

/IN PRACTICE/

## 60 Minutes You'll Never Get Back

By Merrick Rosenberg

IN LIFE, we have three commodities that we can spend—time, money, and energy—and meetings consume them all. However, not all meetings are created equal. Consider the following two teams' meetings:

**Team 1.** Each week, all the members of this management team gather together so that the manager can give a weekly update. Each person shares information about what he is working on, speaking for approximately five minutes, and then sits silently for the remaining hour. All gain a full understanding of the key challenges facing their fellow teammates.

People leave the meeting feeling like it was valuable for the manager, but not for them. They feel drained.

**Team 2.** Each week, the members of Team 2 convene briefly to update each other on their work. However, here's where Team 1 and Team 2 part company: Most of Team 2's meeting is spent solving business issues.

Each team member submits a list of key challenges facing the team to the manager. The manager then prioritizes the issues and discusses a few at the meeting. Whoever submitted the key issue leads the discussion and ensures that each person participates.

After an hour, the team disperses, but the participants often find themselves continuing the dialogue in the hallway. This group has worked together as a team and leaves feeling cohesive and energized.

### The cost

All meetings take time, making them an important part of work life. Sure it's only one hour a week, but hours quickly turn into days and days turn into weeks. A regular one-hour weekly meeting accounts for a full workweek of time each year. Multiply that time for every person in the meeting and it equals several months of

potentially lost productivity.

Meetings also cost money. Consider the burn rate for your weekly staff meeting. (To determine a meeting's burn rate, add together attendees' salaries for the amount of time that they are spending in that meeting.) A single weekly staff meeting costs hundreds of dollars per meeting and tens of thousands of dollars per year.

From a personal perspective, meetings can either drain energy or build it. Typical status update meetings (like Team 1's meeting) function like an energy vampire that literally sucks the life force from your team.

### The value

Bill Gates once said, "Meetings that largely involve status updates are signs of poor information flow." Meetings based on passive listening are boring and generally don't build teamwork or improve results. While it's important to keep people informed, meetings may not be the best forum to do that.

Meetings should engage people, not leave them drained. Attendees should be thinking and contributing, not daydreaming. Effective leaders know that trust and open communication are required both inside and outside of the meeting to build teamwork, create a shared sense of purpose, and lead to better results.

Effective leaders should

- establish a forum for team members to provide project updates outside of meetings and hold people accountable for staying up-to-date
- ask targeted questions to elicit thinking and discussion, rather than to simply share data
- create a safe meeting environment in which all ideas are considered and met with positive encouragement
- convey with words and actions that active participation is expected and require input from all attendees
- ensure that each meeting addresses

specific challenges by gaining input, determining next steps, and assigning accountability.

In *Death by Meeting*, Patrick M. Lencioni wrote, "There is simply no substitute for a good meeting...a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement, when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team."

If your meetings are a place where minutes are kept, but hours are lost, then perhaps you need to change their structure. Effective meetings address employee challenges and ensure that each meeting member actively shares information and insights. Your staff should walk away feeling like a real contribution was made and your company has reaped the reward. That's time well spent.

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