Keys to effective meetings: Time, tone and planning

As a communication specialist, I participate in problem-solving meetings every day and witness the same meeting problems. People talk too long about the less important items and then fall into debate around the more important issues. Time slips by without anyone seemingly noticing it until the ending time draws near and then there is a scurry to make a decision. Some people dominate the discussion, while others are disengaged. If the environment doesn't feel safe, people withhold their true thoughts about what is being discussed in the meeting and vent later in hallway conversations.

Fortunately, there are basic meeting techniques that can be incorporated right away that will make a significant difference. Whether you are meeting with three people or 20, in a conference room or on a conference call, there are three areas which are essential for success: planning agendas, managing time, and advocating tone.

Agenda Planning

The most common planning mistakes around meetings are failure to plan an agenda, thinking in terms of topics not outcomes and lack of prioritization. Those mistakes create a situation where everything that is said in the meeting appears to have equal value and worth talking at length about.

Planning tips
- *Create the standard practice of requiring a prioritized agenda at any meeting with three people or more*. Even if planning time is occasionally nonexistent, find a way to sketch out at least a minimal agenda and prioritize the agenda items in the first couple minutes of the meeting.
- *Before you discuss any agenda item, clarify with the group the desired outcome.* "When we are finished with this agenda item, what do we want to hold in our hands?" (e.g. a list of strategies for how to improve our relationship with a particular client; a decision on adjusted work hours)   Without identified outcomes, meetings frequently end up being more about "talk time" and decision making is left up in the air.

Time Management

The most common time wasters that occur in meetings include being loose around time (e.g. starting overly late and not having a sense that time has value until the ending time starts to loom) and lack of facilitation.   Both of these problems frequently occur because people are uncomfortable

interrupting others who have slid off topic, slipped into too much detail, repeating themselves or just enjoying hearing themselves talk.

Time tips
- *Have simple ground rules for all meetings in your organization.* (E.g. start on time, stay focused on the agenda, speak openly and directly, one person speaks at a time, listen and resolve, be respectful.)
- *Assign a facilitator for the meeting.* Someone who is responsible for monitoring the time, redirecting conversations, and keeping the group focused on accomplishing the agenda items.
- *At the end of every meeting take a moment to assess how well the meeting went in terms of the ground rules and facilitation.* Keep the focus on the positive and how the team can be a little bit better next time.

Advocating tone

Meetings are the public showcase for how the organization interacts. Good communication ability is essential for good business to occur and the amount of problems which occur in organizations when people withhold their important thoughts and expertise is stunning. Counter-productive meeting behaviors which can hurt your business long-term are: an obvious imbalance in participation; debating, arguing or mocking other's ideas and allowing overt, disrespectful behavior towards group members or the leader.

Tone tips
- *Give permission for anyone in a meeting to speak up respectfully when counter-productive behaviors are occurring.* The simplest and most effective way is to identify the behavior and redirect it. For example, "I feel like we are moving into debate here, can we go back to generating solutions?" Or, "I'd like to hear from some of the people who haven't been able to weigh in on this subject yet." Or, upon seeing some eye rolling, "I can see you are disagreeing with something and I'd like to know what is on your mind. The more objective the better."
- *Leaders in meetings need to have the important conversations with individuals who are undermining the group's ability to communicate effectively with one another*. Leaders are frequently hesitant to have these conversations but failure to do so drives a tremendous amount of additional problems. The best time to have a coaching moment is before going into a meeting. For example, "Sometimes you start to laugh when someone says something you disagree with. I think that impacts people's comfort in speaking up. I'd like to ask you to withhold this reaction and speak directly to your concern instead. Does that sound reasonable to you?"

In the final analysis, meetings can be very complex and there are always unspoken interpersonal dynamics occurring. Yet despite this complexity, it is helpful to know that incorporating some simple structuring around agenda planning, managing the time well throughout the meeting and advocating an environment where people realize they need to bring their best communication skills to the table will improve probably every meeting you lead or attend.