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## **Effective Meetings: How To Take Your Next Meeting From Worn-Out To Wow!**

If you are currently experiencing an acute case of "MBO" (also known as "Meeting Burn-Out"), you're not alone. And it's no wonder -- many meetings are inefficient, boring and end up wasting your valuable time. Anticipating a long, drawn-out meeting can make even the most highly motivated employee unhappy, discouraged, and at the very least, a tad annoyed.

If the thought of your next meeting leaves you filled with an overwhelming sense of dread and your stomach in knots, it may be the perfect time to learn and integrate some of the following meeting tools, techniques and tactics. Whether you're the meeting planner or you just want to perk up your participation during your next meeting -- here are some tools, techniques and tactics specifically designed to help you make the most of every meeting minute.

### **Set a Positive Emotional Context**

Individuals responsible for running meetings should be aware of the powerful influence that positive emotions can have on the success of any meeting. According to Michael McCormick, Ph.D., a personal effectiveness coach and organizational psychologist at the University of Houston-Clear Lake: "No one has ever considered the importance of positive emotions and how they affect the dynamics of the meeting. This may indeed be the missing link."

Contrary to what most people believe, effective meetings are no longer just about distributing a clear agenda in advance, rather it's about setting a positive emotional context for the meeting. By deliberately or intentionally creating a positive meeting

environment, we can enhance the positive moods of meeting participants. "Take a typical revival meeting for example," said McCormick, "before anything formal is said, there is a whole lot of singing, clapping and planned activities to elevate mood states of participants."

McCormick's words are echoed by Barbara Fredrickson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan who has completed extensive research on the impact of positive emotions on learning and cooperation within groups. Fredrickson's research reveals that when people are experiencing positive emotions such as optimism, joy, contentment, gratitude, and/or a sense of personal accomplishment, they are more creative and willing to collaborate, they learn new information faster and their problem solving skills improve.

### **Elevating The Mood Of Your Attendees**

While singing and clapping may not necessarily be appropriate for your next meeting, there are things that can be done to elevate the mood of meeting participants. These include:

- 1) Designate an official greeter. The greeter's task is to arrive 15 minutes prior to the start of each meeting to make sure that the room is in order. They then will personally greet each participant as they arrive, as well as introduce them to others in the room. The greeter can also make sure that each individual has a copy of the agenda and all other items that will be necessary to fully participate in the meeting.
- 2) In large group meetings, provide name badges or name plates. This assures that each person is made to feel like an important part of the group. This also makes it easier for individuals to address each other throughout the meeting.
- 3) Offer refreshments. Coffee. Tea. Water. Juice. Cookies. This small gesture can go along way toward creating goodwill. Plus, it raises the attendees blood sugar level thereby making them more alert.

4) Play music as people arrive. The right music can elevate moods and serve to set a positive context for sharing. If your meeting has a theme, consider choosing music that captures the theme.

5) Consider your meeting room's interpersonal atmosphere. If you're trying to generate creative ideas in a boring, white-walled room, you may want to consider what elements could be added to warm up the atmosphere and create a more friendly and festive environment. Wall art, seasonal decorations, your company logo and mission statement can all serve to create a different atmosphere.

**Other ideas that will take your next meeting from good to great:**

*Realize That Timing is Everything*

It's important to start and end every meeting on time. Do this regardless of who has shown up. By making this a policy, it allows people to relax and gives them a measure of control over the meeting. By following a rigid time structure, individuals will know that you value their time. Should latecomers arrive, don't interrupt the flow by making too much of a fuss, rather greet them by name as they enter the door and invite them to sit and participate by sharing with them where you are on the agenda. (e.g., "Hello Bob, come in and join us, we were just discussing item B on the agenda.")

*Establish Ground Rules*

Depending on the size of your group and the number of times that you will meet, it may be a good idea to establish meeting "ground rules." Here participants are asked to generate a list and agree on what things need to occur in order for the meeting to be effective. Typical ground rules might be: Each participant is expected to arrive and depart on time; only items on the agenda may be discussed; no cell phones can be used; everyone must listen respectfully; and everyone is responsible for reinforcing ground rules. (As a reminder, ground rules may be displayed at subsequent meetings.)

### *Stick to the Agenda*

Designate a timekeeper to keep the meeting on track. You can designate the specific time an agenda item will be discussed next to each agenda item. The timekeeper is responsible for keeping all members on task and their efforts should be positively reinforced by all members.

### *Conduct a Positive Check-in*

Successful groups focus on relationships first and tasks second. Knowing this, you may want to experiment by reserving several minutes at the beginning of each meeting to conduct a "positive check-in." During this, all meeting participants are invited to share a positive (personal or professional) experience that they have had since the last meeting. The positive experience could include a positive experience with a loved one, something that has happened on the job or in their personal lives, etc.

### *Iron Out Personality Conflicts Outside of the Meeting*

Face it. There are some people that get on our last nerve. Unfortunately, they may be at your next meeting. If you know that a person has a history of negativity and of offering long-winded comments that bring down the emotional state of the meeting participants, consider talking with the person one-on-one prior to the meeting to express your concerns and your expectations. Rather than airing your dirty laundry in front of the group, by taking the initiative up front to discuss whatever ails you, you will be much better off in the long run.

### *Hold a Positive Check-Out*

Rather than finishing up the final agenda item and rushing people out the door, you can enhance the perception of a successful meeting by reserving three to five minutes at the end to hold a "positive check-out." Here, you will provide everyone with an opportunity to find out how to better work together, by asking: "What worked? What didn't work? What can we do differently next time?" Another approach to a "positive check-out" is to ask each meeting participant to acknowledge one thing that went well during the

meeting. This can include acknowledging another person's contributions or ideas, acknowledging how the meeting flowed, expressing their excitement or appreciation for meeting results, etc.

### *Check Your Attitude at The Door*

You don't have to be a "positive Pollyanna," but you do need to know that carrying a positive attitude with you to every meeting can work to your professional advantage. So, the next time you're invited to a meeting, check your attitude prior to reaching the door. If you are the person who consistently "badmouths" any meeting -- without knowing it, you may be working against yourself. To gain a new perspective, set yourself up to listen. Key questions to ask are: "What is being said that I need to know?" and "How do the points being shared during this meeting relate to what I already know?" By asking yourself these questions, your brain will actively seek to find answers.

As each point on the agenda is presented, ask yourself, "What positive contribution can I make?" A pair of excellent questions to ask yourself prior to speaking up are: "Does what I'm about to say directly relate to the topic at hand?" and "What is my point in sharing this information?" If you can contribute to the conversation by offering an important insight or fact, *do so*. However, when taking the floor, make sure to keep your comments brief and to the point. As we all know, there is nothing more irritating than being in a meeting where one or two people rant and ramble with no end in sight.

In conclusion, keep in mind that with every thought, word and action we either positively affect or negatively infect a meeting's effectiveness. So make a positive choice today to make the most out of every meeting's minutes!

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Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. With a specialized expertise in healthcare communication, Susanne delivers workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations across the United States. For more information, or to book Dr. Gaddis for an upcoming conference or event call 919-933-3237 or visit: [www.communicationsdoctor.com](http://www.communicationsdoctor.com).