

Derailing useless meetings

In the two other essays for this topic, this week, we've discussed how to hold effective meetings, plus its flip side: how to hold useless meetings.

For this last entry into this week's Monday Motivation, we're going to look at a more difficult topic: how to derail a useless meeting.

It's not as hard as you might think, but it's sometimes a little bit dangerous.

I speak from experience here -- I have sat through some of the most boring meetings you'd ever hear. Years ago, I would sit thorough hours and hours of school board meetings, city council meetings, county commission meetings, church leadership meetings -- you name it, I've sat through it. The two highlights I remember were a school board meeting where they broke for soda, and a planning commission meeting where a local apple grower brought homemade apple cider.

Individuals who have any idea at all how to conduct a meeting do not conduct most meetings -- and everybody knows it, except for the person who's in charge.

So -- how are you as a meeting participant going to change it?

You can do it with a couple of easy steps.

First and foremost, have something to contribute. When you're called on, introduce an interesting subject that will provoke a lot of discussion. This will usually wake up the people who've drifted off, and it'll make the meeting leader feel that the meeting's going somewhere.

Caution: do not introduce a divisive topic, unless you're willing to pay the consequences. I used to do this merely out of boredom. I would introduce a topic that I knew had a lot of emotion behind it, just to liven up a meeting. Beware! This technique, used unwisely, can get you labeled as a malcontent.

Second, volunteer before the meeting to bring something up. This forces the meeting-head to think about early planning, even if it's just your topic.

Third, always have something interesting to offer. You might want to print out some of our "Monday Motivations" and offer them to people. I know this can be construed as a self-serving idea on my part, but I'm not limiting you to them. The Wall Street Journal is an excellent source of items to bring to a meeting. I

personally have Yahoo! news clippers set to track items of interest; set the delivery time to an hour before the meeting, and then print it out and bring it.

Fourth, volunteer to serve on a committee or team to help pump up the meetings in your area. Don't take a confrontational attitude toward the meeting-head, unless you think you can get away with it. Volunteering is good -- make the most of it. It increases your visibility and your perceived worth to the organization.

Fifth, if all else fails, see if you can get out of meetings that you're not really a part of. Use this tactic sparingly, since it may be perceived as laziness. Show them how you can better use the time, or how your contribution really doesn't apply.

Scott Adams, of Dilbert fame, has a book titled "Always postpone meetings with time-wasting morons." Obviously, you should cancel such meetings when possible; if it's not possible, then try and pump the meetings up yourself.

Sometimes, the tail can actually wag the dog -- and a little germ of an idea can infect a whole organization for the better.

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