Your Meeting – Don't Let it be an Albatross
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What is the biggest waste of time at your place of work? For most professional employees, the answer to this question is, "meetings."

Each of us has experienced frustration with ineffective meetings. Most of these are face-to-face situations where a bunch of people gather around a conference table with an objective to accomplish something. Meetings also happen on the phone and online; the venue does not matter. It feels like the "process" is painfully slow, and the progress is difficult to appreciate. If you have not experienced this, check your pulse; you may be dead. How can we make meetings more productive?

Let me start with a question. What is the most precious commodity in the world? Stop reading and think about this question. I really want you to ponder what is precious. Is it "love," "money," faith," "family," "freedom," "health"?   Give it some real thought before you read on.

The question is, what is most precious. To answer that, how would you define "precious?" You might equate it with value in terms of intrinsic or extrinsic reward. You might view it in a social or family context. I believe there are two factors that make something precious: how difficult it is to obtain, and how important it is. It is the old "supply and demand" analysis. If something is in great demand, but is extremely scarce, it will be incredibly precious. Take diamonds, for example. They are highly prized by human beings (not sure why) and they are extremely difficult to find (because they look like regular rocks in their natural state and there are so few of them.)

For example, there is a story told by Earl Nightingale about a poor farmer in Africa. He was unable to sustain his family because the soil on his farm was too arid. He tried to grow crops for years and tried to irrigate the land, but the soil was too weak. Finally, he heard of the discovery of diamonds in a mountain region in another area. He sold his farm and moved to the mountains to prospect for diamonds. He never found any and his family perished. Meanwhile, the person who bought his land for a pittance found an interesting rock that he took home and placed on his mantle. A couple years later, a visiting geologist recognized the kind of rock and asked the farmer if he knew what it was. To his amazement, it turned out to be the largest diamond ever found in Africa. Further, the property was replete with similar rocks. It turned out to be the richest area for diamonds in the country. So, the original farmer was literally surrounded by "acres of

diamonds," but did not realize it. He went to seek his fortune elsewhere and perished with his family due to starvation.

Leaders in the workplace are also surrounded by acres of "diamonds," but don't realize it. The diamonds are the people in the organization. If treated right and exposed to the right environment (like polishing) nearly every person will turn into a valuable gem for the organization. The trouble is, most leaders, just like the original farmer, fail to realize the incredible value that surrounds them every day. What a crime.

If you will accept the "supply and demand" argument for what makes things precious, let's explore what is the one thing in this world that is truly scarce. What is it that we cannot get more of no matter how we try. Is it love? No, we can get more of that. Is it money? Certainly not. Is it any kind of metal or mineral? No. Is it faith? No, we can increase that by changing our viewpoint. I submit it is time. Oh sure, we can increase our total time on earth by improving our health risk factors, but I am talking about the time we each have every day. We each get exactly 24 hours every day. Nothing we can do will increase that. No one gets less, and no one gets more. We all want more time desperately, but none of us can get more of it on a daily basis it. It is fixed. Therefore, by the law of supply and demand, time is the most precious commodity.

What does this have to do with meetings? Well, if you are like most people, one of your top time wasters is meetings. We need to make them more efficient and productive. If we do this well, we have more time for the other important things in life. In fact, by increasing our effectiveness at meetings, we can actually "manufacture" time for later use. We can "Save time in a bottle," as Jim Croce put it. Would that be worth it? Well, that is probably the easiest way to get some more of the most precious commodity for yourself and your team. Let's examine some of the typical time wasters in meetings and suggest some antidotes. We'll start with the granddaddy of them all.

Griping is the most significant time waster in meetings. Think about it. You know the routine. Everyone arrives at the meeting with their head full of issues and problems they are dealing with in their working world. As the "early birds" are patiently waiting (by the way, having people arrive late is another huge time waster) for the late members, someone says something like, "Can you believe they are increasing our medical deductions again?" That gets someone else to chime in on how unfair it is, and pretty soon the floodgates are open. Out pours fresh steaming venom onto the table. When everyone has finally arrived and the group is immersed in self-pity and derogatory remarks about the cost of medical insurance. If gone unchecked, this can go on for most of the meeting, completely usurping the original agenda.

The antidote to this waste of time rests with the leader. He/she is responsible for keeping the agenda and not letting the meeting lapse into a gripe session. An easy technique is to acknowledge a need for the group to do some venting, but put a "stop loss" on it. The leader might say, "It looks like there is a lot of energy around the medical deductions. How much time do we want to spend on this subject before we launch into the positive things that must be accomplished in this meeting?" The group might agree to spend 5

more minutes venting. It is now up to the leader to stop the discussion after the 5 minutes and say, "OK, we all agreed to move on after 5 minutes. Any more gripes about the benefits will be done outside this meeting. Let's move on to the agenda and make some positive steps toward our vision." If people persist in venting, it is up to the leader to shut this down.

An agenda is very important for any meeting. If it is worth getting everyone together, it is worth a few minutes to set the topics and objectives for the meeting. This can prevent wasting time when the team wants to wander off topic. Again, it is up to the leader to keep the group on task.

An often ignored technique in meetings is the periodic summary of decisions. This can be a real time-saver. After 10 minutes of discussion on the new safety policy, the leader might say, "Let me summarize this discussion. We seem to be agreeing that we will set a new goal of zero lost time accidents for the next quarter. Is everyone on board with this decision?" If the entire group agrees, then move on to the next topic. Have the notes indicate a decision was made by the group. If this step is omitted, there is no firm commitment to the decision. People will talk around and about a topic and everyone will have their own opinion of the outcome. You can leave a meeting with wide variations in people's minds about what actually happened. Summarizing each point as it is made, prevents this problem. It also puts a cap on each topic so the group moves through the agenda efficiently. The role of the leader is to facilitate the process. Done well, this will maximize the benefit of the time spent together.

Disagreements can create an incredible waste of time. A point is made, then someone offers a counterpoint. This lapses into a discussion back and forth about the issue. It can, and often does, become acrimonious. As people "dig in their heels" to defend their position, the argument becomes more intense. Often it gets personal with statements like, "you are always trying to harpoon everything we are trying to do in this team." The crime is that, many times the individuals are not that far apart. They are just not listening to each other. I have been in meetings where two individuals spend a lot of time in "violent agreement" with each other, but neither of them realizes it.

There are two antidotes for this. First, get the opposing parties to express the position of the other person in their own words. That will uncover if the argument is a "tempest in a teapot." The other technique is the "Rule of Three." If the point- counterpoint goes on for three iterations, it is unlikely either party is going to "win" the argument. This is the time for the leader to say, "I think you two ought to agree to disagree on this point. It is evident that neither of you are going to sway the other, so let's table this discussion or take it outside so we can get back to the agenda." Using the Rule of Three can save huge amounts of time in meetings.

The leader is responsible for starting and ending each meeting on schedule. It is impolite to arrive late for meetings. As a leader, you can stop this behavior simply by not waiting for the lagers. Make sure there are some important decisions at the start of the meeting. If someone comes in late, do not go back and review what was already done; let the

inconsiderate person catch up after the meeting. I use a technique in my on-ground classes where I go over the hints for the next week's assignments at the start of the meeting. Once I had a tardy student turn in the wrong assignment. She came to me and complained that I did not explain the rules well. I told her that the rules were explained at the start of the previous class, but she was not in attendance at that time. She quickly got the message.

The same rules apply in the online environment. If you make a commitment for the start of a meeting at 8 pm, be there at 8 pm. Recognize that there are family or personal emergencies that can make that impossible in rare instances. The problem is that some people have a tendency to excuse themselves from their obligations on a regular basis. This behavior needs to be extinguished by the team. We need to be sensitive to real emergencies, but intolerant of those who habitually make excuses for holding up others.

These are only a few of the rules to make better use of time in meetings. Most of these are common sense ideas, but they are often forgotten in the normal work environment. The best way to make sure you are not wasting time is to remember how incredibly valuable it is, and act that way.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals***, *by Robert Whipple. It is available on* www.leadergrow.com.

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