

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY*

March 3, 2015

Make Meetings Count: Increase Productivity

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Prevent meetings from turning into ineffective black holes where nothing is accomplished. If you fix those gatherings, the result can be clarity and progress. That's from Paul Axtell, author of "Meetings Matter." Tips on making meetings more than worth the effort:

Get it. Maximize every opportunity in speaking to your people, says Dianna Booher, author of "What More Can I Say? Why Communication Fails and What to Do About It." She points to studies by Towers Watson (NYSE:TW) showing that "companies that encourage a culture of employee engagement through effective communication at all levels had a 47% higher return to shareholders. They tell it like it is — bad news and good news. They seek innovative ideas at all levels. They hold people accountable for results."

Share priorities in advance. Meetings with no written agenda, or ones where participants receive the agenda from the leader only an hour or so before, allow no time for people to collect their thoughts or gather needed data, said Booher: "Hitting people cold with an idea and asking for opinions or feedback is likely to be unproductive."

Include time estimates. When you do, attendees stay aware of the clock, Booher says. When they know that they must come to a decision in the minutes given, they avoid repetition and rambling .

Set guidelines. Ensure that the group is attentive. How do you do that? By turning cellphones to mute and eliminating side conversations, says Axtell.

Zero in. With vague topics such as trade shows on the agenda, talks can meander. Booher suggests asking, "Is the \$30K cost to attend the trade show worth exposure to 2,000 attendees?" or "What ideas do you have for generating booth traffic at the CRT trade show?"

Engage. "Call on people who may have different views or who can help add clarity to the conversation," Axtell said. Encourage the participation of each person.

Vivian Chan, CEO of Sparrho, a search engine for scientific content, says that productivity can depend on your team's state of mind; so during meetings, make sure that an open dialogue fills the minutes.

She added: "You need your team to understand your decisions and direction to feel part of the journey. By keeping meetings happy, open and relaxed, you can be your most creative and productive."

Keep chats on track. Doing so, says Axtell, will cut meeting time by 25%. That gets people back to work so they don't lose their flow.

Consider standing up. For informational meetings or those with only one or two agenda items, "people tend to give you their attention quicker, listen more attentively and come to consensus faster than when they are seated comfortably," Booher said.

Shoot for consensus. Find out if everyone is satisfied with the result of the meeting. If not, find out what

would engage them, said Axtell: "You want people to feel heard. You do not want people leaving with something they wanted to contribute but did not. Ask, 'Is there anything else that needs to be said or asked on this topic?'"

Get pledges. A prime reason to meet is to secure commitments to act on agenda items, but too often they don't get nailed down. The solution: "Identify the next steps with specific due dates and individual responsibilities," said Axtell.

Kristina Roth, CEO of Matisia Consultants, which aids firms in all areas of business, says that a meeting recap is crucial for accountability. "This can be translated into any type of meeting," she said. "Recapping your understanding and sharing it with the parties involved is still an old-fashioned must."

Investor's Business Daily Inc.



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