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You Don't Need A Gulag To Run An Effective Meeting

Tips for keeping your meeting running on track and on time

We've all experienced the never-ending meeting – the one that's supposed to last one hour, but instead drags on for 2½ hours, because of side discussions and interesting – but completely tangential – points. It's enough to make you swear off of meetings and rely exclusively on . . . email. Or to turn you into Stalin and make you banish people who talk too much to a gulag.

But you don't have to be a tyrant to have productive meetings that cover the necessary ground in the allotted time. Here's how to do it.

A clear objective eliminates most problems. Participants in a meeting are genuinely trying to be helpful. They want to add value and contribute to the health of the company. But if they don't know what the objective of the meeting is, you can't blame them for bringing up irrelevant topics.

When you distribute the meeting agenda in advance (which you always do, right?), you should also clearly state the objective in big, bold, beautiful letters right at the top of the page. Remember that an objective is a *goal*, not a *description* of the meeting. So, "Implementation of New Pricing Policy" is not an objective (unless your goal is to ensure unproductive digressions). "Develop A Communication Strategy for Price Increase" is a clear goal that tells participants where the meeting is going and keeps them focused on the destination. Remember, meetings don't go off-topic; people do.

The parking lot – respect, security, and no need to reserve a space. Even with an agenda and a clear objective, participants will inevitably raise unrelated ideas that are valuable – just not at that meeting. Quashing those ideas is bad for morale and runs the risk of having people call you a dictator. Unless you like the thought of employees goose-stepping to your command, you need to handle their contributions respectfully. That's where the parking lot comes in.

Use a whiteboard or an easel with paper as the "parking lot" for their ideas. Let the people know that their contributions are important and that you (or even the group) will discuss it at a later date, but that right now everyone should focus on today's objective. Making their ideas clearly visible demonstrates your respect for them, gives them security that you will address it at some point, and allows the meeting to move smoothly forward.

Catching lightning in a bottle. Sometimes the side discussion or the off-topic idea is too good to pass up. You (or the group) decide that there's more value to be gained by pursuing this topic than the original purpose of the meeting. That's fine: while an

agenda is a vital tool for managing a meeting, you don't want to shackle participants so completely as to stifle creative thinking. So how do you catch that lightning?

Get the group's attention and then say: "Excuse me, I don't think this conversation is on-topic, but I'd like to check to see if it's important to pursue now." If everyone feels that they ought to pursue this new topic, then do so – but with these two important caveats. First, the meeting still needs to end at its designated time. Your team has other commitments they have to fulfill. Second, you must choose another time to complete your original agenda. You may find that people are less eager to abandon it when they realize that they're signing up for an additional meeting. Irrespective of the group's decision, you will have demonstrated respect for their time and ideas, without compromising your ability to accomplish your goals.

As the leader of the meeting, it's your responsibility to avoid topic drift while ensuring that people feel respected. Follow these steps, and you'll have more efficient meetings without fomenting a revolution in the ranks.

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