

Do your business meetings involve procrastination and no outputs?

It is fairly accepted in business that meetings are essential to get things moving forward. Is that not why we hold business and strategy meetings; to decide things, produce the outputs and get on with it?

Or is that just wishful thinking on behalf of everyone who has to endure meetings that are frustrating and a waste of everyone's time?



There are businesses up and down the country that deserve award recognition for their high levels of procrastination and ability to achieve nothing in a meeting lasting hours.

We have all been there at one time or another....

We are down on the list of attendees for another strategy meeting about the 'project that never moves forward'. We try to block out the time in our diaries with a more important but likely, fictitious meeting. But the organiser is efficient and has got to your diary before you can. The second avoidance tactic might be to say that your workload is just too heavy and you will have to skip the meeting. But then you remember that you are one of the decision makers and that if you cannot attend, the meeting will be re-scheduled for when you can...you cannot even send a colleague in your place!

So resigned to attending, you have a cursory look at the agenda to see what will be discussed and 'not' decided upon this time. With a sigh and slight annoyance rumbling in the background you read that the agenda is almost exactly the same as the last one. Maybe because at the last meeting everything broke down, went round in circles and ended up in nothing!

Why is this, you ask yourself? Can no one make a decision? Is it because there are too many people in the meeting and no one is prepared to put their neck on the line? Is it because one of the team managers is always on the defensive if anyone ever questions anything and then tension starts putting a stop to anything being discussed? Maybe you think it needs something to change, some bright spark with a new idea or someone to tactfully stop the arguments before they inevitably happen? But that won't be instigated by any of the usual attendees, who seem to have lost the focus and desire to even contribute anymore.

Oh well, you try to convince yourself that it will be fine and after all, the 'project that never moves forward' will have to at least creep forward or we will still be here in 12 months time...

So why do we fail to obtain clear actions and outputs in meetings?

Staying off topic as long as possible – spending at least half of the meeting debating some minor point or going into irrelevant detail about something unimportant on the big scheme of things.

Too much deliberating – everyone seems to have the power to talk for as long as they want to, even when they are just repeating something someone else said.

Lack of written notes – some people around the table are taking notes, great! But the notes they are taking are for their purposes only, nothing is typed up at the end, nothing is shared and no one really knows what actions need following up and by whom.

Creating and committing to actions creates a certain amount of pain – it is easier not to encourage actions and outputs, because that means extra work. It might mean that you are accountable for something or need to produce something in a timeframe that you are uncomfortable with. But the longer meetings go on with no actions, the longer it is before we make progress and can move onto something that is not causing any pain.

No clear objectives or agenda – I am a great believer in setting objectives and outputs and not a great fan of the standard format agenda based on discussions about things. Rather than listing what will be discussed, the agenda should be based on what outputs need to be achieved, decide on a way forward for project A...create an alternative method for the new sales campaign B...ideas for improving performance of brand C. This will produce definite outputs, which move away from having debates and discussions.



There is no one 'managing' the meeting – if there is no one to steer the meeting in the right direction and keep everyone 'on topic', there will be mayhem. Someone needs to keep things to time and order to ensure that conclusions are arrived at quickly and outputs documented and allocated. Someone needs to have the ability to question people's ideas, bring them into line when they start to go off on a tangent and find out the reasons behind negative attitudes.

All of these things, we can relate to and they all evolve around large levels of procrastination. By procrastinating in meetings and not moving forward with positive outputs, we squander the most important asset we have: time. It is ironic that we use lack of time as a reason for not attending these meetings and events in the first place. Yet when we are there, we waste our own and everyone else's time by failing to have a productive and focused meeting. When we waste time in business, we miss opportunities, cost money, upset clients and lose ground fast.

Top Tips for making meetings more productive

1. **Get someone in to 'manage' the meeting**, who will ensure that everything runs more smoothly, can handle difficult personalities, ensure everyone stays on topic, get all attendees motivated and engaged, and get people generating ideas, actions and productive outputs.

2. **Change the standard format** from sitting around discussing things and introduce workshop type activities. This will force creative thinking, particularly where you need to work in small teams or as individuals. You will be amazed at what you can achieve in a half hour session with some post it notes and pens! This also ensures that everyone contributes. And if everyone contributes, there is more opportunity for that one bright spark of an idea to take everything forward.
3. **Take time to pause in meetings**, particularly if the consensus is that the discussion is going nowhere. Even just a few seconds can be valuable and give people time to think and reflect without the barrage of noise and discussion. It could mean the difference between a good idea and a great idea.
4. **Clearly articulate each issue or item for discussion.** This might mean starting the meeting by asking each attendee to articulate in five words or less, the problem to be solved. This ensures that everyone understands the objectives and is working towards the same goal from the start. It is amazing how much time can be wasted when some people have a different perspective of the aim than everyone else.
5. **Attend the meeting with the aim of contributing something to it** and putting something positive and useful onto the table. If all attendees do this, the meeting will be far more productive and more likely to achieve its objectives.
6. **Get rid of all presentations in meetings and send the material in advance.** At the start of the meeting, have 10 minutes in silence so that those who have not read the material can do so (most people). All attendees are then starting with the information fresh in their minds and there will be none of the conversations that lead to nothing, just because someone has failed to get up to date in advance.



All in all whether you have a senior level strategy meeting, team briefing, project review or product launch event, it should add value to the business. It should be worthwhile for all attendees and everyone should want to be there and contribute in a positive manner.

If at the end of the meeting you can all step away feeling that progress will be made as a consequence of the meeting, then it will. And if the meeting took half the time they usually do, had everyone engaged and has caused no frustration or ill feeling, then that is a meeting well held.