Conduct meetings people will want to attend

by Helen Wilkie

When I was in the corporate world, there was a verncular term for meetings: “sit down”. People would say to each other, “I’ll read your report on the proposed project, and then we’ll sit down.” Trouble was, sometimes that’s all they did—they sat down! Nothing much was achieved at these meetings.

But certain people were known for conducting useful, efficient meetings that accomplished their objectives and didn’t waste people’s time. Nobody minded attending those. These efficient meeting leaders had two things in common: they called only necessary meetings, and they didn’t allow the discussions to wander off track. You too can accomplish these objectives for your meetings.

Before you call that meeting, ask yourself if it is really necessary, or if your objective could more easily be achieved by other means. What about a series of telephone calls? Could you just send out e-mail messages to the appropriate people? Perhaps even the lowly memo would serve the same purpose. If your purpose is simply to give out information, with little or no two-way interaction, one of these is often the most effective vehicle. Why take busy people away from their desks for a set amount of time (usually too much time) and sit them around a table—just so that you can fire information at them?

On the other hand, action-oriented, decision-making discussions often demand the face-to-face interaction that is only possible at a meeting. So, how do you decide? Here are three indications of the need for a meeting.

Issue under discussion needs input from several people

You must write a report with a recommendation to Management. You call Bob and ask for information, which you receive. But it also brings up a question you hadn’t considered before and only Jessica has the answer. When you call, she is out of town for three days but her assistant directs you to Tom. He thinks he knows, but just needs to be sure about one point and he will get back to you as soon as he talks to Jack. And on and on and on. You’ve been there, haven’t you?

This scenario lends itself to a meeting, convened for a time when everyone is available, at which information can be exchanged and discussed to the point where you have all you need for the report and recommendation.

Helen Wilkie is a partner in MHW Communications
90 Warren Road, Suite 202, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 2S2
Tel: (416) 966-5023 • e-mail: hwilkie@mhwcom.com
www.mhwcom.com • www.masteringbusinesswriting.com
www.communi-keys.com

Potential conflicts

There's a very good reason the courts don't allow "hearsay evidence"—it usually can't be trusted, particularly if one party to a conversation is not there to confirm or deny the substance. If you are at all concerned that the issue under discussion is seen in various lights by different interested parties, the best course is to bring them all together and put the issue on the table for discussion. Then there can be no doubt later about what anyone said.

Commitment needed from several people

The Production Department is ready to manufacture the new widget. The Marketing Department has plans in place to put it on the market. Finance has crunched the numbers but still has questions. Are we ready to go? No. The systems people are not sure they can incorporate the new product into the system in the projected time. Steps will need to be taken to resolve the problem, and in the end all departments must commit to their parts in the product launch. A face-to-face meeting is the best platform for discussion of this situation.

Staying on track

In an orchestra, every musician knows his or her individual part of the music, but without the conductor they would all go at varying speeds, perhaps insert their own improvisations, and rarely finish at the same time. Along the way, the clashes would completely spoil the music.

In a meeting, the leader is the conductor, without whose firm hand the meeting is likely to go off in all directions and never meet its objective. Here are a few tips on how to keep your meeting on track.

- Make sure the attendees include at least one person who can supply necessary information. Few meeting woes are more frustrating than having a detailed discussion come to nothing because nobody present could supply needed data on which to base a decision. The specialist might be someone from another department or even from outside the organization. This person may need to attend only for part of the discussion, but it is crucial to have the input available.

- Some people are born critics. You've probably run into certain people at meetings who always disagree with any proposal on the table. They always have a problem with every suggestion—and never, of course, have suggestions of their own to offer. Typically, their body language demonstrates their attitude: folded arms, slight condescending sneer, rueful shaking of the head. These people are always, as my mother used to say, "agin the government". The best way to handle them is to make them prove their point:

- I can see you don't agree, John. What is your specific problem with this idea?
- Janice, since you evidently don't go along with the plan, can you explain to us what the difficulty is?
- You've mentioned several times that this won't work, George, but can you explain exactly why not?

If you do this every time, they will soon grow tired of having to justify themselves and begin to think before automatically disagreeing with everyone. When one person is a nuisance in this way, everyone else will be on your side and happy to have the troublemaker silenced.

• Side issues can arise in the midst of discussions, completely throwing the agenda off track. Suppose, for example, you have decided to hold a client seminar as part of the marketing effort. Too often, the discussion degenerates into details of where to hold it, whether and how to cater food, etc. When this happens, your meeting is doomed. Solution? Appoint a committee to handle the details and logistics. Set a date and time for them to report back to the group with decisions on time, place, numbers, catering and other logistical details. Then move on to the next agenda item.

• Some people like the sound of their own voices, hogging the floor and stopping others from having their say. The simplest way to deal with this is to limit the length of speaking time for each person. If you make this clear at the outset, you can easily step in and tell someone his or her time is up and they must give others a chance to speak.

• What if discussion shows no sign of waning because of a variety of opinions? A simple way to end discussion is to take a vote. You may vote on whether to continue the discussion at another time, perhaps with written submissions beforehand; or you may vote on the decision itself. In any case, a vote is a time-honoured method of closing a discussion.

Using these techniques, develop the reputation for holding only necessary meetings that meet their objectives in the time allotted. Then people will not mind attending them, as they will be seen as time well spent.

Helen Wilkie is a keynote speaker and workshop facilitator who focuses on the link between communication and productivity. Her keynotes and workshops cover the specific skills of communication, such as writing, presenting and meeting skills, as well as the importance of communication at work. She is the author of "The Hidden Profit Center: a tale of profits lost and found through communication", Reach her at 416-966-5023 or hwilkie@mhwcom.com. Watch video clips on her main website at http://www.mhwcom.com to get a feel for her platform style and audience response.