EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

BY ANNE SCARLETT

A few tips on maximizing meeting outcomes, both as a leader and as an attendee.

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WHY ARE MEETINGS often the butt of work-related jokes?

Why do we sigh with disdain when our calendar is loaded with meetings?

Quite simply, many meetings are poorly run, resulting in little or no specific outcomes and action items. Conversely, an effective meeting—with clients, prospects, subcontractors, industry peers or colleagues—is actually considered a marketing and business development plus. When clients participate in a productive meeting led by their consulting engineer or architect, it bodes well for the overall client-service provider experience.

But not all meetings are created equal. They vary in terms of content requirements, environments (in person, by phone, via video, in office/out of office) and intentions. Meeting types in the AEC industry can include:

1. Short-term planning for project teams
2. Long-term planning, such as a senior leadership retreat
3. Creative brainstorming, including design sessions with the client
4. Information transfer (data dump), such as a training seminar
5. Motivational messaging, such as an all-office meeting where senior leadership shares company direction with the staff.

So how can you, as a meeting leader or attendee, walk away from the meeting feeling like it was time well spent? Time is our most valuable asset, and meetings do not always respect—or capitalize on—our time and contributions. Take it upon yourself to make a change!

> Remember that as a meeting attendee, you will be measured by the quality, not the quantity, of your contributions.

As a Meeting Leader

Here are some things to consider when you are the one leading things:

Remember that "facilitation" is the optimal word. Create an environment where others can participate, observe and have some takeaways. Facilitate others' ability to contribute. Even if the particular meeting is primarily intended as a one-way download of information from senior management to staff, you still need to create a situation to encourage active listening by attendees.

Invite the right people. Consider your meeting objectives and expected outcomes. Carefully choose those who will be the best contributors to the mix, like a recipe. Often, there will be individuals that—because of their status or position—either "should" attend or "want to" attend. Yet in your judgment, you may determine that those people will neither add to the meeting nor benefit from attending the meeting in an observatory role. In those cases, it's important to identify your hesitation to include them, and then have a quick and candid talk with them about those hesitations. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding. Perhaps it requires gently letting the person know that it is not personal, but that at this time it makes the most sense not to include them. Whatever you do, be specific, discreet and respectful.

Send out an agenda and expectations in advance. Keep your agenda tight. Assign initials next to components where you expect others to take charge. In addition to the agenda itself, make sure to include a brief bulleted summary of expected outcomes for the meeting. It may be as simple as: "We will conclude with clarity on our individual responsibilities for this week's project." Or "We will produce a minimum of three schemes for the schematic design." Or perhaps "We will bring the client to a point of decision on a particular sticking point." Or even "We will decide how to reallocate internal resources for cross-training purposes."

Where it makes sense, consider using a consent agenda. When the lion's share of a meeting structure involves passive reporting—as opposed to discussing, resolving and strategizing—then why not save time by using a consent agenda? This is a single agenda item covering a number of routine issues that require familiarity or approval but not necessarily in-person discussion. If a team member feels that discussion is warranted, any item may be removed from the consent agenda by simply requesting that it be removed. The removed item is then placed elsewhere on the active meeting agenda. The entire consent agenda is then acknowledged and validated by the team prior to moving on to strategic matters. While this method is most commonly used by nonprofit boards to save time, there is most certainly a place for consent agendas within a for-profit organization as well!

Establish a no-phone zone. This can be tricky, particularly when dealing with stubborn attendees who may be senior to you. But even one person scanning a cell phone can throw off the rest of the group and the leader. It's distracting at best and downright perturbing and discouraging at worst. Options to handle it include: establishing the meeting as a phone-free zone on the agenda invitation, asking people to check phones at the door and providing scheduled breaks for everyone to check their devices.

Use a "parking lot." To remain acutely focused on the meeting's intent, have a flip chart or white board handy. This will serve as the parking lot. Any time a worthy issue arises beyond the meeting context or intention, it moves to the parking lot. At the end of the meeting, the parking lot should be categorized by urgent and non-urgent items. "Next steps" should be assigned to the attendees for those that are deemed more urgent/important—exploring a new idea, researching answers to a particular problem or initiating an activity. Sometimes, parking lot items are bigger than they first appear, so they may need to spin off into separate meetings. Other times, attendees ultimately realize that the parking lot item is of a very low priority, and they decide to table it indefinitely. The ultimate point is that all contributions are captured and attended to, one way or another.

> Unless you are expecting a burning, time-sensitive client call, don't be a jerk. Keep devices silenced and out of sight.

Start on time. Start meetings on time even if there is only one other person in the room. As others drift in, simply continue moving along. If you'd like to be polite, you can stop for a brief moment, welcome them and let them know where you are in the agenda. Do not backtrack or repeat what you have already said. Sometimes, an integral meeting contributor (and decision-maker) will be late. Consider making a game-time decision by reorganizing elements to see what you can accomplish without him/her. When that person finally arrives, summarize what has already been discussed, then weave that back into the original agenda. End the meeting by reiterating the importance of timeliness for the sake of the team. Attendees will see that you are committed to an on-time start, and they will surely arrive promptly in the future.

End on time. Have an established meeting timeframe. Well-planned meetings should not run long. The only exception is a creative and/or brainstorming meeting, where juices are flowing abundantly. In those cases, you may want to respectfully ask for additional time from your attendees.

Get feedback. Allow a few minutes at the end the meeting to ask for feedback. You may even want to have people rate the meeting privately or right there on the spot (perhaps on a scale of 1 to 5). Off-line, feel free to ask the attendees for additional input or requests. You won't be able to satisfy everyone, but at least you will have heard them. If the group shares common goals and has the firm's best interests in mind, then they should all wholeheartedly strive to make the meetings productive.

Don't be satisfied with the "usual." Sometimes we get caught in a rut of attending the same meetings week after week, month after month. Maybe those meetings have lost their useful life; many do have expiration dates, after all. For example, one of my former firms held merger integration meetings for one year longer than necessary. Another firm I consulted for used an old and tired agenda for their project manager meetings that was no longer productive. At least once a year, perhaps during your strategic planning sessions, analyze the effectiveness of your firm's meetings. At a minimum, review all the "standing" meetings that are held both internally, as well as externally with clients and consultants as part of your overall work process. Which ones should stay? Which ones should go or be revitalized?

As an Attendee

Even if you are attending rather than leading, you share responsibility for the meeting's success. Do not be complacent and complain. Instead, recognize that you, as an attendee, can demonstrate positive behavior while motivating others to do the same.

Come prepared. Read the agenda in advance. Have some thoughts/ideas/questions in writing. Collect any information that you need to prior to the meeting, and have it organized and on hand (no running back to your desk).

Make quality statements. You will be measured by the quality, not the quantity, of your contributions. Digressions run the gamut from the senior partner that wants to tell yet another story to the mid-level manager to repeating what others have already said to the chatty business developer that enjoys hearing himself speak to feel important. Don't add to this problem. There is no need to restate what others have already said unless you add something that will make a difference. People who repeat and restate are simply adding to the length of the meeting. If you truly agree with something, simply say, "I agree." And mean it.

Arrive early (especially for an external meeting). Never be the person that walks in late! Use your pre-meeting time to gather your own thoughts, review notes, etc. Furthermore, take the opportunity to connect with other attendees on a more casual basis before the meeting commences. This is where relationships can grow and strengthen!

Remain engaged (and look the part). Unless you are expecting a burning, time-sensitive client call, don't be a jerk. Keep the device silenced and out of sight, and do your part to remain present with the group.

Give your feedback. If you have ideas on how to improve a particular meeting type, don't be shy. In your most diplomatic way, present your ideas to the meeting leader off-line. First, express appreciation for their current efforts. Preface your suggestions by stating they are just for consideration, and offer to help in any way you can. Make sure you support your claims—i.e., share another context/story in which a particular meeting technique worked well.

Meetings are a broad—and often controversial—topic in terms of their real value. While some rebel companies have ousted meetings altogether, the majority of firms in the AEC world continue to rely upon meetings to service clients and move the company forward. They play a significant role in our professional lives. Let's make them the best they can be! ■

What is your experience with meetings? Which meeting ideas and tactics have worked well for you? We'd love your feedback! Send your thoughts to ***melnick@aisc.org****.*