

Solve Anything with Dr. Mark

Career Advice
for the
Working Class

Mad about meetings

Q: The meetings at my company are nearly useless. No, that's not true. They are totally useless. I don't even know why we bother having them. And it's not just at my present job. It was the same at the last two places I've worked. I just don't get it. The people at my current job seem smart and dedicated and want to do a good job but we just can't get our act together. Can you offer me something I could slip under my boss' door so that he takes a hint and does something about our meetings to make them more productive?

A: Sharon Rich is the principal and founder of Leadership Incorporated in Los Angeles. Her company focuses on turning managers into leaders and turning productivity into efficacy (you can't be productive without being effective). Like you, one of her pet peeves is how meetings waste time and deplete people's energy. I passed along your request to her. She shared with me the hint your boss might need.

Here is Rich's list of "11 Things Smart Leaders Do to Waste Company Money and Lose the Respect of Their People."

- 1. Ignoring the exorbitant amount of time, money and energy drained by ineffective meetings.** Do the math. Look at more than the cost of wasting valuable hours of your people's time. There is also the cost of lost productivity, lower morale, loss of respect for management, additional time spent complaining about bad meetings and more. It adds up to millions and millions of dollars a year in most companies.
- 2. Failing to leverage the power of meetings to create positive outcomes in every aspect of the business.** Meetings are the single most important business tool there is. Think about it. No matter what brilliance you may accomplish on your own, nothing moves forward in business without a meeting.
- 3. Calling unnecessary meetings and not calling essential meetings.** Examples: Retaking meetings that have already been taken while putting off meetings that inform others of a brewing problem. The biggest mistake leaders make is not knowing the difference between necessary and unnecessary.
- 4. Allowing too many meetings to get in the way of follow-through.** The single biggest complaint employees have about meetings is that there are too many. People can't deliver on next steps from one meeting before there are more next steps from the



Q&A

next. Setting priorities and boundaries is a leadership issue.

- 5. Seeing meetings as a one-way communication tool.** If a meeting doesn't actively involve participants, it doesn't need to be a meeting. It's likely that you will not engage people and do more harm than good. Either figure out how to include involvement or find a more effective way of imparting that information.
- 6. Talking instead of listening.** Meetings are a great place for leaders to gather valuable information about projects, teams, opportunities and impending disasters. Listening is an invaluable and underused tool.
- 7. Not understanding the proper use of an agenda.** Telltale signs: not having an agenda, getting off agenda, people arriving unprepared, ending the meeting without clear next steps.
- 8. Sending leaders into meetings unprepared.** When people who lead meetings don't understand that a client presentation, a brainstorming meeting, a problem solving session and a team work meeting each require a unique skill set to be effective. It's critically important that people who lead have the tools, skills and knowledge to maximize the power of each type of meeting.
- 9. Not asking enough of people before, during and after meetings.** Responsibility and involvement increase ownership and engagement. Give people a stake in the game to build morale, commitment and follow-through.
- 10. Undermining their own objectives.** Many intelligent leaders don't realize that their own energy, attitude and presence have a profound impact on the energy, productivity and effectiveness of everyone in the room, not just during the meeting, but beyond.
- 11. Setting a bad example for the rest of the organization.** Very often the top people in businesses are the worst transgressors in terms of wasting others' time in meetings. Otherwise smart leaders fail to realize that they set the tone. What they do, good or bad, the rest of the organization will emulate.

On a final note, instead of slipping this list under your boss' door, why not sit down with him or her and brainstorm how to prevent all of these from happening? It should be pretty easy for the two of you to come up with solutions, for which your boss will thank you.

Ask Mark • Mark Goulston is a Santa Monica-based management adviser, executive coach and author of "Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone."
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