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Talking Heads

How to call fewer but more meaningful meetings that actually yield results

Ever been in a meeting where you spent time fiddling with your smartphone just because you were bored? Or found yourself wondering why you had to leave that growing pile of work at your desk to attend yet another session in the conference room?

You are not alone.

In his new book *Read This Before Our Next Meeting!*, Al Pittampalli writes that the modern-day meeting is not a tool to share information that could be sent out in an email or a free-flowing session to generate new ideas. What it is, is an opportunity to support decisions.

“Team meetings are an important tool for managing a team’s tasks and ensuring productivity, but they can lead to a loss of interest among people if overdone or if conducted without adequate preparation and leadership skills,” says Prashant Bhatnagar, director (hiring) at technology firm SapienNitro in India. Gurgaon-based Bhatnagar says that at SapienNitro, 30-40% of the senior management’s time is spent in “team and functional meetings”, and at the junior to mid-level, employees spend 10-15% of work hours in meetings.

We asked human resource (HR) managers and division heads of companies how they are using, and changing, the meeting culture in their offices.

First, some ground rules

Going into the meeting, there must be a clear agenda, an outline of possible solutions and alternatives, and a proposed decision—the merits of which can then be debated in the meeting, says Pittampalli.

He adds that we engage in many different kinds of interactions in the office—the one-on-one conversation, the group work session and opportunities to brainstorm. None of these in the strictest sense is a meeting, which must be geared towards getting multiple, informed inputs on one clearly identified problem, and prune the suggestions down to select the one that works best.

There’s another set of “meetings” that is becoming popular in the modern Indian office, the daily update. Teams huddle around to talk about the previous day’s achievements, where they got stuck and the tasks to be completed that day.

At financial services firm Bajaj Capital in Delhi, “there’s a 7-minute daily huddle, in which the teams highlight three things that happened yesterday”, voice any dependencies on others and set the tasks to be completed on that day, says Sunaina

Mattoo Khanna, executive vice-president and head (HR), Bajaj Capital. “That meeting can’t be more than seven-eight people,” she adds.

What prevents this type of meeting from degenerating into a general chat session often is a tight structure—the agenda is to update everyone about where the teams stand vis-à-vis the current projects, highlight bottlenecks and hurdles which need the intervention of the big bosses; and the time limit and number of participants is prefixed. Also, all team members stand during the meeting—this helps them wrap up quickly.

At SapienNitro, says Bhatnagar, the daily meeting serves yet another purpose—it energizes the teams, which usually end the meetings with a “loud team cheer”.

Problem areas

Of course, there is the one-off employee in meetings who will be distracted, look at his phone or come unprepared, says Sanjeev Dixit, chief people officer at the Mumbai-headquartered Allied Blenders & Distillers Pvt. Ltd. The officials then have to make presentations and repeat announcements for those who didn’t go through the memos and emails sent ahead of time.

Bringing the laggards up to speed during the meeting can, of course, be a huge waste of time for others. Jyorden T. Misra, managing director at Spearhead InterSearch, a network of executive search firms, agrees. “Most often, people don’t do the preparatory work for a meeting and a lot of things are developed in the meeting rather than being researched beforehand,” says Delhi-based Misra.

Misra adds that we need to look at the anatomy of meetings. If you have an hour at your disposal as the meeting leader but it gets wrapped up in 15 minutes, end it quickly rather than letting it drag on, he suggests.

Ravi Dawar, India director of finance at medical technologies firm Becton, Dickinson and Co. (BD), says: “Open-ended, undefined and exceedingly long meetings add no value to the organization and often lead to delayed decisions.”

Not only is this approach to calling meetings disrespectful of other people’s time, it’s inefficient. When people take a break in the middle of the workday for a meeting, they are forced to divert their thoughts from the job at hand to attending the meeting. This can have an adverse effect on productivity.

Gunjan Shukla, general manager (Pune) at software firm ThoughtWorks Technologies (India) Pvt. Ltd, says there are other ways to share ideas. Instead of calling others away from their workstations, hold on to that thought, and let the team come back to you when they can all spare some time to hear you out, she says.

Another key challenge is engaging all participants in the meeting and encouraging them to share their thoughts. This can only happen when you give the participants enough information and time ahead of the meeting to think things through, collect data points and really come prepared for the meeting.

Ideas mill

Colourful Post-its dot one wall of the Pune office of ThoughtWorks. Each Post-it is an idea on how to solve a problem, or even a new problem the team could develop and market a solution to. And once that concern is out there for others to see, it elicits responses from them, triggers new ideas in their minds, and allows employees to do this “interaction” with the idea when they are free, rather than being called away from their desks at an inconvenient time.

There’s another solution that Shukla says works well for her office: Teams can indicate entire chunks of time—“core working hours”—during the day when they will be unavailable for meetings. “Teams get to decide core working hours. Only certain meetings can violate these core working hours, like when we have a senior executive visiting the office (from overseas),” she explains.

A lot of the problems related to the lack of pre-meeting preparation, the inability to stick to a time limit and set agenda or, at the end of it, to come up with a concrete decision have a surprisingly simple solution—appointing a meeting leader.

Misra says at Spearhead they make the employees in charge of meetings by turns. The meeting leader is then in charge of outlining a clear agenda for the meeting and communicating it to the other attendees, collecting the necessary data points around the meeting, distributing copies of the necessary documents and presentations to everyone well in advance, Misra explains. That person also gathers intelligence from other team members regarding updates on their work.

Misra says this level of pre-meeting preparation has had two interesting outcomes for Spearhead. When employees talk to each other periodically to learn what has been keeping them busy in the workplace, it helps develop a greater appreciation for what they each do. Another plus is that if someone calls in sick or has to go out for work-related travel on the day of the meeting, the meeting in-charge can fill in for them, he says.

Dawar agrees: “The meetings are pre-scheduled to ensure effective participation and also agendas are circulated well in advance. In case of presentations, the presenters share the presentation and pre-reads ahead of the meeting to enable informed and productive discussions during the meeting.” This also addresses a key spoiler in the modern-day meeting: non-participation. Employees who come to meetings unarmed with information on what it is about, or data points to back their views, often have little of value to contribute.

People managers are increasingly thinking of ways to incentivize employees to speak up during meetings. At ThoughtWorks, daily team “bear huddles” are limited to 7 minutes for a team of seven-eight. On average, that gives team members a minute or less to speak. “Not everyone gets a chance to speak,” admits Shukla. But built into the structure of this meeting is a promise—if you have asked a team member or someone in another function for help two days in a row without result, you can escalate the matter to the chief executive officer.

Driving more active participation in meetings also hinges on creating a culture of free speaking in the organization. The leadership must welcome negative feedback as well as positive inputs, and also be open to ideas on doing things differently.

Pittampalli writes there are ways to fix non-participation—don't invite someone who doesn't participate to the next meeting.