Proper Planning Prevents Poor Meeting Performance

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Many of the employees we meet in Center-led Risk Assessments yearn for a more generous communications loop in their organizations. Our team has also observed the growing interdependency of work tasks and the need for thoughtful collaboration and communication. Email and instant messaging may feel like time-saving communications tools, but they are poor substitutes for face-to-face meetings.

However, many people view meetings as ineffective and as an interruption to their work. Ineffective meetings can be bad for morale and limit the productivity of your organization. Because of this, many can view a meeting as a waste of time. In his book *Beyond Management*, Mark Addleson posits that the perception that meetings are a waste of time is misguided. Addleson explains that meetings are where the most important 'work' of an organization takes place, and that every meeting has the potential to be an opportunity for information sharing necessary to develop solutions to key challenges and collectively make decisions.

The first step toward transforming your staff meetings into high-energy, high productivity moments is simple planning. A good meeting agenda identifies the purpose of the meeting, the points that will be covered in support of this purpose, the participants that will attend, and the preparation that needs to happen before the meeting.

- **Purpose:** A meeting without a purpose is doomed from the start, and will be perceived as a time waster for everyone involved. To define the purpose of an upcoming meeting, put yourself in the shoes of an invitee and complete the following statement: "As a result of attending this meeting, I will be able to…" For example: "As a result of this meeting, I will understand how to lead my team in completing the new risk assessment exercise" or "At the conclusion of this meeting we will have agreed upon and be ready to disseminate the revised charter for our staff Risk Management Committee." Remember to always consider whether a meeting is necessary or potentially beneficial to advance your purpose. If the purpose can be fully realized without a face-to-face meeting, nix the meeting and use another channel, such as email.
- **Points to cover:** Once you have identified the purpose of the meeting, list or outline the topics that will be discussed. If you expect specific team members to lead the discussion of each topic, include their names adjacent to the topic, to achieve your goals. Your closing discussion points should always include a recap of the decisions made during the meeting, and the action steps that the meeting participants have agreed to take in the wake of the meeting. These final discussion points can often be used as introductory topics during follow-up meetings, in order to hold meeting participants accountable for what

they promised to achieve at the last meeting.

- **Participants:** Choose meeting invitees with care. Don't make the mistake of leaving out key informants; even a routinely disagreeable staff member might deserve a seat at the table. Don't make the opposite mistake–inviting everyone to make a 'process' decision feel democratic.
- **Preparation:** Now that you have a purpose, points to cover, and a list of invitees, focus on preparation. Ask:
    - What materials, if any should be distributed in advance of the meeting?
    - How much advance warning or notice is needed to maximize attendance?
    - What is the appropriate length given the topics that will be discussed?
    - What is the appropriate setting for the meeting? Choose the smallest appropriate meeting space given the number of attendees. For example, a meeting of five staff is better suited to an office or huddle room, not a large conference room.
    - Do you need to communicate to meeting participants that they should prepare for conversation in advance? Empower meeting participants to fully take part in the meeting before it takes place.

Respect the time and brainpower of your co-workers by constructing meeting agendas on a solid foundation. If any of the "4 P's" above are missing, hold off meeting until you're truly ready. For additional insights on making meetings matter, check out our other RISK eNews articles, including pieces on facilitating inclusive meetings and making meetings matter. For a deeper dive into creating an agenda, take a look at "How to Design an Agenda for an Effective Meeting" from Roger Schwarz in the *Harvard Business Review*.

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