



Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

A meeting is an event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose—who, what, how, and why. Traditionally, there was also a time and a place—when and where—but as technology allows us to meet virtually (the subject of Chapter 8), these secondary aspects may become less important.

There are many types of meetings, depending on the people, content, process, and purpose. Because a meeting is basically a collaborative work process, the word “meeting” encompasses almost as many possibilities as the word “work” itself. In this book we’ll discuss meetings in general terms, focusing on what all or most collaborative meetings have in common.

We’ll also use the term “participants” to refer generally to the people who take part in a meeting. A term sometimes used—“attendees”—is not only an incorrect formation (because it would mean “people attended by someone or something”) but, more importantly, it suggests a passive presence. We believe that people should be involved in a collaborative meet-

2 The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings



Meeting An event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose.

Because a meeting is basically a collaborative work process, the word “meeting” encompasses almost as many possibilities as the word “work” itself.

ing, not just be there.

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

When Charles Dickens used those words to begin *A Tale of Two Cities*, he

wasn't writing about meetings, of course. And yet, it seems appropriate to begin discussing meetings in terms of extremes. We've all attended meetings that were “the best of times,” that energized the participants, promoted teamwork, and generated important results. And, unfortunately, we've all attended meetings that were “the worst of times.” What makes the difference? That's the focus of this chapter. And the objective of this book is to help you make that difference.

The Worst (of) Meetings

Here's a checklist of some common complaints about meetings. Check each that applies to your meetings:

- People invited to a meeting don't show up.
- People arrive late and/or leave early.



Smart Managing

It's Only Words

Does it matter whether you call people who meet “participants” or “attendees” or something else? Yes, according to Lani Arredondo, in *Communicating Effectively* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000, p. 151):

In every type of meeting, think of those present not as employees or attendees, but as *participants*. Doing so encourages you to engage the employees.

It also encourages people to take more seriously their responsibility to contribute to the meeting.

Even if you believe that “it's only words,” that what you call people at a meeting is just semantics, it's a no-lose situation to call them *participants*.

Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times 3

- People doodle, think about things they could be doing, or even doze off.
- Too many people talk at once.
- The meeting is dominated by one person or several people.
- The meeting is dominated by the leader.
- People get into personal attacks.
- Nothing gets accomplished.
- The meeting rehashes topics discussed at previous meetings.
- Meetings take too long and accomplish too little.
- People leave expressing relief: “The meeting’s finally over. We can finally get back to work.”
- Meetings don’t get any better; managers and employees are stuck in a rut of bad meetings.

A meeting can go bad for many reasons. The following lists present many of the general causes for bad meetings. You probably recognize most or even all of these problems—and maybe you could add to these lists.

Sometimes problems start *in advance of a meeting*:

- because it’s held for the wrong reason or no reason at all
- because of poor or even no preparation
- because of the people invited—and the people not invited
- because of unclear roles and responsibilities
- because the participants don’t know what to expect or how to prepare
- because the manager and/or the participants don’t bring necessary resources
- because of the place
- because of the timing

Sometimes problems start *as a meeting begins*:

- because it starts wrong
- because the manager tries to be responsible for everything

4 The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

- because participants aren't focused on the business of the meeting
- because participants don't get sufficiently and appropriately involved
- because it's not considered to be "real work"
- because of bad attitudes about meetings
- because of low expectations for meetings

Sometimes problems arise *during a meeting*:

- because discussions get off track
- because it takes too much time to do anything
- because of distractions
- because people hesitate to contribute—or they contribute hesitantly
- because people get into conflicts over nothing—or they do nothing in order to avoid conflicts
- because the group can't make decisions

Sometimes problems come *as a meeting ends*:

- because it ends abruptly, with no sense of conclusion or closure
- because the participants are unsure about what the meeting has accomplished
- because it ends without any plans for action
- because nobody knows who's responsible for doing what
- because the participants leave feeling disappointed or frustrated about something that could have gone better
- because participants have contributed without any recognition for their work

Sometimes problems develop *after a meeting*:

- because the effort put into the meeting seems to go nowhere after it ends
- because the people responsible for assignments fail to complete them
- because of all the other bad meetings that preceded it—

Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times 5

people don't take meetings seriously and so don't commit to the outcomes

Whew! With all of those potential problems, it's not really surprising that so many meetings fail in some respects.

The Impact of Bad Meetings

The effects of those problems, the results of those failures, can be serious—for you, your people, and the organization. There are some very good reasons why a smart manager does whatever it takes to make meetings *better*.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for You

When meetings don't work well, you're not maximizing the potential of your people and you're not making the best use of time and energy. That means you've got to work harder to make up for the bad meetings—and you're likely to need more and/or longer meetings in order to produce results.

A meeting is a microcosm of the workplace, a type of project in which you show your ability to manage people, time, and resources—for better or for worse. And as more and more of what organizations do takes place in teams, meetings become the setting in which more of the really important work gets done—or in which more time and energy are wasted.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for Your People

Your employees are negatively affected by bad meetings in many of the same ways you are.

After all, the meetings are wasting their time and energy. Consequently, they have less time to do their other work, which causes frustration—for them and for coworkers who depend on them.

But they also become frustrated by the meetings, because nobody likes to be ineffective and inefficient! (On the other hand, some may decide that if it's acceptable for a group to be ineffective and inefficient, it's OK for individuals, too.) Of course, it's likely that your employees will have concerns about the inability

6 The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings



Treat Meetings Like Work!

Perhaps the single most effective way to improve meetings is to make sure that everyone treats every meeting like any other essential work activity. Every meeting participant should arrive knowing what the group is going to do, aware of what's expected of him or her, and prepared to contribute to the best of his or her ability.

of their manager to improve the meetings.

Bad meetings affect morale. Some of your employees will become frustrated by their coworkers. Collaboration can energize employees—or enervate and annoy them. Some employees may become apathetic and not take meetings seriously;

they may miss meetings, arrive late, and spend a lot of time doodling. Others may become negative, pessimistic, skeptical, cynical—and those attitudes are hard to leave behind when the meeting ends.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for the Organization

Now take those bad effects on your employees and on you and multiply them by the number of managers and employees in your organization.

In the short term, bad meetings waste time, talent, and other resources. Inefficient meetings cost organizations billions of dollars each year in lost time and lost opportunities. But those are just the measurable costs.

Bad meetings affect the climate and the culture of an organization as well. And, if word gets outside the walls, there could be damage to the image and the reputation of the organization. After all, bad management is bad management—in meetings and in other areas of a business. (It's that “meeting as microcosm” concept again.)

Bad Meetings Are Bad for Your Career

Beyond the negative effects of meetings outlined above, there's one more that could be huge—the effect on your career. Again, the meeting is a microcosm of the workplace. As we noted earlier, a meeting is a type of project—a project in which you show

Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times 7

Bad Meetings Make Bad Companies

“Meetings matter because that’s where an organization’s culture perpetuates itself. Meetings are how an organization says, ‘You are a member.’ So if every day we go to boring meetings full of boring people, then we can’t help but think that this is a boring company. Bad meetings are a source of negative messages about our company and ourselves.”

That thought-provoking comment comes from William R. Daniels, senior consultant at American Consulting & Training of San Rafael, California, who has introduced meeting-improvement techniques to companies (quoted by Eric Matson in “The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings,” *Fast Company*, April 1996).



how you manage. If you do meetings well, people recognize your abilities as a manager. If you have problems with meetings, it’s generally obvious to your employees—and to others in the organization and maybe beyond.

The skill to manage a meeting—to develop ideas, to motivate people and to move people and ideas to positive action—is perhaps the most critical asset in any career.... Most professionals have had no real training in devising and managing an effective meeting; in fact, most professionals do not recognize the enormous impact their meetings have on their organizations and their careers.

That’s how George David Kieffer summed up the discussions he had with “some of America’s most successful and respected leaders in business, labor, industry, education, and government” in *The Strategy of Meetings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988, p. 13).

He devotes 50 pages of his book to the importance of meetings for careers. In brief, to succeed as a manager, you have to manage meetings.

The Best (of) Meetings

Managers often fail to maximize on the potential of meetings. They waste valuable opportunities—for themselves, for their

8 The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

employees, and for the organization. Here are just some of the many possible benefits to be derived through meetings:

- You can share information—and learn from your employees—in a setting that allows and even encourages interaction.
- You can answer questions.
- You can ask questions.
- You can discuss important issues and reach decisions as a group.
- You can direct and coordinate the individual and joint efforts of your employees.
- You can help your employees develop their abilities to think critically.
- You can draw upon the experiences of your employees and others.
- You can get your employees to raise questions and identify problems.
- You can gain perspectives on an issue.
- You can observe how your employees interact.
- You can help your employees work better as a team.
- You can display and develop many of your managerial skills.
- You can promote a sense of community.

Make a Difference

We've briefly considered the differences between bad meetings and good meetings. But the difference that concerns us in the rest of this book is *you*. You can be the difference between bad meetings and good meetings.

You've already committed to improving your meetings by starting to read this book. We hope that you will read it to the end—and make use of it.

This book will take you step by step through the meeting process:

Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times 9

Chapter 2 outlines and discusses the details of preparing for a meeting.

Chapter 3 explains how to start a meeting, including setting rules and assigning roles and responsibilities.

Chapter 4 offers suggestions for conducting a meeting.

Chapter 5 explains how to close a meeting and follow up on the results.

Chapter 6 describes a selection of techniques and tools for helping meeting participants work together more effectively and efficiently.

Chapter 7 presents common problems with meetings and ways to deal with them.

Chapter 8 discusses the use of technological tools and the issues involved in meeting virtually (online).

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

- Meetings can energize the participants, promote teamwork, and generate important results—or waste time and money and cause serious problems. As manager, you make the difference between good meetings and bad.
- Meetings can go bad for many reasons. Problems can develop in advance of the meeting, as the meeting begins, during the meeting, as the meeting ends, or after the meeting—and virtually all can be prevented.
- Bad meetings are bad for you as a manager, for your employees, for your organization, and for your career.
- Good meetings allow you and your employees to discuss important issues and reach decisions together, encourage your employees to develop their abilities to think critically, draw upon the experiences of your employees and others, help your employees work better as a team, and promote a sense of community.