discuss it here." You might reduce petty arguments if you seat adversaries on the same side of the table, but apart from one another. If they can't see each other they won't lock horns as often. Remember, if your meeting starts to drift in a direction that will not help to reach your objective, pull it back on course. And fast. But don't get hung up on parliamentary procedure unless you're a member of parliament. The name of the game is results.

Guard against one or two people monopolizing the discussion, encourage everyone to participate and watch for those non-verbal signals that indicate someone does not understand, objects, or wishes to speak. The tendency is to accept ideas of the most dominant individuals even though his or her ideas may not be the best ones. Don't be afraid to acknowledge the person's ideas and then quickly say "Thanks, Sam. I'd like to hear other people's thoughts on this point as well."

Listen more than you talk. One study revealed that the average leader took 60 percent of the conference time. If it's one-way communication you want, forget about a meeting and send e-mail messages instead.

4.2 DON'T MISINTERPRET THOSE YAWNS

If you think yawning on the part of meeting participants is a sign of boredom, think again. It is one of the best ways to bring them into a state of alertness, according to the book *How God changes your brain*, by Newberg and Waldman. It might even be wise to encourage everyone to yawn throughout the meeting, since studies reveal that it is an important way to improve the functioning of the brain. In the above-mentioned book, it is explained that yawning is one of the best ways of exercising the brain and it increases activity in one of the areas hardest hit by attention deficit problems. It not only relaxes you but improves your cognitive awareness as well. One of the authors goes as far as to say he has encouraged students to pause and yawn 10 times. We all have experienced that yawning seems to be contagious so this idea should be easy to apply. But you might want to read some of the research first if you are not convinced.

When you break for coffee at your meetings, don't say "Be back at 10:15" because everyone's watch may have a different time. Say "Let's be back in 15 minutes", or whatever. A countdown timer on a PowerPoint slide would help. And remember, the meeting resumes when you start talking at the appointed time, not when everybody returns to their seat.

The meeting is over when you have accomplished your objectives, so don't let it drag on and on. Once a consensus has been reached, you should cut off further discussion. Summarize the actions to be taken and make sure responsibilities are clear. Issue minutes promptly, with actions clearly highlighted. You could use a cover form for the minutes that highlights the decisions reached, the action required, the person responsible for follow-up and the date the action is to be completed. Then people would not have to dig through pages and pages of minutes searching for items they are supposed to look after. Chances are, they won't. And non-action is a great and costly time waster.

Always evaluate your meetings afterwards. Ask what could be improved next time. If your magic markers run dry or the LCD projector bulb burns out and you have no spare, it should never happen the second time. Planning for any meeting starts when the last meeting has ended.

4.3 STAND-UP MEETINGS

You have probably heard of stand-up meeting, which lets the participants know it will be a brief meeting, tends to keep comments short and to the point, increases creativity of the participants, and doesn't waste valuable time. Well, you can apply this idea to longer meetings as well. No, I'm not suggesting that you have the participants stand up for an entire full-day meeting. But there are other advantages to having the participants stand up for portions of the meeting.

Sitting for more than half the day doubles the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular problems, according to James Levine of the *Mayo Clinic* in Scottsdale, Arizona. And Tom Rath, in his book, *Eat Move Sleep*, called sitting “the most underrated health threat of modern times. He claims that after sitting for two hours your good cholesterol drops by 20 percent.

Standing up and moving around, on the other hand, is mentally stimulating and keeps the brain sharp. It also feels better when you get a chance to change your position and stretch every so often. Most chairpersons schedule stretch breaks anyway – so why not integrate stretch breaks into your longer meetings by having people stand-up during discussion sessions or as you summarize what has been agreed upon after a 20-minute module? It would be just as healthy as offering fruit and water at break time – and perhaps more popular.

4.4 THE 60-MINUTE MODULAR MEETING

Deadlines make us more efficient without detracting from the effectiveness of our meetings. To minimize the impact of Parkinson’s Law (activities expanding to fill the time allowed for them) you might try breaking all your meetings into one-hour modules. Most meetings can’t be completed in their entirety in one hour. Others may need several one-hour modules. But outlaw open-ended meetings that have a long list of agenda items and no timeframes. They invariably consume more time than necessary.

Draw up an agenda with the 80/20 Rule in mind. (20% of the items on the agenda represent 80% of the value that will be obtained from the meeting.) The first one-hour module contains the most significant items. The second one-hour module, if one is needed, contains more items, but of less importance. If a third hour is needed, group all the remaining items into this one-hour module.

By doing this, the amount of time spent on agenda items is proportional to the importance of the items, rather than by the number of items discussed. You have also prioritized the order of business, and have built in deadlines – which will further increase efficiency. And if someone has to leave early, they will not miss any key issues.

All the personal anecdotes, news, reviews, and shaggy dog stories can be left until after the meeting, and limited to those people with nothing better to do with their time.

4.5 CONTROL THE DISCUSSIONS

Don’t allow discussions to drag out. 80% of the decisions you encounter are probably not worth more than a few minutes of the group’s time. Make decisions quickly when the impact of the decision would be minimal.

As far as your brain is concerned, less information frequently results in better decisions. Too many choices and too much information taxes the brain and depletes your mental energy. Researchers have found that coming to a decision often involves listening to two parts of the brain – one that relies on taking advice and the other on experience. The brain considers both views, sometimes conflicting, and makes a decision.

Experiments show that there is a finite amount of mental energy available for exerting self-control, willpower, problem solving and decision-making. Making decision after decision eventually leads to poor decisions. Similarly it has been shown that exerting willpower reduces your energy.

Too much mental exertion without breaks taxes the executive skills. In fact studies described in *Scientific American Mind* (May/June, 2011) have shown that people who exert themselves mentally gave up on problems sooner when presented with them immediately afterwards.

In decision-making, when too much information is available, the prefrontal cortex, home of your executive skills, goes into overload and you either don't make a decision or you make a poor one. In one study, grocery shoppers who were offered free sample of 24 jam flavors were less likely to buy anything at all compared to those shoppers who sampled only six flavors. And when people are given information on fifty rather than ten options in an online store, they choose lower-quality options. The main reason for this is the limited capacity of the brain's working memory. It can hold about seven items; anything more must be processed into long-term memory.

4.6 BE DECISIVE AS A GROUP

Slow decision-making waste time, as do spur-of-the moment decisions, which usually result in costly and time-consuming mistakes. But the worst thing you can do is to procrastinate on decision-making. And often chairpersons, experiencing a long discussion period and with a meeting threatening to go overtime, postpone a decision until the next meeting.

Napoleon Hill, author of *Think and Grow Rich*, once conducted a survey of successful people and found all of them were decisive. Don't be afraid of not making the best possible decision. We learn from our mistakes; but if we do nothing, we neither accomplish anything nor learn anything.

Discuss the problem until you have enough information, but don't wait until you have *all* the information. If you have all the information, the course of action becomes a foregone conclusion: no real decision is necessary. Have the courage to make decisions with only 70 to 80% of the facts.

Spend time on any problem in proportion to the importance of the decision. For instance, don't waste a lot of time discussing the menu for the staff Christmas party. The decision to close down an operation or expand the product line warrants a greater expenditure of that costly commodity call time. Make minor decisions quickly. If the consequence of the decision is not important, it is not worth much of the group's valuable time. For example, don't spend \$1,000 in peoples' salaries discussing whether you should turn down a request for a \$100 purchase.

There may be an occasion where the impact of the decision warrants a special meeting to discuss that one item. In that case, delay is essential. Also, if the decision is yours alone to make, and you seem to get bogged down in the process, and get frustrated by your lack of progress, it's frequently faster in the long run to leave the problem for a short period of time. When you have mulled over the facts and considered, the alternatives, sleep on it. Decisions are usually better after a good night's sleep. Work on some unrelated jobs for a few hours or even a few days and then tackle the problem anew. The change in pace will revitalize your thinking. But delay it only once or you will be tempted to procrastinate.

Whether as an individual or a group, always make short-term decisions with long-term objectives in mind. Don't make a band aid decision that solves the immediate problem, but results in time-consuming problems further down the road. And above all, don't waste time on past decisions. Instead of saying "I if only we had done such and such," say instead, "Next time we will."

4.7 THE HIGH COST OF MEETINGS

Inadequate planning steals precious time. If you want to check the cost of this time take a look at Exhibit 2. If you have ten people in attendance, earning an average of \$35 per hour, the meeting is costing you \$5.83 *per minute*. If you only lose 10 minutes looking for a spare bulb or magic marker, this simple slip in planning has cost you \$58.30.

With the same table you can calculate that a 4-hour meeting will cost you \$1399.20. And that's an understatement because time spent in meetings is time taken away from other critical activities. Judge the importance of a meeting by the results you get from it; because it's costing you!

I recommend you purchase an App that will allow you to not only time the meeting, but also determine the cost of each meeting and even set a budget for it. One such App is *Meeting Timer*, *Marco Meeting iOS App* at \$1.39 plus tax from the Apple store. Once the meeting participants are aware of the actual cost of meetings, they will also realize that wasting time is wasting money.

No. of Participants	Average hourly wage of participants						
	\$15	\$20	\$25	\$30	\$35	\$40	\$45
2	.50	.67	.83	1.00	1.17	1.33	1.50
3	.75	1.00	1.24	1.50	1.75	2.00	2.25
4	1.00	1.33	1.66	2.00	2.33	2.66	3.00
5	1.25	1.67	2.07	2.50	2.92	3.33	3.75
6	1.50	2.00	2.48	3.00	3.50	3.99	4.50
7	1.75	2.33	2.90	3.50	4.07	4.67	5.25
8	2.00	2.66	3.32	4.00	4.67	5.32	6.00
9	2.25	3.00	3.73	4.50	5.25	6.00	6.75
10	2.50	3.34	4.14	5.00	5.83	6.66	7.50
11	2.75	3.67	4.56	5.50	6.41	7.33	8.25
12	3.00	4.00	4.96	6.00	7.00	8.00	9.00



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No. of Participants	Average hourly wage of participants						
	\$15	\$20	\$25	\$30	\$35	\$40	\$45
13	3.25	4.34	5.39	6.50	7.58	8.67	9.75
14	3.50	4.66	5.83	7.00	8.14	9.34	10.50
15	3.75	5.01	6.25	7.50	8.75	10.00	11.25
16	4.00	5.33	6.67	8.00	9.34	10.64	12.00
17	4.25	5.68	7.08	8.50	9.92	11.33	12.75
18	4.50	6.00	7.50	9.00	10.50	12.00	13.50
19	4.75	6.35	7.91	9.50	11.08	12.66	14.25
20	5.00	6.68	8.33	10.00	11.66	13.32	15.00
21	5.25	6.93	8.74	10.50	12.24	14.00	15.75
22	5.50	7.35	9.17	11.00	12.82	14.66	16.50
23	5.75	7.66	9.57	11.50	13.40	15.33	17.25
24	6.00	8.00	10.00	12.00	14.00	16.00	18.00
25	6.25	8.33	10.41	12.50	14.58	16.67	18.75
26	6.50	8.67	10.83	13.00	15.16	17.34	19.50
27	6.75	9.00	11.25	13.50	15.74	18.00	20.25
28	7.00	9.33	11.67	14.00	16.28	18.68	21.00
29	7.25	9.67	12.09	14.50	16.86	19.33	21.75
30	7.50	10.00	12.50	15.00	17.50	20.00	22.50

Exhibit 2: Cost per minute of meetings

5 BE A RESPONSIBLE PARTICIPANT

5.1 QUESTION THE VALUE OF YOUR ATTENDANCE

As a participant, you can't control the meeting; but you *can control yourself with respect to the meetings*. Try not to attend time-wasting meetings. If you have doubts about the necessity of your presence, ask. Maybe you were on the invitation list so you wouldn't feel you were being passed over. There's a lot of politics at play in organizations.

Some people go to great lengths to observe protocol. After all, they wouldn't want you to get your nose out of joint. "Jack, this meeting next Thursday. Is it really imperative that I be there?" That's all it takes. You may be surprised at the reply. If the person hesitates, go on to explain the critical tasks you're working on. If it's your boss, he or she is as concerned as you about how you spend your time. Maybe a copy of the minutes and a brief phone call to the chairperson afterwards is all that is necessary to keep you on stream with the meeting's objectives. But don't attend unless you feel that particular meeting is a high priority.

If the only reason you have to be there is to present a report, ask if you can attend only *that* portion of the meeting. There should be an agenda detailing the time allotted for your report. If there isn't, ask for one. And make sure you know the objective of the meeting. If there's no objective it's probably not worth attending.

If you have reviewed the agenda, and feel you are unable to contribute to achieving its objective in any way, ask to be excused from attending. Your time is valuable. People should not be subjected to lengthy meetings if only a half hour is of importance to them and if they cannot increase the other attendees' effectiveness by being present. So don't hesitate to suggest that you leave early to fulfill other commitments.

Alternatively, you might ask if you could leave once the remaining agenda items have no relevance to you or your department or function. And don't forget the alternative of sending someone else in your place. It doesn't make sense to pay \$100 per hour for something you can get for \$25 per hour.

If you have considered the above alternatives, and decide to attend the full meeting yourself, it's probably because you feel it's important enough to warrant your attendance – and your time. But be on guard. Meetings can have meaningful objectives and timed agendas, and still take twice as long as they should. It depends on the chairperson and the other participants. And it depends on your active participation as well.

5.2 BE PREPARED FOR THE MEETING

Before you attend a meeting, be prepared. Have all your meeting material in one folder or binder. If it's an on-going committee, you could have a 3-ring binder with material separated by tabbed dividers. Break down the categories as much as possible so you can find material quickly. Minutes of previous meetings should have all important items highlighted with a yellow marker. Invariably time is wasted by people searching for past records, reports or documents. If your binder is complete and properly organized, you can save everyone some time.

If you have to submit a report, complete it early and distribute it in advance. But bring spare copies with you. There are always people who claim they never received it. (There are even a few who admit they never looked at it or forgot to bring it.)

Arrive on time but not too early. If you show up late, you are telling everyone that your time is more valuable than their time – or at least that you don't respect their time. If you arrive too early you could get involved in non-productive conversations. Aim for five or ten minutes before the meeting starts. You can always work on your routine tasks until the meeting starts.

Choose your seat carefully. Avoid sitting next to the notorious joke tellers, loud talkers, or the attendees who fan all their materials in front of them to cover all the table space. Don't sit near the coffee pot, telephone or doorway or you'll be constantly interrupted. You might pick a roomy spot between two introverts so you can concentrate on the meeting's objectives and help speed it along its way.

Put your smartphone or other hand-held device on airplane mode while in the meeting so you can still have access to the time and other information without being interrupted by email, text messages or phone calls.

During the meeting, help keep the chairperson on track. If someone starts discussing an entirely different issue, quickly ask the chairperson if this is to be added to the agenda. And don't be sidetracked yourself. If the jokester asks, "Have you heard the one about..." quickly reply, good naturedly, "Yes, it's hilarious," and continue talking about the meeting – "Martha, on that last point, have we concluded that..." Don't react emotionally to anything being discussed. Don't allow yourself to be baited. It's a business meeting so keep it impersonal. Anger, resentment, and petty grievances not only waste time but make you less effective at making rational decisions. When discussing items on the agenda, show respect for the person speaking since you will expect the same respect when it's your turn to speak. But speak to a point only if you have something to say. People stop listening to those who speak just for the sake of speaking.

Remember that you are part of a group making decisions as a group. You should accept the outcome and support it even if you were against it during the discussion period.

5.3 TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN THE MEETING

Don't pass notes to the chairperson or others. Communication stops while notes are being passed because everybody's mind is on that note. It interrupts the meeting, creates a feeling of resentment among some participants, and *wastes time*. If you have something to say, speak up. But don't feel you *have* to talk. Speak only if you have something to say that will help reach the meeting's objectives.

Be an active listener and make notes. Use the *Meeting Participant's Action Sheet* to record major points, decisions reached and follow-ups required. If you have found it necessary to attend the meeting, then it's necessary to get all you can out of it. You want value for your money. You owe it to yourself and the others to help keep the meeting productive. The action sheet that I used in meetings is shown in Exhibit 3.

For example, if you see that it's approaching lunch hour and there's only about an hour of business left to be conducted, suggest that lunch be delayed until the meeting is finished. Don't waste time attending an additional meeting unless absolutely necessary.

When the meeting is over, don't wait for the minutes to arrive before taking any necessary action; you may wait a long time. And you may even forget what certain statements in the minutes were meant to communicate. Instead, take action right away based on the information in your *Meeting Participant's Action Sheet*. Always allow time immediately after the meeting to take action or to at least schedule time in your planner for later action. If you simply leave it as an item on a "To Do" list, you might postpone it indefinitely. If anything important enough to do, make an appointment with yourself in your planner to get it done.

The form is titled "MEETING PARTICIPANTS ACTION SHEET" and features a logo of an hourglass. It includes fields for "NAME OF GROUP:" and "DATE:" at the top, followed by a line for "IN ATTENDANCE:". Below these is a table with five columns: "AGENDA ITEM", "DECISION REACHED", "ACTION REQUIRED", "PERSON RESPONSIBLE", and "COMPLETION DATE". The table is currently empty. At the bottom left, it says "© 1988 Harold Taylor Time Consultants Inc." and at the bottom right, "Form No. P5".

Exhibit 3: Meeting Participant's Action Sheet

5.4 HOW TO LISTEN EFFECTIVELY

Not knowing how to listen effectively can waste time, cause stress, and generate costly communication problems. But there's more to effective listening than meets the ear. It's hard work. It requires an active participation in the communication process. It takes effort and practice.

It requires that we break habits that have been forming since childhood. One such habit is interrupting the speaker. Many of us are impatient. Some of us can't even stand pauses. We want to rush in with more words. Even when we're not speaking, we're not necessarily listening. We're rehearsing what we're going to say, once it's our turn.

Don't be a passive listener. Be an active listener. Lean forward to demonstrate your interest in the speaker. Establish eye contact. Resist the temptation to let your eyes wander or glance at your watch. Devote full attention to the speaker. If you're genuinely interested in people, listening is a lot easier.

We can speak at about 125 words per minute but we can listen at least four times as fast. With all this spare time to kill, our mind wanders, daydreams, goes on little mental excursions, and by the time it returns we have missed something. Reluctant to admit we were not listening, we guess – and frequently misinterpret what was said.

The secret is to stay with the speaker, and use the spare time by reviewing and summarizing what is being said. Listen between the lines, observe those non-verbal gestures, and evaluate the points being made, but stick with the speaker. Resist the urge to interrupt or to start formulating your own reply. Listening is a skill that can be developed through practice. And it can also save time.

5.5 DEATH BY POWERPOINT

You have probably already heard most of the criticisms of how PowerPoint is being used in training programs and meetings. More and more, critics are claiming that PowerPoint is a crutch for the presenter rather than a learning tool for the audience. The slides could encourage presenters to talk to the screen rather than their audience, produce needless repetition when the trainer reads them word for word, and overwhelm the audience with the number of words on the screen.

Mark Ellwood, who specializes in improving meetings and teambuilding (terrific meetings.com) even suggests a “one-breath-rule” for keeping the PowerPoint copy brief: “Look at your slide, take a deep breath, and try to say all the words on your slide in one breath. If you can't make it through, then you've got too many words.”

If you use PowerPoint, keep the bullet points brief, be prepared to explain each point in your own words, and use them to enhance the learning experience – such as linking the points to brief video clips or explanatory photographs. And remember, everything in moderation.

5.6 ATTENTION SPANS ARE DECREASING

After about the tenth PowerPoint slide, you start losing the attention of the participants. If you put less information on each slide, slides flow more quickly, and adding graphics make them more interesting; but you're only extending the inevitable. Attention spans in general are decreasing. Regardless of whether you blame it on the Internet and digital technology or the impatience of people, the fact is we *do* have to consider this fact when managing meetings. And brain research does confirm that variety is the spice of life.

You might consider using PowerPoint sporadically, three or four slides at a time, interspersing them with "show and tell," discussion, object lessons or whatever. You might link them to brief three-minute video clips that illustrate the point you're trying to make. You can have 100 or more slides if you like; but don't use them all. It may be impossible to predict the precise slides that will be relevant to the discussions. But you can cover a lot of bases.

Unless it's a canned speech or presentation that you are making, you will be delivering the information that the participants want and need – not necessarily what you want to deliver. The focus should be on application, not just knowledge.

So be prepared. Make a copy of all your slides in the order you think they will be needed, six slides to a page, and number them all consecutively. Then you can glance at these sheets and quickly show the desired slide by pressing the slide's number followed by *Enter* on your laptop. Remain flexible.

PowerPoint is still an effective tool for both training and presenting information; but it should be one of many – and used to emphasize a point, not to carry the presentation.

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7 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harold Taylor, CEO of *TaylorInTime*, has been speaking, writing and conducting training programs on the topic of effective time management for over 40 years. He has written more than 20 books, including a Canadian bestseller, *Making Time Work For You*. He has developed over 50 time management products that have sold in 38 countries around the world. His monthly Time Report has been published for twenty-five years and he has had over 250 articles accepted for publication.

A past director of the National Association of Professional Organizers, Harold received their Founder's Award in 1999 for outstanding contributions to the organizing profession. He received the CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) designation in 1987 from the National Speakers Association. In 1998 the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers inducted him into the Canadian Speaking Hall of Fame. And in 2001, he received the Founder's Award from the Professional Organizers in Canada. The award has been named in his honor.

Prior to his speaking and writing career, Harold held management positions in industry for twelve years and was a teaching master in the business division of Humber College in Toronto for eight years. He has been an entrepreneur for forty years, incorporating four companies during that time. Since 1981, when he incorporated the time management company, *Harold Taylor Time Consultants Inc.*, he has presented over 2000 workshops, speeches and keynotes on the topic of time and life management.