

By Shannon Kalvar

A quick survey of Amazon.com reveals hundreds of books purporting to help manage meetings. The vast majority do, in fact, contain good ideas if you initiated the meeting, have the ability to set its agenda, and possess the social skills to keep all of the attendees focused. However, we all must occasionally attend meetings we do not control. What do we do in those meetings, especially when they go awry? The following tips will help you make each meeting an effective, interesting experience. No IM required.

1 Know why the organizer called the meeting

The idea of a meeting agenda seems almost quaint in this era of too much e-mail and not enough time. When an actual agenda makes an appearance, it quickly breaks down as participants meander in a variety of unplanned directions.

Do not wait for an agenda. Instead, take a moment to contact the meeting organizer before the meeting. Ask him to explain to you, in 10 words or less, what he wants from the meeting. Once you know what he wants, you can help him achieve it.

In this case, forewarned is forearmed.

2 Know what you want from the meeting

Finding out what the meeting organizer wants allows you to help him; knowing what you want from the meeting allows you to help yourself. So before the meeting begins, set yourself one action item you absolutely need to accomplish with this group of people at this time.

Select an action item compatible with the meeting organizer's goal if you want the meeting to succeed. Otherwise, you could end up with a reputation for disrupting meetings.

Whether that's bad depends on your point of view.

3 List what you need to say

Meetings never start on time. Someone always needs a cup of coffee or has to answer a cell phone call about an unforeseen disaster. These idle moments make an ideal time for firing out instant messages to friends, family, and co-workers.

You can also use this time to make the meeting more productive. Jot down a list containing five things related to the action item you want to share. The act of writing helps focus your thoughts, even if you don't use the list at all.

If you have something to say to the people in the meeting, you might not have to send IMs after all.

4 Take the meeting minutes

Meetings come, meetings go. Their details vanish into a haze of similar events because no one bothered to write them down. Then the next meeting rolls around, and you spend the first 10 minutes trying to remember what happened last time.

Break this cycle by taking the meeting minutes. You don't have to record everything everyone says. Instead, focus on recording assigned action items, decisions made, and key information or questions revealed during the discussion. These minutes then become the meeting's artifact, the record of what happened and what decisions came about. This record guides whatever actions take place after the meeting ends.

As the writer, you make most of the judgment calls about what was important.

5 Keep to the rules of order

All meetings, large or small, involve people interacting to achieve one or more goals. In a perfect world, these interactions would spontaneously organize themselves. Everyone would respect one another's time. Comments would emerge in an organized fashion. Action items would appear and be agreed on, and the group would move to the next point.

Back in the real world, we need ways to stay organized and on track. You do not have to adopt Robert's Rules of Order, but you should know the ground rules by which the meeting will run. If your organization does not have rules of order, make some. Share them with others and follow them.

Chaos happens, but you do not have to let it ruin an otherwise productive meeting.

6 Reflectively listen in information meetings

There exists a breed of meetings seemingly designed to frustrate the attendees. These meetings "provide information" about a topic or update the attendees about the status of things they do not care about. In the breed's most extreme forms, no one at the meeting can do anything with the information provided.

That does not excuse you from finding something useful to do. The meeting organizer obviously needs to communicate this information. Take the opportunity to practice your reflective listening skills. You get some practice, and the organizer will feel like he positively connected with someone.

It's a win/win, or as close as you can get in this situation.

7 Set things aside

It never fails. In every meeting, someone derails the discussion with a host of interesting tangents. Sometimes these tangents relate to the topic at hand. More often, though, they affect it only indirectly. In either case, the time spent on them detracts from the meeting's real goal.

Do not be this person. Ask yourself the following question before you interject a new idea or question: Is this really the right venue? If the meeting focuses on brainstorming, go ahead. If not, and if the question/idea does not directly relate to the meeting's goal, set it aside for later conversations. Make it an action item, so you do not forget it.

Yes, everything connects to everything else in business. That doesn't mean you have to bring it up in a focused session.

8 Ask for action items

The meeting ends, someone cleans up the conference room, and...then what? Ask the meeting organizer for action items as the meeting starts to wind down. If need be, prompt him by asking if he wants you to take care of one or more items you noted during the meeting. Alternately, you can make some up if you have a good idea of what needs to be done.

Action items speak louder than words when it comes to ending meetings.

9 End the meeting when it's done

Meetings, with or without agendas, often drag on long past their useful lifespan. People get lost in quagmires or the meeting organizer forgets what he's there for. Nothing useful gets done, but no one can escape without offending the powers that be.

Fortunately, you have a 10-words-or-less description of the meeting's goal from your previous research. Ask the meeting organizer if he has achieved his goal. If not, help him get to it. If yes, mercifully end the meeting before everyone goes insane.

Mercy is, in this case at least, one of time management's greatest gifts.

Ask questions afterward

10 Meetings gather informed, active people into one place to address an established list of topics. Why not take advantage of the opportunity? If you have questions for someone who will attend the meeting, make a list of them before you arrive. Then, during the after-meeting meeting, whip out the list and get your questions answered.

Asking unrelated questions in the after-meeting meeting means you do not have to disrupt the meeting with them.

With these 10 tips you can participate in the meeting rather than just attending. Actively participating reduces your stress levels during the meeting. It also gives you some control over what happens next.

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