



**MANAGEMENT MATTERS**

By Thomas P. Satter, Ed.D., & Carol A. Doniek, M.S.

# Avoiding meeting mayhem

*"Thinking is easy, acting is difficult and putting thoughts into action is the main reason for meeting."*

— Anonymous

**I**N GOLF THERE'S a saying, "You don't share the victory, because you can't share the failure." We might apply the same philosophy to managers who have the responsibility of scheduling and conducting meetings.

Most everyone knows what it's like to attend a meeting that leaves participants wondering why the meeting was called in the first place. Unnecessary, unproductive and unending meetings eat up valuable time for most managers. Facilitated properly, however, meetings can be productive and time-efficient. While meeting management may sound elementary, heightening your awareness of a few key points can mean the difference between a productive meeting and your team working late.

**First, consider whether a meeting is necessary.** Is a meeting the most time-efficient way to further the task at hand? Or, would an email, fax, telephone call, memo or brief note in a coworker's mailbox, with a reply requested, be sufficient to solicit the information you need? Think about why you are calling a meeting, why you or anyone else should participate, what you want to accomplish and how, or whether, the meeting will assist in accomplishing the task. If you don't have an answer for each of these questions, a meeting may not be necessary.

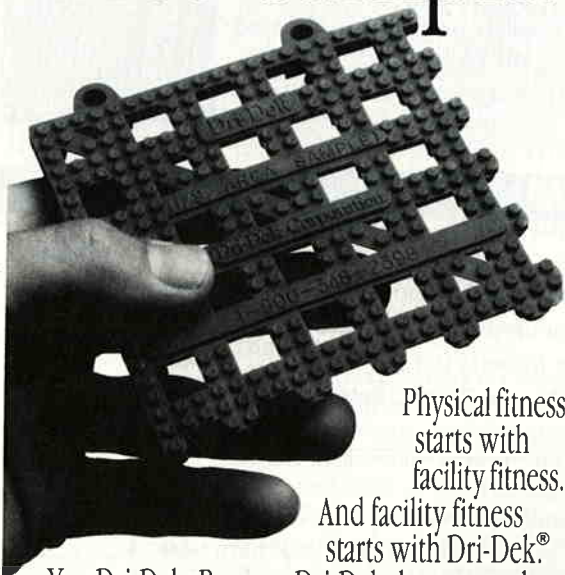
What about routine meetings held on a weekly or monthly basis? They are probably a waste of time if a specific objective is not being met. Oftentimes, participants in a routine meeting resort to discussing unnecessary topics, and the meeting becomes a "gripe" session, thus lowering morale. A meeting without an objective is like golfing in the dark. It's difficult to get the ball in the

cup if you can't see the green.

**Second, consider who you will invite to the meeting.** Generally, the participant list should include only those who are needed to further the task at hand, those who will provide information needed to make a decision, those with the decision-making power, or those whose job it is to take a recommendation to the decision makers. Remember, the more people you invite, the longer the meeting will last. Usually, people who don't have a direct interest in the task will thank you for not inviting them rather than be offended by their exclusion.

**Third, and possibly most important, is to prepare and distribute an agenda prior to the meeting.** If participants arrive unaware of what will be discussed, the result is often another meeting to discuss information that would have been brought to the initial meeting if an agenda had been prepared. Give participants as much notice and information about the objectives of the meeting as possible. This way, participants can arrive prepared, which in the long run will save

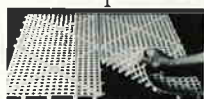
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everyone time. Be sure to be specific about the format and expectations of the meeting. For example, should the participants be prepared to present information? If so, is there a time limit? And, does a decision need to be made at the meeting? Generally, the objective should be to make a decision and take action. If you can't come up with an agenda, there is no need for a meeting. Be sure to identify other participants involved, and include the date, location, start and end times on the agenda. Also, be sure to plan time for meeting evaluation (see below).

**Fourth, hone your meeting facilitation skills.** The productivity of a meeting often depends upon two things: planning and the facilitator's ability to keep the group moving.

**Finally, develop an evaluation system for your meetings.** One useful technique requires participants to rate the meeting on a scale from one to 10 on the following items: Was the meeting worth everyone's time? Was the agenda actually used? Were the objectives reached? Was everyone given a chance to participate? Did everyone participate? Were time limits for presentations, discussion, decision making and meeting length adhered to?

Ask each participant to hand in their observations complete with their name at the top. The facilitator then tallies the responses on a flip chart or white board. Any responses that vary from the majority should be shared by the participant during the meeting. This process can help clarify an issue or clear the air about a miscommunication.

This evaluation process serves two additional purposes. The first is to solicit information from those participants who, perhaps unlike the majority of the group, feel dissatisfied with the meeting, but would otherwise remain silent — a potentially dangerous situation. Secondly, it provides some general feedback on how the group rates the productivity level of the meeting and alerts you to areas that can be improved next time.

Another useful evaluation technique is to have a survey ready for distribution to participants upon their departure. The survey can include the same questions as the informal survey plus others. For example, you may want to ask for suggestions on two things that should be done in the next meeting and two things that can be left out of the next meeting.

There are only three things in life that are certain — death, taxes and

meetings. The corollary of this, of course, is that death always comes too soon, taxes are always too high and meetings are usually a waste of time.

Management research showed that managers spent up to 50 percent of their time in meetings, and implied that this was time wasted. Peter Drucker once said, "If a manager spent more than 25 percent of his/her time in meetings, it was usually a sign of poor organization." So, rethink your

meeting schedule according to the format that has been suggested. Take the praise for all your successes, because you cannot share the failure. □

REFERENCE

Milo, F. O. *How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1989.


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