

Managing Meetings

By John Vamos

I seriously can't believe it! You read the title of this article and yet you decided to read on! It gives me no end of pleasure of course to be the first one in the world to put pen to paper on this robust and exciting topic. However, if you have read this far, then I guess you are looking for some answers. Answers you hope will get to a point where you have this major business challenge under control.

Let's start this way:

"In my business we run regular meetings, these meetings always conform to pre-determined time limits. The right people always attend and we use the meeting to push the agenda for business forward. Our set agendas make it easy to cover the topics we need to and we track all the Key Performance Indicators of the business."

OK now who in the readership can say that? I'm overwhelmed as I can imagine all the hands going straight up in the air! Here's my hunch: you can't say it, but you would like to. And if you would like to, then I have some answers.

It starts at the Top

Like anything else, if you own the business and you are a meeting re-scheduler, then you are dead in the water with this one. So step one is to accept the fact that businesses that can make the statement above are better than businesses that cannot. You are welcome to challenge me on that - any time, anywhere.

I spend my life coaching workgroups so I know as I arrive with our tools for workgroup improvement whether or not I find a strong meeting-regime in place. Having a strong meeting-regime – or developing one when it's absent - doesn't always make all the difference. But it can.

Let me share with you how I get businesses to recognise this fact. I ask them "Who is the most important client you have, the biggest?" After they predictably go through the list of clients they would gladly miss a staff meeting for, I ask them again to think about the question. Hint: Which client is so big they actually sign our pay cheques? You've got it – WE are our biggest client. So, I guess we are worth spending one hour a week on our meeting.

If you cannot convince yourself of this fact read no further as I have failed you!

THE AGENDA IS KING

I've said it before, I'll say it again "A meeting without an Agenda will achieve everything on it". Here is a simple way to get the Agenda right. Think of the ten most important things the 'workgroup' must accomplish week in week out. Type these up and have the sheet of paper laminated. Game over: Agenda written. The fact is that everything you need to talk about is either on that list, or you will be reminded by the list. People who type up a new agenda for every meeting are not smart about their business or don't have enough to do.

TIME LIMITS

My own attitude to this: If you don't give me a guaranteed ending time for our meeting, I will not be there. At the conclusion of the promised time allotment, I'm outta there. Anyway, I will probably have booked my next commitment based on your undertaking.



We have two key business meetings in our business that involve me:

BUSINESS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

This meeting goes for one hour and covers nothing but our Business Plan. This meeting is bi-monthly. The Manager of our Resource Centre meets with every staff member for half an hour a week to make sure they are OK with running their Business versus their core business responsibilities. They also meet monthly for three hours as a team. I'm not invited to that meeting.

SMART MEETING

The second we call the SMART meeting (Senior Management Action and Response Team). The name alone tells you that and although we don't take ourselves too seriously, we take this meeting very seriously. It happens once a month – you can guess who attends – and it goes on all day.

We effectively make every important decision that shapes the future of BCS on this day. The days are scheduled a year in advance and missing them is our equivalent of a letter of resignation. Get it? Yes people do come back from overseas for the day. It's that important and it is the foundation of our communication and accountability.

Want to know what the Agenda looks like?

It has the names of the senior management team. Under each name are the Five Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) by which that person is measured. For each KPI there is a report that tells us how we are going versus where we should be. We look at the differences – group hug if we are ahead of target, warm handshakes if we are on target and much poking fun at the incumbent if we are behind target. If we are behind, we simply ask, was the prediction valid? If yes, what happened? If we don't know we decide how we find out and if we do know we decide how we claw back the losses.

Needless to say, the Business Plan also gets a run at the SMART meeting, as do the traditional staff and other issues. We may involve those members of a senior manager's team who prepared a report on a sub-area for their manager.

This whole meeting thing is desperately important to me because without it I would be wondering how things are going. With the meeting schedule a genuine 'happening thing', I relax. I know that I will get the opportunity to raise issues and the Agenda is struck in such a way that I never go away wondering if I remembered everything.

For my team, well I can leave them alone. There is no need to pester them. They have the KPI's and the meeting schedule to keep them focused. I do all my guiding, suggesting, provoking etc on that day and sit back and do my job and let them do theirs the rest of the time.

If I didn't already believe in meetings, I've just managed to convince myself. Hope you are convinced too!

