

Cost Versus Revenue: How Do Your Meetings Stack Up? **by Linda Hanson**

Construction companies make or lose most of their money out on the jobsite, not back in the office. Or do they? One of the business world's most universal rituals is meetings. They can happen on the job site or in the office and they can cause you to lose money.

Statistics show that most managers spend one-quarter of their working lives in meetings, and yet at least half of all meeting time is wasted. In addition, when firms require field employees to be in meetings with supervisors or managers their contributions to the bottom-line are lost if meetings are not handled correctly.

Cost Versus Revenue Enhancer

Meetings that enhance revenue don't just happen--they are designed. The first thing you need for a successful meeting is an agreement among people that meetings are a time for real work to take place--not just a time to have a cup of coffee or shoot the breeze. In addition, some employees only attend meetings because they feel they have to and therefore are not committed to the meeting agenda. Meetings become a major cost when managers and their staff are multi-tasking, running in and out of meetings for phone calls or to deal with problems, and are not fully engaged. This type of behavior sends the signal that your staff is not committed to the meeting, that they are not in control of their jobs, and that you are not in control of the meeting.

You may call a meeting for a variety of different reasons but it is important to realize that different meetings require different kinds of conversations and different outcomes. For instance, a group can come together to generate ideas but not to make decisions. Other meetings are built around a conversation for opportunity where you do not reach a final decision but narrow down the field of ideas or options. Some meetings are necessary to share new information or deal with problems. Finally, there are meetings that are built around a need for action. The goal is to decide, to commit. For example, "We want to leave this meeting with three expansion ideas for this fiscal year." "We want to leave this meeting with a decision on what to do about this problem."

If you are the manager don't assume that everyone understands the reason for the meeting or you can run into some basic problems: a brainstorming meeting where people are afraid to speak up because someone might shoot down their idea--or worse, someone might say, "Let's do it." Or you set a budget meeting, with a goal of action, and someone loops back to an idea that was rejected earlier--that will drive everyone else crazy. If you call a meeting, make it clear to people what kind of conversation the meeting is going to have and then impose a certain amount of discipline on them. If participants come to a meeting with clear expectations about how everyone should act and then the meeting lives up to such expectations, the participants will feel like they've had a really good

experience. If the meeting does not meet those expectations, then people will become upset, withdraw or always arrive late.

Set the Rules of Engagement

Set the rules of engagement for your meetings. For instance, start and end on time, have a clear objective and set rules on how people will act. This last point is critical. Some rules for how people should act are:

- ~~/~~ Senior people can only speak after junior people speak.
- ~~/~~ Before anyone makes a point, they need to find merit in the point made by the previous speaker.
- ~~/~~ Schedule 5 minutes for social or open time to encourage people to relate to each other.
- ~~/~~ Tell attendees to leave computers and work at their desk.
- ~~/~~ Put cell phones and pagers on vibrate and unless there is a real emergency, call back when you are on break.
- ~~/~~ Break every hour, if it is a long meeting.
- ~~/~~ Keep the majority of your meetings to thirty minutes by boiling down the crux of the meeting to the following questions. What's the most important problem in front of us now? What are the most crucial issues facing us? What are the most pressing challenges we face? What opportunities do these ideas, issues, and challenges present? What actions can we take now?
- ~~/~~ Develop and follow a tight agenda.

If you are leading a meeting, people expect you to move the group toward a decision, so you need to act accordingly. Running a good meeting is a skill that few people have mastered. Yet in the real world, most ideas get hatched at meetings. As the meeting leader, remember that you send both verbal and non-verbal messages. Since actions speak louder than words use the following nonverbal messages:

1. If you are in charge sit at the head of the table to signal you are in charge.
2. Stand while others are sitting to signal you have the floor.
3. Ask a team member to run the meeting if you want to signal that you want to share leadership.
4. To signal you are with the team, sit on one side of the table.

Enhance Revenue

Use meetings to distribute information, make decisions and work together as a team to create spirit and enthusiasm. Running effective meetings will put the enthusiasm back in your team, ensure the proper information is received, reduce costs due to wasted time, and ensure commitment. Keeping a tight schedule, being in control of the meeting and getting results ensures revenue enhancement. The return to your company in productivity, quality work, motivation, and staff loyalty will be exponential!

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