

EFFECTIVE MEETING MANNERS

by Carolann Philips

A recent article reported that an average worker only feels productive three days out of the week. Ineffective business meetings were ranked at the top of the list as one of the biggest wastes of time.

A business meeting can be defined as any gathering consisting of two or more people in a business-oriented or professional setting. Business meetings are meant to provide a setting where ideas can be created and problems can be solved whilst developing work and leadership skills of employees. Even though the majority of executives feel that meetings are ineffectual, the fact is that they are not essentially insignificant, just often poorly managed. If ego and power are put aside, this powerful and productive communication tool can be the true backbone of corporate success.

Here are some protocol guidelines for effective meetings:

An efficient meeting is one where the goal is achieved for which the meeting was held.. Therefore, clarify the aims or purpose of the meeting. If the aims of the meeting are not clear a meeting should not be arranged. One way to clarify aims is to ask, "Once the meeting is over, what do I hope will have happened?" Then, create an actionable agenda where each item on it begins with an action word. For example, "Decide on date and venue for staff party". Allot specific amounts of time for each item according to their importance. A good strategy to do this is to consider the likely level of participation and

agreement for each agenda item. Distribute the agenda and other pertinent materials in advance to those who are involved. Begin the meeting on time. Establish ground rules about how the members will interact. All groups violate their own ground rules sometimes, and it is the leader's role to remind the group. Review the agenda, making clear what decisions need to be made or actions need to be taken. Keep the discussions focused. To get a discussion back on track say something like, "We are getting off the topic and need to move back to finalizing the date of the staff party." Important issues that come up but are not directly related to the agenda item should be noted on a separate sheet of paper. This can be consulted for agenda planning for succeeding meetings.

Effective meetings are participatory and a leader should try to get everyone involved. All ideas should be sought before critiquing. Waiting to critique will generally increase the amount of participation. All decisions taken in a meeting should be restated and summarized. This helps to ensure that all members hear the same thing. An action plan should then be completed which outlines the specifics that must be done. Agenda items for the next meeting should be invited from the group or some members could be given the responsibility to work on creating agendas. Employees are more likely to participate in a meeting if they are allowed to have some input into building the agenda.

Before the meeting adjourns, a brief evaluation should take place in order to identify areas of improvement. This can be done by the leader asking some informal questions or by handing out a brief paper survey where the results are aggregated and shared.

If you are an attendee, do not be more than 5 minutes early or late. Be sure to greet everyone gathered when you arrive and depart. Remember to silence your mobile phone. When discussions are under way allow more senior figures to contribute first. Never interrupt, even if you disagree strongly. Note what has been said and return to it later with the leader's permission. When speaking, be brief and ensure what you say is relevant. Don't slouch, swivel or rock in your chair. Sit upright and be as attentive as possible. Don't check e-mail, clean your spectacles or doodle. If you miss a meeting, apologize giving solid reasons, not excuses.

Whether you are an attendee or the organizer, you will find challenges during every meeting; but the above guidelines should be sufficient to help you start every meeting on the right footing.