

# Training 101

## M E E T I N G M A N I A

This month's "Training 101" looks at a topic everyone loves to complain about: meetings. As much as we gripe about them, we all have to acknowledge that many of the meetings we attend really are necessary. Here are some ways to get the most out of them.

Doug Malouf's "Nine 'M's" focus on the early stages of a meeting—from your first meeting announcement to your "get 'em moving" ice-breaker. Edward Franklin explains how to turn regular staff meetings into opportunities for employee development, by having employees take turns facilitating. Charlotte Stuart looks at the advantages of holding daily meetings, and gives some advice for getting them off the ground.

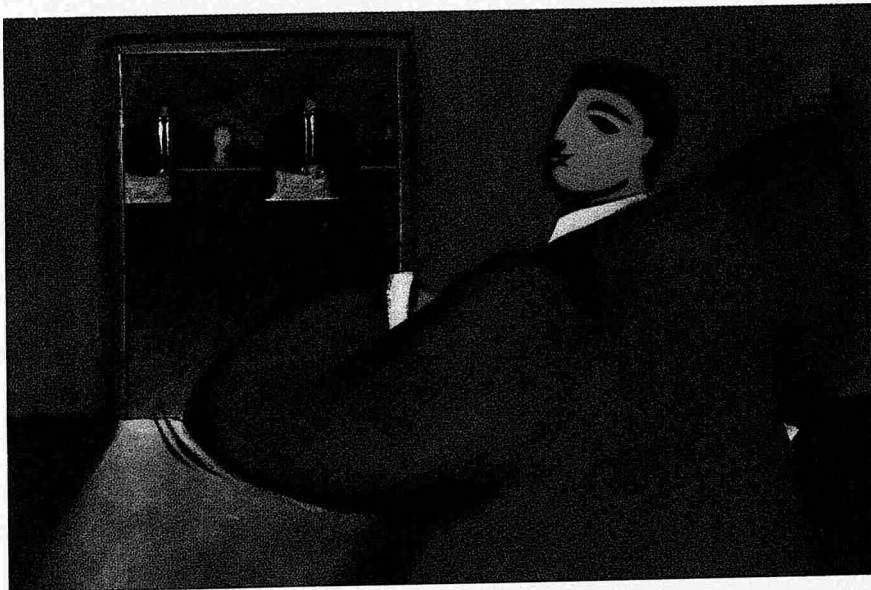
### Nine "M's" for Meetings That Motivate

First impressions count. That's not the first time you've heard that, is it? But we all know how true it is. Career consultants emphasize the importance of first impressions about the way people dress, writers know they have to grab their readers in the first paragraph, and presenters at meetings had better know that it's vital to attract people's interest quickly.

Here are some tips on how to start meetings that really motivate.

**Make your meeting notices zappy.** This is your first direct point of contact. It's your chance to forge expectations. Would you rather have someone who sees your meeting notice say, "What's this? Hey, this looks interesting!" or groan, "Not another damned meeting. I suppose I can't get out of it."

You're to first base already if your



John Carruso

course participants want to be there and anticipate an interesting time. Here are some tips:

- ▶ Print your notice on colored paper to make it stand out.
- ▶ Spend time on a catchy title. Which would interest you more—a course called, "Enhanced Instructional Methods," or one called, "Teaching With Bells and Whistles"?
- ▶ Use a relevant, eye-catching cartoon or illustration.
- ▶ Keep the text to a minimum. Write a short lead, outline the content in point form, and then finish with a brief line or two telling what's in it for the participant.

**Make 'em fill out a name tag.** Why? First, it makes people feel involved from the start if they do it themselves. Second, you will build rapport much more speedily if you can call someone "John" instead of "er-um." Make sure the tags are large enough for you to read from the back row without eyestrain. (You weren't even thinking of not having name tags, were you? Were you?)

*With a little thought,  
you can plan successful  
meetings that truly motivate  
employees*

**Meet and greet 'em on arrival.** Do this and you've broken the ice before you even open your mouth about the course content. A smile, a handshake, and a friendly exchange do wonders to build empathy. You're not just a "talking head." Of course, we hope your teaching techniques make you more than that anyway.

**Music 'em on arrival.** What does music signal? "This is not a starchy meeting. We want you to relax and enjoy yourself." You'll have them humming along and feeling in a positive frame of mind as soon as they walk in. This is not work; it's fun! A word of warning: Everyone has different musical preferences. A good choice is popular light classical or movie themes. Even plants thrive on classical music.

**Make 'em mix before you start.** This loosens up the audience and promotes group interaction as people get to know more about each other. Give the first arrivals tasks to do. For instance, ask them to tell the others to print their names in large, clear letters.

**Make your housekeeping announcements.** People like to know where they're going, both physically and mentally. And you like to keep their attention. If you don't attend to the nitty-gritty stuff beforehand, people will be whispering to each other, "Where's the loo?" or "What time's lunch—and where is it?" instead of listening to you.

So sort those things out before you launch into the body of your presentation. Outline plainly the location of rest-room facilities, the timing of breaks, the where and when of lunch, and a definite finishing time.

**Make 'em aware of your mission.** You know why you're here. If you've made your meeting notice zappy and informative, then everyone should have a fair idea of what's coming. But now, in a friendly, upbeat way, tell 'em again. Tell them why you're here, what's in it for them, and how you're going to do things. Don't be afraid to be natural, and to use humor. Use the same keen, friendly tone of voice you'd use if you were telling a friend.

**Make your start fun.** Even if you've accomplished the first seven "M"s, it's likely that you haven't yet won over everyone in the room. Right now there's that guy in the gray suit in the back who's looking a bit skept-

tical, and the woman in red who just yawned for the third time. She might have been up all night, but on the other hand, maybe she's just not convinced you'll deliver.

So wake 'em up. Tell an amusing story. (At your own expense is fine.) But unless you know you're a natural comedian with a great sense of timing, it's best to stay away from joke-telling. You're as likely to earn a stifled groan as a laugh. You want them to smile!

And then, as well as making 'em listen...

**Make 'em move in the first five minutes.** There are plenty of books around with good icebreakers for meetings. Many of them require people to move around. Yes, you'll get the occasional person who'll groan or make a face, but you'll get most of the audience awake, alive, and participating.

What sorts of things could you do? Try giving each participant two minutes to do one of the following:

- ▶ Exchange backgrounds with someone they don't know.
- ▶ Collect a list of five different people's favorite ways of relaxing.
- ▶ Collect a list of five middle names beginning with different letters.

The list is endless. Make up your own!

The beginning of any meeting or seminar is the part that can make or break the day. If you want to hold meetings that motivate, use the nine "M"s to get yourself off to a flying start. You'll find that reaching your goal will be that much easier.

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— Doug Malouf

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## Putting the Staff Into Staff Meetings

A staff meeting should be the staff's meeting. Giving staff the responsibility for planning and conducting staff meetings makes sense. It helps build effective teams and gives managers the opportunity

### Facilitator Responsibilities

- ▶ Consult with division colleagues about appropriate agenda items. Review these with the manager.
- ▶ Set the date, place, and time slot for the meeting.
- ▶ Announce the meeting and distribute an agenda.
- ▶ Facilitate the meeting.
- ▶ Distribute a summary of the meeting, including notes of significant accomplishments and of items that need follow-up actions.

to develop staff members. It can lead to a workforce with better planning, facilitation, and evaluation skills. Even more important, staff-led meetings can help build employees' confidence as they become key participants in the management process.

So how do you set up a staff meeting that is run by and for the staff?

**Planning the meeting.** The manager's responsibility is to ensure that effective planning takes place before every meeting. Have staff members take turns facilitating the meetings, and try to give all staff—technical, professional, and support staff—the opportunity to do so.

Facilitator assignments should be announced at least three to six months before the first meeting. You may want to start with senior staffers, to give less experienced people role models. Consider also the staff's projected workload, vacation plans, and other factors that could influence scheduling.

Once the staff facilitators have been scheduled, they can begin preparing for their meetings.

**Developing the agenda.** This is the most important part of planning for the meeting. Before a meeting, the staff facilitator collects agenda ideas from each staff member. The manager meets with the staff facilitator to clarify the purpose of the meeting and to ensure that the agenda has direction and meets its purpose.

The manager and staff facilitator should come to an agreement about how each agenda item benefits the staff. Each item should fall within one of the following categories:

- ▶ An action item requires participants to decide on a course of action during the meeting.
- ▶ A problem solving item requires participants to spend time defining the problem, but no decision is expected during the meeting.
- ▶ An informational item conveys new information and announcements of general interest to participants.
- ▶ Reports are updates from staff members who have completed assignments since the previous meeting.

Include in the agenda such "housekeeping" items as a review of the previous meeting. Next to each item, assign a time limit to help participants make the best use of meeting time and to keep the meeting on track. Agree on the mechanics of the meeting, including time and location, record-keeping responsibilities and methods, and other roles.

The staff facilitator distributes the agenda to all participants in advance of the meeting. This gives the staff a realistic expectation of what is to be accomplished and how much time it will take. It also helps prepare everyone to participate.

**Conducting the meeting.** The staff facilitator is the meeting chairperson, whose job is to keep the meeting running smoothly.

The manager assumes a coaching role. During the meeting, the manager may give a few opening remarks or a "state-of-the-division" statement. The manager also intervenes when needed to help keep the meeting focused, to make decisions, and to assign staff teams to resolve problem solving tasks and side issues after the meeting.

The agenda helps the staff facilitator keep the meeting focused. Handouts are another useful tool that the facilitator can use. And flipchart notes allow participants to see their work during the meeting and any decisions that are made.

**After the meeting.** The manager meets with the staff facilitator immediately after the meeting has ended to share reactions. The manager should ask the facilitator about several issues:

- ▶ Did we accomplish our meeting objectives?
- ▶ What did we do well? What could we have done better?

- ▶ What did you learn from this experience?

The staff facilitator and manager agree on the decisions made at the meeting, and on any assignments and goals that were set for the next meeting.

— **A. Edward Franklin**  
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## A Meeting a Day Keeps Team Problems at Bay

**T**eamwork! Organizations want it. And they want it now. There are many different approaches to helping groups become fully functioning teams. Most involve teaching specific communication skills. But helping people acquire skills is only one part of the formula. The other part involves providing the opportunity for communication. Daily meetings provide the perfect opportunity to square off communication skills and build a team.

Here are seven strategies for trainers to use to help employees create daily meetings that encourage and develop team building:

**Explain the rationale.** Many employees groan when they hear the word "meeting." The first hurdle a trainer faces is convincing employees that a daily meeting is important, whether it lasts 5 minutes or 20 minutes, and whether it's a sit-down meeting or a stand-up meeting. If it becomes a routine part of the work schedule, a daily meeting offers a unique opportunity for proactive rather than reactive management.

Problem avoidance, clarified expectations, regular feedback, timely conflict management, and rumor control, for instance, can all be handled in other settings. But the daily meeting encourages prompt action, which in turn saves time and money and boosts morale.

The big bonus is what happens over time. The simple fact of day-to-day interaction over time is instrumental in team building. You can't command it to happen on a particu-

lar day at a particular hour. You won't necessarily see it coming. You may not even realize when it arrives. But one day, like gray hair, it will suddenly be there: teamwork!

Why? Because we tend to bond with people we see frequently. That's why friendships spring up from car pools and classes. As the saying goes, familiarity may breed contempt, but more often it leads to better understanding and a higher comfort level for interaction.

The trainer can begin a discussion of the rationale for daily meetings by asking employees to list several of the people they are close to and to think about when and how that closeness came about. Often the lists contain teammates or old school buddies. The one thing that is almost always true is that people remember spending a lot of time—in the past, if not recently—with the people on their lists.

Once team members accept this major benefit of the daily meeting, the trainer can move on to practical issues related to holding a daily meeting.

**Brainstorm ways to overcome the obstacles.** Even employees who are receptive to the idea of holding daily meetings may respond to the suggestion with the familiar, "Yeah, but...." statements.

It doesn't take long to put together a list of reasons why having daily meetings may seem impractical to some—employees may be located in different areas, they may consider meetings a waste of time, they may not have a good place to meet, the meetings may delay getting work done, someone may have to be available to answer the telephone, and there are deadlines to meet, to name a few.

Generally the obstacles can be divided into two categories: physical and psychological. It helps to separate the two before tackling the solutions.

Each organization will face slightly different physical obstacles. One of the most common I hear is the problem of employees spread out over several locations, sometimes in more than one building. At first this obstacle may appear insurmountable, but with creative brainstorming, solutions can be found.

For example, one option might be to hold the meeting first thing in the morning with the understanding that no one will be expected to be "on the job" until after the meeting. If employees must travel between buildings, perhaps bicycles can be provided to speed up travel. Maybe a series of staggered meetings is the answer, with individuals assigned on a rotating basis to accompany the supervisor in charge. The daily meeting does not have to fit a particular mold; it just has to offer the chance for people to get together face-to-face on a regular basis.

Psychological obstacles are usually more difficult to address because they are less tangible. But once employees see that they can surmount the physical obstacles, they may be more willing to tackle the psychological ones.

One frequently mentioned psychological obstacle is resistance to change. Some people worry that daily meetings will deteriorate into gripe sessions or end up "like all the other boring meetings we have to attend."

Some psychological obstacles can be countered by discussing them—by bringing the issues out into the open. For example, the group can talk about resistance to change; in the process, people may become more accepting.

Other obstacles may require brainstormed solutions that everyone can buy into. For example, a group may come up with ways to make the daily meetings useful or interesting. Maybe participants want more information on particular subjects. Maybe they want presentations from management. Maybe they want the opportunity to make suggestions with the assurance that they will be listened to.

In order to deal with psychological obstacles, the goals and objectives of the daily meeting must be carefully defined. It may be helpful to consider the range of possible topics for discussion at the meetings.

**Identify topics and resources.** One typical response to the order to hold a daily meeting is to ask, "But what will we talk about?" It doesn't take much to fill five minutes, but it does require some forethought.

A leader who begins the meeting by asking, "Well, does anyone have anything to say?" and expects that to start things going, will probably be disappointed. Either no one will have anything to bring up, or someone will bring up something the leader would rather not discuss. Worst of all, chances are that most employees will consider the question an indication that the daily meeting is going to be a waste of time.

The content for the daily meeting will of course be influenced by the type of organization the team works in. If the company operates in shifts, for instance, people may need to know what happened on the previous shift. Maybe the meeting will be used primarily to allocate assignments or keep people up-to-date on what's happening in the company. The meeting could involve trouble-

the situations involved. But having something to talk about is the first step. Next the leader must consider how to handle the topic in the daily meeting format.

**Compare and contrast daily and standard meetings.** The daily meeting is not just a "mini" meeting, although the mechanics of holding the two are similar. Both involve work done before, beginning, during, and after. And many of the rules are the same: start on time, end on time, clarify procedures, and summarize periodically. But the time difference between the standard meeting and the daily meeting necessitates adaptations and variations.

One of the most important adaptations is the use of an oral overview instead of a written agenda. Employees want to know what will be covered and how long it will take,

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shooting, problem solving, or information flow—it doesn't matter what the content is, as long as the meeting is organized and ends on a positive note.

One supervisor I talked with said that he feels the daily meeting is his opportunity to make people aware of the industry as a whole. He brings quotations and articles from industry journals to share with team members. His goal is to make employees aware of where they fit into the larger picture, to make them feel more significant, and in the long run, to make them more conscientious about their jobs.

Another supervisor decided to make her daily-meeting planning easier by assigning certain topics to specific days. Wednesdays, for example, are "gripe sessions." Thursdays are devoted to safety issues. Employees can anticipate the topics that will be discussed and come prepared.

Topic possibilities are as varied as

but they don't need the information in print. Also, to be effective, the agenda for the daily meeting must remain flexible. This means that the person in charge must plan, but must also be ready to make changes on a moment's notice.

Another way in which the daily meeting must adapt to time pressures involves record keeping. Keeping minutes of this type of meeting isn't practical, but the person in charge may find it helpful to keep a log of major issues discussed. This ensures consistent follow-up and becomes a progress record for the group.

The nature and complexity of topics covered is also affected by time limits. The leader must be conscious of what can and what cannot be accomplished in a daily meeting. A good question to ask is: "Can this group deal with this issue in this amount of time?" If the answer is "no," then it is not an appropriate topic for the meeting.

In addition to meeting mechanics and topic choice, the daily meeting varies from the standard meeting in the type of communication demands it places on the person in charge. Instead of concentrating on developing and maintaining a thought line, the leader must be able to think on her or his feet and must appear responsive to questions and people. At the same time, the leader must keep the meeting within the stated time limits. That's no easy task!

A good way to prepare leaders for this challenge is to give them a chance to practice their communication skills, particularly the skills needed to field tough questions.

**Provide question-and-answer practice.** Training meeting leaders to be "good on their feet" involves two phases:

- ▶ They must know what to expect.
- ▶ They must be given the opportunity to practice.

"But what if they ask me...?" This is the fear expressed by many group leaders when they are told that their meeting agendas should remain flexible and responsive to employees. Flexible is often equated with "out of control," and with the idea that "anything can happen."

Some meeting leaders need to learn how to organize quick responses. Some gain confidence by learning when to say, "I don't know." But for many, the most empowering skill is the ability to cope with manipulative questions.

One way to allay the fear is to familiarize leaders with the different types of tough and manipulative questions, and with the range of appropriate responses. Once they realize that the list of questions and response choices is not infinite, the process becomes less threatening. Sometimes the distinctions between the different types blurs; the important thing to understand is that a manipulative question doesn't actually ask a question but, instead, implies an answer.

To become comfortable responding to manipulative questions, it is necessary to practice, practice, and practice some more. The successful response to a manipulative question is for the meeting leader to remain calm and not defensive. The leader

should answer the question on his or her own terms, and with his or her own language.

In addition to responding to questions, a daily meeting leader must also be prepared to cope with criticism.

**Role-play handing criticism.** Trainers usually try to get employees to focus on giving "constructive feedback." But not all employees receive training, and those who do receive it don't always practice what they've been taught. So daily meeting leaders must be prepared to cope with criticism. They need to recognize valid, unjustified, or vague criticism. And they need to know how to handle each type. Again, the key is practice.

**Practice and more practice.** A useful activity to help meeting leaders practice stand-up skills is to have them role-play daily meetings. This is not intended as "trial by fire"; it helps take the mystery out of the range of questions meeting participants might ask.

Before the first presentation begins, each team member receives a card that states a specific type of manipulative question or criticism to use during the question-and-answer period. For example, listeners may get cards that say: "Ask a justification question," or, "Give unfair criticism."

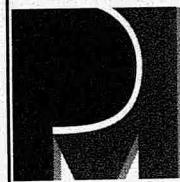
Because role playing can feel "real" at times, it is a good idea to hold a debriefing immediately after the simulated meeting. It may be helpful to videotape the presentations so that people can review their strengths and weaknesses.

Our concept of teamwork will undoubtedly change as businesses change to meet new challenges. But at the heart of the team are interactions and connections between people. Frequency of contact makes the process easier and more efficient.

Teamwork. Everybody wants it. One way to "get it" is by holding a daily meeting.

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