

Why Are We Meeting Like This?

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"I'm super excited about my new career path, and I know I won't miss the daily grind of academe for one second (especially the meetings -- those endless, soul-sucking meetings)." -- Anonymous Colleague

Meetings among colleagues are commonplace in every organization. Academe is no exception. We have meetings for our specific schools, departments and units, not to mention the additional task forces, subcommittees, working groups, teams, ad-hoc groups, councils or advisory panels -- with each designed to help us serve the institution.

But have you ever met anyone who genuinely feels that most of these meetings are useful, productive, efficient or enjoyable? Me neither.

I can only speculate that we continue having so many meetings because of a few good ones we had in the past -- we're hoping to recapture the magic. Perhaps that's why meetings are standard practice and a significant demand on everyone's time, especially for those in administrative roles. And certainly, collaborative, innovative, thoughtful and productive meetings are worthwhile.

But filling our calendars with unproductive meetings is illogical because we are all busy and do not have time to waste. Time is the ultimate nonrenewable resource, so we need to do more to conserve it. Meeting organizers and attendees need to ensure that the hours we spend together are worthwhile.

One way to have better meetings is to simply avoid the bad ones. In my 15-plus years of experience, here are the most common offenders.

No. 1. Your regularly scheduled meeting. When the calendar strikes a certain day and time, it dictates that you have a meeting. Why? Because you always do. It is a habit that exists for historical reasons -- for example, the meeting of the committee to oversee meetings always meets on the second Monday of the month. Routinely reserving time for important priorities is a wise strategy. But those meetings should only convene when people must make a clear decision, discuss a specific strategy or solve a particular problem -- not simply because the calendar says so.

No. 2. The directionless meeting. Often the byproduct of regularly scheduled meetings, directionless meetings commence with no agenda, an agenda sent within the last 24 hours or a spartan agenda with so few details as to be arbitrary. They flounder because they lack a clear purpose. The irony is that we would not teach a class without clear learning objectives for the day or have a course without a syllabus. Without a predetermined agenda or goals, the

discussion wanders aimlessly among loosely connected topics of questionable relevance to the group. Having a well-communicated plan will produce a more focused and ultimately productive meeting.

No. 3. The training meeting. Sometimes members in your group need to learn about new policy, procedure or, most typically, technology. While training is necessary, such meetings often take a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to differentiate those who truly need training from those who do not or who aren't able to immediately use it. It ignores the fact that attendees have different needs depending on comfort levels with technology, preferred methods of learning and previous experience.

In their worst forms, training meetings occur via online webinars that experience technical difficulties, requiring everyone to sit and wait for a resolution. Instead, training should be highly differentiated, user directed and timely. The meeting attendees, usually respected professionals and faculty members, should be allowed to select a format that works best for them and which trainings they need to attend.

No. 4. The preconceived meeting. Have you ever arrived at a meeting to discuss an issue, only to discover that the outcome was predetermined? Preconceived meetings happen when the people in charge already know what the outcome or decision will be but believe a meeting is necessary to rally others around the idea, give the appearance of collaboration or cover up the true top-down nature of the decision. In those cases, it would be better to simply be open and transparent about the decision. The meeting could then serve to explain the thought process and rationale behind it or to ask attendees to identify possible implementation issues and solutions.

No. 5. The meeting that could have been an email. Too often, the entire purpose of a meeting is to provide attendees with information, updates, new developments, reports or announcements. In their worst form, they are delivered as text-laden PowerPoint presentations that are read to the audience. Though the information is vital, the setting and format are not -- rather, such information is tailor-made for email. You should use the time in meetings to sit together as a group to discuss and share ideas, or for any type of interaction that is not possible over email.

No. 6. The Trees for the Forest meeting. These meetings have an agenda. The objective is to engage in big-picture strategic thinking and brainstorming. Done well, such meeting can be thought-provoking, aspirational and, most important, energizing. But that rarely happens, and instead, the meeting ends up focusing on smaller issues without identifying important broader themes or patterns. To avoid that, the person leading the meeting must keep the discussion focused, and attendees also need stay on topic and not seek to derail the conversation.

No. 7. The I Hate This Particular Tree meeting. These meetings start with some other stated purpose in mind but get hijacked. Most often, the new focus is a personal grievance or ax to grind that then quickly devolves into venting about related (or completely tangential) annoyances. Typically, those complaints are procedural or about technology or an undesirable

change at the institution. The individual points are valid, but they are often idiosyncratic to the person raising them, or the issue is not being raised with anyone capable of making a meaningful change. The problem is that complaining is contagious and without any way to directly address the underlying issues, bad feelings will fester.

No. 8. The guest speaker meeting. In this situation, the discussion often touches on questions that involve other areas on the campus -- enrollment management, facilities, advising, athletics and so on -- and a guest speaker from that area joins the group to answer them. That seems promising. But first, there is a long introduction rehashing the problem -- something that could have been put in an email. Next, the guest speaker makes an opening argument that often provides much more detail than necessary and touches on topics already familiar to those in attendance. ("Let me give you the history of this problem over the last few decades.") Upon finishing the lengthy preamble, the speaker opens the meeting up for discussion but, unfortunately, only a few minutes remain before the meeting ends.

No. 9. The run out the clock meeting. Ever notice how meetings rarely end early? If anything, meetings typically drag out past the predetermined end time, even when nothing meaningful is up for discussion. Yet because the meeting is set to run 75 minutes, it lasts more than 75 minutes. In those cases, the meeting leaders feel obligated to fill the time by pontificating on semi-relevant topics, or there is an extended period of announcements or an invited guest. They should instead end the meeting early; everyone will appreciate the bonus time.

No. 10. The kick the can down the road meeting. Some problems are not easy to solve, and many decisions are difficult or unpopular. To avoid uncomfortable interactions, or simply to buy more time, decisions are tabled for a future meeting or require another, smaller group to consider it. The larger group is then unable to proceed until the smaller group reports back. That inevitably takes several weeks because the group needs to coordinate schedules among members of both groups. It gives the appearance of a conscientious and responsible decision but only delays the inevitable. Complete unanimity is rare. Leaders of meetings need to embrace difficult conversations and work to resolve even the thorniest issues.

Everyone's Favorite Meeting

The best type of meeting is easily the canceled one. It should be. It's simple addition by subtraction and realistically should occur more frequently. If the meeting you are considering scheduling has any realistic chance of being one of these other types, cancel it. There is a general sense of meeting fatigue among administrators and faculty because we have all been in one too many bad meeting. Each type shares one thing in common: they waste time. By canceling a meeting, you communicate something very important: I value your time and do not want to waste it.

Meetings are a fact of academic life and can be essential to the institution's success. Simply by eliminating undesirable gatherings, our hours spent together with colleagues will be more efficient and productive. As a result, meeting attendance, enthusiasm for important service

roles and overall productivity will improve significantly.