

motd

by Tina Darmohray

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Meeting of the Minds

[Editor's Note: Tina wrote this great column and graciously allowed me to run it under the MOTD banner. RK]

In-person meetings are generally held for three reasons: to gather information, to disseminate information, and to use the collective brainpower of the group. I classify the meetings I attend into two types: the Well-Known (which I loathe) and the Unknown.

Well-Known meetings were originally created to provide a way for an organizational unit or project team to assemble and easily exchange information. Because the meeting is pre-scheduled and perpetual, folks forget to ask whether the time expenditure is still necessary or useful. As a result, a non-trivial number of these meetings are content-free and ultimately a waste of everyone's time. And, of course, the meeting has a preset start and ending schedule, thus too often ensuring wasted time. I find myself sitting in these meetings focused on all the things that await me back at my office and frustrated that I'm not using the time to get to them.

My contempt for these never-ending meetings is not widely shared among my colleagues. Maybe they get a lot more out of the gatherings than I do. I think, though, it's because these get-togethers are a lot easier than the "Unknown"-type meetings. Let's face it: There's not much at stake in regular group meetings. Everyone pretty much knows the drill. There are rarely any surprises, and there isn't a whole lot of preparation for the meeting: just show up, listen, maybe contribute a thought or two, kill the hour (or two), and return to your regularly scheduled tasks.

Many folks embrace the Well-Known meetings and recoil at the Unknown meetings, those one-off gatherings that are called to seek resolution, force common ground, or report status. I've decided that the distaste for the Unknown meeting is because they're not as easy as the Well-Known meetings: There's often more at stake with less predictability, and thus they are sur-

rounded with uneasy anticipation of the consequences if the meeting doesn't go well.

As with most things, however, "no risk, no reward." If there is more on the line with the high-profile Unknown meetings, there is more to be gained as well. I relish that potential, and you can too! Here's a strategy to get you in the mind-set to tackle the Unknown meeting head on, and most of all, use it to your benefit in the workplace.

Instead of considering the Unknown meeting as a "command performance," in which you're being summoned to appear before your managers and their managers (potentially for "judgment"), consider it an opportunity. Even if you've been requested to attend and report on a particular topic, never lose sight of the fact that you can turn that into an opportunity to turn the tide in a direction of your choosing.

You don't have to be a passenger!

No matter who called the meeting, you can decide what you want out of it. Determine what your position is and decide what you need to do to get your point across and persuade your audience.

Prepare Yourself

Now that you've identified what you want to get out of the meeting, assemble a professional presentation that persuasively elucidates exactly your point of view and moves the group in the direction you want – and I mean exactly the direction you want.

Realize how strong the power of suggestion is. Suggest to the attendees that they'll see it your way! Consider your own reaction to a presenter who starts a session with honesty – "I'm sorry, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed by this group" – versus "I'm delighted to join you today; I'm excited to share my ideas about XXX with you." You may be feeling the former, but whatever you do, be sure to say, act, and look like you mean the latter! Also, if you're attending as a group or giving a joint presentation, make certain everyone is on board with your goal and the way you plan to achieve it. There is no room for an apparent crack in the armor if you want to succeed.

Do Your Homework

Know your audience. These meetings are often filled with decision-makers, many of whom you may not know. Find out ahead of time what you can about them and about any opinion they may have about the meeting topic. During the meeting, try to acknowledge the different types of people in the audience so that each of them feels they've played a part. Often they fall into broad groups:

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- Drivers – people who get to the point and solve the problem; people for whom the solution, not the means, is paramount
- Analyticals – people who require lots of data to make decisions; give them enough data to help them feel comfortable about decision-making
- Expressives – people who thrive on and enjoy the thrill of the conception of a new idea (but not necessarily its execution); listen to and acknowledge their creative ideas; make sure they feel included in the creative part of the meeting
- Amiables – those who seek relationships and personal approval for their interaction and participation in projects; make sure they feel included and that the meeting will foster good feelings and relationships
- Naysayers – those who, for whatever reason, feel compelled to see the dark side of any and all proposals; acknowledge their concerns and perhaps assist them in restating concerns as goal-oriented action items that are required in order to move forward

Don't be lulled into lack of preparation just because you're attending a discussion-only meeting instead of one where you are giving a more formal presentation. Take some time to organize your thoughts and your position and run it past a colleague for "practice" just as you would if you were giving a presentation. Consider making a list of "the top seven reasons why we should XXX," for example. You'll find the pre-meeting preparation and discussion with your peers gives you a perspective from the "information consumer" standpoint and also gives you invaluable practice in discussing and presenting your points in a less structured setting.

Stack the Deck

Create some allies in the crowd. Prior to the meeting, make some phone calls to people you think you can persuade to come over to your side. Listen to what they say! Don't be afraid to change your ideas slightly if you can achieve broad buy-in. Of course, don't compromise your vision too much. In a sense, and as much as possible, have the meeting ahead of time by touching base with those who will attend. Ideally, the meeting can just be an affirmation of the topic presented. If not, at least you'll be forewarned of the issues that will come up and you can be best prepared to address them.

Stand and Deliver!

Once you've prepared for the meeting, you're ready to present your topic in a confident and persuasive way. You know your audience and who you can count on in the crowd to vote your way. You're prepared for the counter-arguments and are armed with information to support your stance. The only thing that stands between you and your desired outcome is the time to pass before the meeting happens. So look forward to these Unknown meetings as opportunities to influence your workplace, and use them to your advantage to get an idea accepted, forge an alliance, head off a problem, or get a project "green-lighted."

Conclusion

So what's the big picture? Use meetings as a tool. Help participants see it your way. Contribute when appropriate; don't just absorb. Communicate, both before and during the meeting. Understand what the goals are or set them yourself. Meetings can be great, but you must make the greatness happen.