IDEAS THAT WORK

INSTEAD OF MEETINGS

How much time do you spend in meetings? And how much of it is justified by results? *ExecuTime*, the newsletter on effective use of executive time, points out that time wasted in meetings is one of the biggest chunks out of your day.

The best response may be to eliminate nearly all meetings and get the work done without getting the people together. While work without meetings seems a relatively new concept, modern technology and Yankee ingenuity are already providing us with the means to do away with most of our wasted meeting time.

What's a Meeting For?

Many meetings are called without a clear idea of why. Look deeper than mere "agenda." Information-handling meetings provide: 1) a forum for exchanging ideas, 2) a technique for stimulating our minds, 3) a process for hammering out decisions, consensus, and agreements, and 4) a means of presenting information.

Management process meetings give us: 5) a method for coordinating people and activities, 6) a procedure for allocating resources, 7) a technique for obtaining advice and 8) a way to build involvement.

But you can accomplish most of these purposes without meetings, too. Before you call your next meeting, figure out what you would like to happen there, and then see if one of these alternative procedures might be a better, more cost-effective way to get the same job done.

Routing Schedules

The simplest form of information transfer: Instead of meeting to pass around information, send it around to relevant people for them to read at their convenience. Reply comments can come back to you the same way. Excellent for exchanging ideas, providing and receiving stimulation, presenting information, and the like.

Instead of meetings to brainstorm, or solve a problem, send around a statement of what you want to accomplish, and simultaneously set up a Notebook to which everyone can contribute. The Notebook, freely accessible, becomes the repository for thoughts, ideas, and idle speculations — the same comments you might hear at the meeting you might have called. Direct people to look back through the Notebook to see what others have contributed and to respond directly or contribute a new idea or approach.

Each week copy the new contents of the Notebook and route to everyone in on the project, and present a new, sharper focus to keep the group moving forward. These Notebooks are great for problem-solving, brainstorming, exchanging ideas and gaining consensus or agreements.

Break Up Tasks

Many meetings are called to coordinate the activities of large groups working on the same task. Eliminate these meetings by breaking up tasks so you won't need coordination. Breaking up tasks will also help you build involvement without meetings because you can give individuals their own decisions to make — a proven involvement-building technique.

Quit Traveling to Meetings

Part of increasing costs of meeting is bringing everyone together. Now with space-age communications, you can eliminate meeting travel and associated scheduling conflicts. Instead of meeting "in two weeks," you can all confer today or tomorrow without leaving your offices.

"Conference calls" are well-established and easy to use. If you couple telephone conferencing with speaker-phones or other hands-free devices, you can write, work with your papers, and stay on the line for hours without fatigue.

We discussed "Video Conferencing" in *ExecuTime* June '78. Presently available in several cities, it will soon come on line as a satellite service offering two-way color TV, hard copy, and data-transmission facilities. Video conferencing is a step up from telephones: you get visual clues, gestures, and body language communication, along with the spoken word. But it is still experimental.

"As long as you have real-time communication, you don't save me any real time," insists Professor Harold Frank, who teaches Psychology and Business at the Wharton School. "Computer conferencing breaks free of real time. You send a message whenever you want to, and others on the computer network will receive it as soon as they check in with their terminals. It's like a letter, but much faster, and the computer alerts you the minute their replies come back."

Conversations over computer networks tend to be much more to the point than spoken communication. However, you need a measure of personal contact outside

the network for real understanding. Otherwise, you'll miss the nuances and emotional shadings of the dry, written messages. Also, these networks don't communicate urgency very well. If you need a decision in ten minutes, the telephone is a surer way to get it than the computer network terminal.

It makes sense to use means other than meetings for information-intensive communication, and where the time costs of meetings don't match the results you hope to achieve. But there are benefits of meetings that cannot be replaced.

For example, going out for a drink after a meeting may seem a waste of time, but it may give you an opportunity to generate and develop future business. Preliminary social talk around the meeting table may seem to detract from cold business efficiency, yet these informal conversations help build trust and provide the human basis for future business relationships.

Tours of the plant, whispered "asides" in tense meetings, and the sight, sound, feel, and even smell of other people all add to the richness of the business communications process. They may appear to be a waste, but they often carry with them strong positive benefits more sterile communications cannot provide.

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PLANNING A MEETING? DON'T FORGET THE "FRINGES"

The overall basic purpose of any business meeting, whatever form it takes . . . seminar, workshop, conference . . . is to inform the participants. If the program content is sound, the presenters professional, and the objectives established the only major phase remaining to plan is the *fringe benefits*, which can encompass a multitude of things and can help to make your meeting a tremendous success rather than "just another meeting."

Some of the fringes that should be considered are discussed below. Maybe they will trigger some other ideas or you, the planner,

can modify some possibilities. Why not consider brainstorming the subject? The sky's the limit, and the cost is not always expensive.

If your meeting is to take place at other than the participants' home location, consider meeting them at the airport and taking them to the meeting. This fringe really relieves pressure. Airports are so busy . . . long lines, extensive waiting time for ground transportation plus in some cases unfamiliarity . . . that the participant is frazzled before he or she ever gets started. It sounds complicated to coordinate this effort. But if you know arrival times, flight information and participants can identify you by some means (maybe a button with a company logo or a straw hat with identifying band, etc., etc.) or know where to meet you (by the _____ airlines counter) that's all there is to it. A by-product of this benefit is that you can chat on the way to the meeting site.

Often meal function planning is a hassle for the planner. You look at standard menus from the caterer and everything looks O.K. but you can't decide, so you close your eyes and stab at the menus and select. Even though the meals are great there is just so much prime rib, lobster, etc., that one can take. Why not plan to prepare an outdoor barbeque, a fish fry, a Hawaiian luau, etc.?

Once again there are just so many cups of coffee, donuts and sweet rolls a participant can take during breaks. Why not think about fresh fruit such as a watermelon carved out and filled with small pieces of fruit on toothpicks? It provides a focal point for everyone "to gather around." Another idea might be a variety of cheese, fruit and even wine. Don't forget yogurt, it is very popular and also a delight for those watching the waistline.

Some things may sound "hokey" but consider them. If there is an evening social event hire a guitar or piano player and let everyone join in. This need not be a "name" person, maybe even someone in your company. Once I used a fellow employee who was a great magician for a short program.

A good "ice breaker" for small groups of participants who are unknown to one another is to take a polaroid photo of each person, break the group into clusters of two or three and have them give facts about themselves they feel important. As the information is exchanged someone puts the information on 3x5 cards. At the end of the session, post the photos with the important facts attached below each photo at the front of the room. Leave it there throughout the entire meeting. This way everyone can learn about each other. At the end of the program you can give the photos to the participants or maybe you wish to publish a small report of the meeting and use the photos. Everyone likes to see their name and picture in a company newsletter, report, etc.

Some planners see resort locations and social activities as glamour items, and competing with program content. Why not shoot an early nine holes and have your meeting in the golf course clubhouse? For those who like to sleep late, let them meet all of you at the clubhouse for an outside ranch breakfast.

Another interesting idea is to put your entire group together for a river run or float trip. Take the presenters with you. These can be planned for any length of time from a day to a week. Don't worry about the nonswimmers. Any good outfitter has control of all situations. Can you visualize your participants receiving information over a campfire from a well-known "expert" or company trainer or corporate executive?

These are just a few ideas on how to do things differently at a meeting. Don't compromise the program content or message with fringes, but sometimes they can make a difference! — *Lee Beckner, Ogden Service Center, Ogden, Utah.*

KEEPING ADULTS INTERESTED IN REQUIRED TRAINING SESSION

Personnel working with or associated with adult training pro-

grams have experienced the effects of adults demonstrating a noninterest attitude in class. The characteristics of noninterest may appear openly in class or remain hidden beneath the surface in the form of discontent and/or lack of attention. Symptoms of noninterest are easily recognizable. These symptoms may appear as talking on unrelated tangents, excessive talking to class members during instruction, gazing around the room, scribbling on a pad or simply closing their eyes. When these characteristics are evident, it is time to integrate new techniques to stir up life, motivate and arouse interest.

Generating and maintaining the interest of adults in required training sessions can be a frustrating and trying task for the instructor. The attitude of the adult attending the required training session is not always one of high interest and motivation for personal improvement, but just the opposite. The adults' interest in the required class can range from fulfilling the requirement, receiving positive feedback from the organization requiring the attendance of the class to a short vacation from the normal work routine. Generating interest in these situations is one of multiple decision-making on-the-spot and brainstorming of ideas with only a small percentage of the ideas proving effective.

The adult training instructor can help create and maintain interest by exploring and implementing different techniques. Below are several workable techniques that have proved effective in producing interest in adult training classes:

Planning the Class: Avoid planning your classes on days and nights of special events or occasions. Examples: holidays, vacation schedules, Friday afternoons and athletic events.

Informal Introduction: Before the training session begins, walk around the room among the group members introducing yourself informally. Give participants a chance to get acquainted with you. This technique reduces formal isolation between you as an instructor and the class members. When the

formality is removed, interest can be gained.

Know Their Name: Insure you have a workable system to enable you to call on the adults in class by their first name. Calling on adult learners in class on a first-name basis reduces the formal atmosphere and creates a more relaxed one.

Walk Into the Group: While instructing, walk among group participants. Don't be afraid to move from the front of the room. This procedure will relax you as well as the trainees while at the same time creating interest and attentiveness.

Voice Variation: Varying the voice is helpful in maintaining and producing adult participant interest. Voice variations stressed at particular key points will arouse interest and add clarification to the points you are making. Not only does this procedure arouse participants' interest, it also aids in reducing drowsiness in class.

Mental and Physical Strain: Avoid scheduling participants to classroom situations right after long periods of work. The individual has difficulty in staying alert and interested if tired from mental or physical activity, even if the subject is interesting.

Keep the Subject Matter in Bounds: Keep your subject matter and verbalization in bounds of the group's comprehension. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to understand what is being presented and not being able to do so. This procedure can turn a possibly interesting class session into a virtually boring experience.

Vary the Seating Arrangement and Teaching Procedure: By varying the seating arrangements in your training sessions, you remove the old classroom stereotype. When seating arrangements are left the same class after class, little participation and interaction will result. Participants are inclined to sit in the same seat for every class meeting. Adults sit in the same seat or location for a number of reasons — identification between the adult and the classroom, security in their location, to social contact with the same class members

are only a few. Whatever the reason, adult class members at times will not interact with other adult members in class except for a social encounter at break time.

Realizing there are negative points against this philosophy, changing the seating arrangements from time to time has, and can, create interest in class. By varying your seating arrangements at times, participants are forced to interact with other class members. This procedure can produce interest both in classroom work and individual interaction.

Varying your instruction methods from one form to another is probably the most effective technique employed to generate interest in your instructional presentation. Once you find a method of instruction that generates the desired feedback of interest, stay with this method until the results exhibit negative characteristics. When negative characteristics are discovered, quickly search for another method to hold and continue the participants' interest in class.

Vary your instruction methods by changing to a discussion from a lecture, to a question and answer period, even to short breaks to regroup your thoughts and ideas. Above all, keep your methods on a positive, interest-producing tone. For if the participants' interest falls off, the learning effect becomes negative.

In order for the required learning effect to be accomplished in your required training sessions, participants have to receive a positive, interest-producing stimulation. Without this positive-interest stimulation in class, a negative attentiveness can occur.

In accomplishing the learning objective, generating and maintaining interest in class is most important. Generating and maintaining interest in a required class can be a positive and rewarding experience for the instructor. Not only can this procedure be rewarding to the instructor as an individual, it can add assessed value to your overall required training programs. — *Charles R. Gatlin, training coordinator, The Chesapeake Corp. of Virginia*