

Everyday Meetings

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 8

Background Information: In Chapter 8, Small Meetings Management, MaryAnne Bobrow proves that small does not mean uncomplicated. She also points out that “a small meeting is classified by the number of participants, not by its perceived importance” (page106). Within that chapter, Bobrow:

- Identifies three types of small meetings and compares them with large meetings
- Discusses the value of the small meeting
- Offers suggestions to negotiate contracts for smaller meetings

PMM5 Postscriptä Use: Smaller meetings by nature tend to be more focused and structured. By their nature, the smaller meeting are exclusively focused on the business at hand. Thus, Bobrow discusses issues like:

- Opening the meeting
- Establishing ground rules for the meeting
- Time management
- Establishing the discussion management process

This PMM5 Postscript™ encourages meeting managers to become involved in agenda and dynamics of the small everyday meeting. By helping stakeholders focus on the agenda and the content of the meeting, meeting managers can improve the actual meeting experience of everyday meetings. The PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Define the challenges associated with small meetings.
- Identify three ways to improve small meetings.
- Select two strategies to employ with small meetings.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 8, Small Meetings Management: Small Does Not Mean Uncomplicated
Author: MaryAnne Bobrow, CAE, CMP



Small Meetings Are Not Small Potatoes

Hey, its just a meeting. Why should meeting managers focus on improving small, everyday, mundane meetings? Aren't we only interested in the BIG meeting?

In reality the everyday, small meetings are important for three reasons:

Reason #1: Regular meetings control the organization's performance and culture.

"Regular meetings always display, affirm and exercise the organization's values, structures and roles — so they are also the primary means by which the organization perpetuates its culture", states William Daniels in his book, *Group Power II: A Manager's Guide to Conducting Regular Meetings* (Daniels, 1990).

"Meetings matter because that's where an organization's culture perpetuates itself," Daniels, a senior consultant at American Consulting & Training, continues. "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" (Matson, 1996).

Reason #2: Ordinary meetings waste time, lots of time.

Allan Cox, a Chicago management consultant and author of *Redefining the Corporate Soul* found that, the average executive spends 17 hours a week in meetings (McGarvey, 1996).

The Wharton Center for Applied Research found that excluding preparation time, senior executives spend 23 hours a week in meetings. Executives in the study run by Dr. Oppenheim's study said 20 to 30 percent of meetings could have been handled better by phone or through a memo.

Reason #3: Bad meetings wear on people's souls

Ineffective everyday meetings are a source of negative energy. Meeting managers may overhear comments about everyday meetings where participants say in a complaining tone of voice, "I have to go to another meeting....."?

Here are some common complaints about everyday meetings:

- My presence not needed
- Too long
- Too many people
- Leader had predetermined solution
- Trivial matters discussed; irrelevant discussions
- No priority regarding how to spend time
- No tangible outcomes

All these legitimate complaints affect the performance and overall culture of the organization in addition to de-motivating employees.

Everyday Habits

Like flossing, establishing good daily habits for the everyday meeting will serve ones "business" health and career well. Meeting managers can encourage everyone to adapt these three habits:

Habit 1: Determine if a meeting is needed by asking the following questions:

- Do you need to generate enthusiasm for a new idea or product?
- Would the lack of distraction save time and money?
- Does the issue need multiple perspectives?
- Is it a complex topic?
- Are you trying to create or motivate a team?
- Are you trying to resolve a customer problem or need?
- Are you trying to create a new way of the organization to do its work?
- Are you trying to solve a systemic business problem?

If the answer to these questions is a "yes", have a meeting. Otherwise, use an alternative way of communicating (memo, email, phone call) to deal with the issue at hand.

Habit 2: Set standards and communicate them

Organizations must set expectations. Senior management should communicate expectations if they expect them to be followed. The other piece to this habit is the concept of consequences. In business, people pay attention to either what is measured (what management cares about) and what affects their paycheck/performance review. Set a good example and if that doesn't work, put some teeth behind this habit.

Tandem Computers created The Meeting Manifesto, a poster hung in every meeting room. The poster offers tidbits about effective meetings. For example: Arrive on Time, Meeting must start and end on time, Leaders must stick to the agenda. Also included on the Manifesto: The meeting must be necessary, the objective clear and the right people present.

The Manifesto was also inserted in the company newsletter with a pledge from company executives to contribute to good meeting management.

Habit 3: Give people the tools and skills necessary to run effective meetings.

There are many great books on this topic. Or borrow from one of the many "models" for keeping meeting skills top of mind.

This is the PATIO Model:

Purpose — Have a clearly defined purpose

Agenda — Have a defined agenda, distributed to participants before the meeting

Time Limit — Start and end time

Information — Work before the meeting to make the session effective

Objectives — Pinpoint the objectives you hope to achieve for each item on the agenda

From Mundane to Magnificent and Marvelous

Everyday meetings can be improved with a renewed focus on activities that occur before, during and after the meeting. Meeting managers can help their organizations move everyday meetings from mundane to magnificent in the following ways:

Before the Meeting

If someone has decided a meeting is the best method for communication, a meeting manager will help that stakeholder clarify objectives and desired outcomes.

With a clearly identified purpose, form will follow function. Set up the meeting so it supports the desired outcomes. Objectives for everyday meetings include:

- Share information
- Generate ideas
- Delegate
- Share work
- Plan
- Coordinate
- Persuade, involve or inspire
- Maintain relationships
- Celebrate
- Decide on issues

Borrow from a principle from the Modern Architecture movement — Form follows function. If the purpose of the meeting is to make decisions, set up the agenda in such a way to support a decision making mode.

For example, specify on the agenda which items are for information sharing and which are for information processing. The difference: information sharing items are those for which only points of clarification are allowed. Information processing items allow discussion, analysis, decision-making and planning.

This change in the agenda will set behavioral expectations for the group and minimize time wasted.

Or another idea: Use action verbs on agendas. Instead of posting topics in a typical topical agenda

<u>Topical Agenda</u> Project X Report Y Testing Plan
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Use verbs in the agenda like *examine*, *discuss*, *review*, *approve* or *list* (Albert, 1996).

<u>Verb-Spurred Agenda</u> Decide on Project X Review Report Y Approve Testing Plan
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During the Meeting

If the meeting will be held to share information, offer participants a structure or procedure. This can be done with some flair and fun! This PMM5 Postscript™ provides two examples:

Example 1: Stop/Start/Alerts Agendas

This procedure allows people to share news in a quick, participatory manner. It is well suited for sharing “news” types of meetings

Each member of the group reports on:

- Starts — What is new or proceeding in altered ways
- Stops — What is completed or is discontinued
- Alerts — What problems or opportunities may be coming up

Example 2: Highlights/Lowlights Agendas

Again, this procedure invites participation and is well suited for meetings where the agenda items are “sharing of information” without any deliberation.

Highlights are significant accomplishments or good news worth notice. Lowlights are problem, failures or significantly bad news worth sharing as a warning or as a learning opportunity.

Each member should share at least one highlight and lowlights and no member should pass.

These examples provide a framework to help ensure that the meeting functions as it is intended. Meeting managers can seek out other tools to help stakeholders improve everyday meetings.

Even with a good purpose, a meeting can still be de-railed. There are many potential reasons for this:

- Loss of focus
- Problem personalities
- Lack of preparation (participants or leader)

These issues are why meeting managers involved in small meetings should have rudimentary information on group discussions and decision making.

Picture a meeting room with a group of professionals, each with vastly different experiences, values, opinions and beliefs trying to reach agreement. In this typical scenario, often meetings discussions go awry because of two unspoken dynamics:

1. The discussion does not differentiate between opinion and fact.

Opinions are easy to express because they are based on preconceived ideas and beliefs. Facts come from external sources or experiences and require some research or knowledge.

People's opinions should be known. The meeting leader or facilitator should encourage people to express their opinion on the subject. Then once everyone's position is known, restrict the remainder of the discussion to factual statements only.

To speed up decision-making, ask people to argue using facts only. Without opinions getting in the way, groups will arrive at consensus and make decisions much more quickly.

2. People view conflict and disagreement as the same thing.

Disagreements are healthy in an organization. They force the group to consider different options and select the most viable course of action.

Conflict, however, has an emotional component. When people form an emotional attachment to a certain issue, stance or strategy, it is very difficult for them to back down from that position. It is also much harder to reach resolution if someone is emotionally attached to a specific outcome

Encourage disagreement but limit conflict by avoiding personal comments, character attacks and underhanded maneuvering. Patrick Lencioni, author of *Death by Meeting*, encourages the use of debate in meetings. He cites the “Problem #1” of meetings as the “lack of drama” (Lencioni, 2004, p. 226).

Everyone involved in meetings should develop skills at leading meetings. PMM5 Postscript™ Number 13 focuses on facilitation skills — a major element of leading effective meetings.

After The Meeting

It is not over until it is over. A meeting is not over when all the items on the agenda have been discussed. The meeting is only one part of the process. Additional action follows a meeting's close.

Ideally, a meeting should end with the 4 C's Charles Hawkins identifies in his book, *First Aid for Meetings: Quick Fixes* (Hawkins, 1997):

Consensus - Reaching win/win solutions and decisions by consensus

Closure - Clear action steps, timetables and responsibilities

Critique and Celebration - Assessment of the meeting's effectiveness and acknowledgement of individual contributions

Communication- Concise summary of meeting with a follow-up system to keep projects on track

Meetings which lack accountability and follow-up are futile and a waste of everyone's time. Every organization should focus on follow-up for everyday meetings to continue the progress made during the initial investment of time at the meeting.

Not on the Usual Agenda

Here are some unusual ideas that meeting managers may recommend for agendas:

- Invite participants to attend only for their specific sections of the agenda.
- Allow different people to host the meeting. This gives people the opportunity to practice meeting skills and creates more interest and buy-in.
- Assign roles during the meeting. It may be too much to ask for the meeting leader to also function as the timekeeper, the facilitator, the scribe, surrogate customer, or devil's advocate and still focus on the agenda. The meeting leader should delegate tasks to others in the meeting to help the overall efficiency of the meeting. Often too meetings are less than effective when the leader who may also be the boss also acts as the facilitator. Meeting leaders often have a vested interest in the outcome. It can be difficult to remain neutral and objective as required in the role as meeting facilitator. Moreover, an impassioned meeting leader/ boss /facilitator can squash input and ideas from other meeting participants.

- Limit meetings to 30 minutes or less. This forces people to come prepared and it puts pressure on everyone to focus. Finally, everyone can leave the meeting and get back to their "real jobs."
- Borrow a "perspective" from Edward de Bono. De Bono is a creativity guru and his book *Six Thinking Hats* encourages people to adopt a certain perspective in a meeting. The meeting leader will ask people to don (figuratively) a blue hat, and everyone's contribution will be directed toward a blue sky perspective. Conversely, during the meeting, people will be asked to take a black hat perspective and point out the weaknesses of an idea. In addition to the role of Devil's Advocate in Black Hat thinking, De Bono offers Green, Yellow, Red and White Hat thinking perspectives in his book (De Bono, 2000).

Summary

MaryAnne Bobrow's chapter on Small Meeting Management helps meeting managers plan and execute small meetings. This PMM5 Postscript™ allows meeting managers to make recommendations about the agenda and dynamics of the small everyday meeting. The agenda and the content of the small meeting are typically the only element of the meeting—there are rarely social activities or break-out sessions. This necessitates the importance of working with stakeholders to improve the actual meeting experience. Even everyday meetings can benefit from the direction and guidance of a meeting manager.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. How have meetings figured into your career or educational experience? Reflect on great meetings you have attended and list the reasons why that meeting worked. Also think about a less-than-stellar everyday meeting experience and list the problems with that meeting. Share your results with your group and determine areas of overlap.
2. Select one of the subjects below and describe the role it plays in small meetings:
 - Humor
 - Interaction
 - Group discussion
 - Strong meeting leader
 - Collaborating among participants

Does tension exist between any of these elements?

3. What is your personal pet peeve about everyday meetings? How could you erase or eliminate your pet peeve from occurring?
4. How can a meeting manager help prepare for a meeting that will include conflict? What strategies (logistical set up and group dynamics) might they recommend to diminish negative conflict?
5. Research how much time would be saved if a meeting were held with participants standing up. How would this strategy benefit and detract from the meeting?
6. Roger Burns, a 30-year veteran of high-level meetings describes, one meeting flaw, "Often times the first 20 or 30 minutes of our meetings would be spent with people flipping through the docu-

ments I had sent them over a week ago. They had not prepared and had no idea what questions I was going to ask in the next few minutes." This scenario shows up more often than not. How can a meeting manager avoid this common pitfall. (Quinn)

References

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