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Business meetings don't have to be a waste

Careful planning, clear focus can help make them great, **WALLACE IMMEN** reports

Be honest now: When was the last time you looked forward to a business meeting? For most people, the ritualized, routine gatherings of an organizational clan represent lost time in the middle of a busy day.

But with careful planning, timing and clear focus, meetings can become productive, consensus-building activities that are actually enjoyable, management coaches say.

Running productive meetings is one of the most important tests an executive faces, but few managers are ever trained in how to make them effective, says Allan Ebedes, president and chief executive offi-

cer of Management Mentors International Inc. in Toronto, which runs practical workshops for executives.

"In fact, most organizations have meetings and don't even know why they are having them," he says. Many meetings that are called are unnecessary because a decision has already been made by an executive or consultant and no further discussion is required, Mr. Ebedes suggests.

However, meetings are still essential for forging consensus and building momentum in any organization, so Mr. Ebedes advises making them as quick and enjoyable as possible.

But to make short meetings effective requires meticulous preparation, advises Cy Charney, president of Charney & Associates Inc. in Toronto and author of *The Instant Manager*.

"Going into a meeting without a plan or an agenda is a formula for having a discussion going in dozens of different directions and ending up frustrating everybody. If you don't have a plan, it's better to postpone the meeting," Mr. Charney says.

But one approach won't work for each type of meeting, Mr. Charney says, so keep in mind there are essentially five different kinds of meetings, each with a different requirement.

■ Information meetings are for sharing information with little discussion, and Mr. Charney suggests these work best if the information is

presented in a visual way.

■ A feedback meeting is one that investigates options but does not necessarily come to a conclusion. The key here is to get opinions from everyone and not only listen to the vocal few.

■ Problem-solving meetings have to be systematic to find the root causes behind problems and work forward to determine a best course of action or best options.

■ A decision-making meeting strives for genuine consensus on a decision between options or agreement on a new policy.

■ A planning meeting follows on the decision and allocates responsibilities to carry out the change.

In reality, many meetings are combinations of types, but the leader should make it clear what the goal is and that it must be reached in the time allotted, Mr.

Charney says.

A good strategy to keep a meeting concise is to develop ground rules — such as be on time, turn off your cellphone and don't use your BlackBerry during the meeting.

In addition to the facilitator, who is the one who sets the agenda, Mr. Charney recommends appointing a timekeeper and someone to record ideas and decisions.

Meetings most often go off the rails when people have different agendas or when people don't want to deal with difficult issues or offend others, Mr. Charney says. "It's the job of the leader to be firm and urge people to put issues on the table and make sure they are not personalized."

And if it is a sensitive or contentious issue, he suggests pointing out that conflict can be a healthy thing and it should be encouraged in

of time

meetings.

In his coaching on meetings, Mr. Charney teaches executives to be aware of body language. "They might be saying 'yes, I agree' but in fact they are rolling their eyes. That's when the facilitator has to ask for feedback to make sure that the team is really on board with the decisions that are made."

It's important to remember that there is generally a second meeting that happens informally after the gathering. That's where consensus can fall apart if people have second thoughts or say they didn't really agree with the decision, Mr. Ebedes says.

The way you improve is to ask for feedback at the end of the meeting, he says. This can be done as a written checklist to make it quicker and "if you make it anonymous, you'll get more honest comment."