

How To Run A Staff Meeting

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As a company founder who has grown into a CEO and manager, I'm constantly adding to my team people with different backgrounds and skill sets, and trying to keep them connected, productive and guided toward a common goal.

It's like herding cats through a maze.

To help manage this, the first thing I learned was the importance of one-on-one meetings.

When the company and team were new, I went so far as to have 30 minute one-on-one's each day with each of my new executives.

It killed half of every day for me, but helped me build a culture of trust, drive everyone to a single vision and taught me the power of delegating. The team was coming from different backgrounds, and we learned together how to steer the ship.

Then, over time, one by one, we moved the daily check-ins to a weekly schedule.

Eventually, the check-ins started slipping to every two or three weeks, and I could see the disconnect build. Weekly check ins became the norm, and mandatory.

The next challenge was getting my executive team to have one-on-one meetings with each other, weekly. Anytime there is tension brewing between two members of my team, I ask, "When was the last time the two of you had a one-on-one?" I'm paraphrasing, but the response is usually something to the effect of, "Well, we've had trouble finding time to meet for the last 2 or 3 weeks."

They then have the meeting, and the problem invariably goes away. When it doesn't, my solution is a bit more aggressive, such as moving them into offices next to each other.

What a surprise, that the closer they are the more communication they have, and more communication leads to better cooperation.

My next pursuit was the perfect staff check in, bringing my executives together for an hour or two each week, or every other week.

Over time, we've tried a multitude of formats for this meeting. Going longer than two weeks between meetings, I see the team get disconnected. Going around the room and giving status updates, eyes glaze over when others speak. Having a group brainstorm, there is a fear of work being created and assigned or priorities adjusted adhoc. Having everyone distribute a status beforehand, everyone brings their computers and types away during the check-in.

Reviewing performance metrics over a lunch, the team builds resentment about losing their personal time.

Running a great staff meeting is a scavenger hunt of sorts for me, constantly searching for new bits and pieces that make it more productive, and giving the team's cooperation and purpose a regular shot in the arm. With how much time we all spend at work, I believe the executive staff meeting time should feel sacred.

To this end, I recently surveyed all my employees, asking them to post on a Wikipeage what they've liked and disliked about staff meetings, over their entire careers.

After a week, there were pages of anonymous feedback. Their experiences stemmed from the Googles and Yahoos from whence they came, as well as many years of experience on the front lines of rapidly paced startups here in Silicon Valley.

Some of my favorite postings included, "No meetings for the sake of meetings (i.e. meetingitis)," and, "solid start and stop times."

I also surveyed fellow CEOs, who manage anywhere from a dozen on up to thousands of employees. One of my favorites was Bill Coleman, the famed founder and CEO of companies such as BEA Systems, which was ultimately acquired by Oracle for \$8.5B.

He startled me with this bit of wisdom: "Staff meetings aren't for making decisions, they're for ratifying decisions."

Another favorite came from Larry Baer, President of the San Francisco Giants, who said, "Instead of calling them staff meetings, it's a small but important thing to call them what they really are, which is leadership meetings."

With that introduction, and with thanks to the dozens of folks that participated, here is my prototype of the ideal staff meeting, ...er, leadership meeting.

Clearly defined objectives

Most well run staff meetings do seem to address a clearly defined need, such as the need for team members to know what's going on with each other. Some go so far as to write down a concise purpose, to ensure that every member of the team remembers, e.g. cross-departmental information sharing.

Regularly scheduled meetings

As for frequency, it goes without saying, that everyone is averse to meetings for the sake of meetings (hence the invention of the term "meetingitis").

However, I found it extremely common for teams to have weekly or bi-weekly meetings, with Monday afternoons and Wednesday mornings being the most typical. Counter to my initial hunch, lunchtime is the least-appreciated time for meetings. Lunch is personal time, and should be respected as such.

If salespeople are involved, then any time that would interfere with them reaching customers is off limits, particularly in the mornings. Meetings seem to range from about 1 to 2.5 hours, with an occasional exception in either direction.

Depending on the team, a standing time is important, or it can be flexible and scheduled only one week in advance at a time.

In addition to the core weekly or bi-weekly meeting, some teams have supplemental meetings, on a daily, monthly or quarterly rhythm.

But the law of meetingitis says to avoid meetings that could just as easily be handled through more electronic forms of communication, like Google Apps or the company Wiki. When appropriate, a daily meeting tends to be no more than a 15-minute morning huddle (or "rugby scrum"). Standing room only.

Types of meetings

Monthly meetings are typically an extension of the core meeting, with more time allotted, say up to 5 hours.

Quarterly meetings are considered critical, to bring everyone together as a team. One suggestion for quarterlies is to do a group risk management session, and color code each key area as red, yellow, or green. This type of meeting is less data driven, and more intentionally interpersonal, to get each member of the team out of their silo.

Most people with whom I spoke felt that **showing up by Skype or phone is okay, but that everyone should strive to be together in person at least once a month.** "Seeing" each other is extremely important. Also, one of my more detail-oriented employees asked that we only use speakerphones that are full-duplex. I learned that a non-full-duplex phone is one where the listener can't hear you asking them to stop talking!

was reminded of the adage that time is money; it emphasizes that starting and stopping a meeting on time is imperative. And that it's a matter of respect for each other that attendees show up on time, meetings start on time, and small talk at the outset is kept to a minimum.

And that failing to show up, with no emissary, and no notification, is a major faux pas.

When scheduling a meeting, Gmail Calendar is a favorite. And for any off-site meetings, another of my more detail oriented employees asked that the physical address be pre-populated, so any smartphone can automatically bring up a map.

I also learned the importance of putting any dial-in numbers in the body, since not all smartphones can call directly from the title or location fields. And the newest common courtesy is pasting in any notes or attachments, rather than referencing a separate email. Services like **Dropbox can create a public link** to a file, when attachments are too difficult.

Size matters

Even with thousands of employees, I never heard more than a dozen or so people being invited to a staff meeting.

The exception is the occasion of a whole team coming together, to talk more openly. There were stories of danger lurking when too many people were invited, or the wrong people were invited. If a department head can't make it, then the next person in line is expected to come in their place.

There is a standing expectation for every department to be represented.

Before the meeting

The most successful meeting leaders have quite a few things in common, most notably information sharing happening prior to the meeting, preferably in an online, version-controlled repository, such as Google Sites.

And especially when team members are remote, it's important to respect any deadlines for distribution of information. Taking a step back, I heard three main types of pre-meeting information.

- **Key Indicator Report:** A summary snapshot of the group or business's core metrics. For example, for a Monday afternoon meeting, by noon, a 1-page key indicator report may be uploaded to a Google Sites page.

- **Team Member Updates:** I really like the one colleague's approach to team member updates. He uses a Google Sites page, and on it he puts links to personal pages for each team member, where they write their personal updates by a noon deadline every week. Over time, their personal pages become matters of record, that can be rolled up and reviewed quarterly.

- **Deep Dive Suggestions:** Before a meeting, there really should be a bottomless "suggestion box," for what are rightfully called deep dives. I'll talk about this more below.

The meeting

No good meeting lacks structure. With this in mind, here is a "best of" buffet of structure for running your next meeting.

1. Leader overview: 2-30 minutes

The leader should start the meeting, for anywhere from 2-30 minutes. He or she should start (and end) with something inspirational, such as a good or bad letter from customer service.

Then, trust me, try a warm-up exercise, such as going around the room and having everyone grade how they feel about their job on a scale from 1 to 10, and then saying one word that describes how they feel. The more foreign this sounds to you, the more surprised you will be about how effective this is at "leading" your team. It's been working for me.

Then try a short review of recent success stories and process improvements, to pat everyone on the back. Next, state a clear timeline for the meeting, with ample time allocated for each part, including wrapping up. Another piece of wisdom I heard, was that having a clear timeline is more important than having a specific agenda.

2. Team member round robin: 15-30 minutes

In a round robin fashion, each team member should do one of the following two things:

Inform people (2 minutes)

Informing people is about looking back, and looking forward. Look back, by sharing key achievements, disappointments, issues, and concerns. Issues are facts. Concerns are judgments. Look forward, by sharing what you hope to accomplish. This forces you to say what you're going to do, and hold yourself accountable. Start or end with a recent story or letter that inspired you.

Pass

The meeting is for sharing information, not showing off. No one should be going through the 30 things on their plate. Rather, they should just go through the few things that others need to know now, or that move the needle forward. It's reasonable for a third of attendees to say, "we're good." No one should take it as anything bad. It's fine to pass, and there should be no stigma attached to it. If you don't have something to say, then your silence should be appreciated.

3. Customer focus: 10 minutes

As a group, talk about the customer at every meeting. Try to highlight one customer, and ask, "What are we going to do differently?" Everyone on the team wants to know, that every other member of the team has gone out to talk to customers.

4. Deep dive: up to 90 minutes (optional)

A deep dive is a problem solving session, that leverages the power of the team. Those that suggested deep dives ahead of time go first. Strategic topics are at the leader's discretion. Deep dives need the right participants, and the right data, to avoid generating follow-up meetingitis and homework. Here are examples of deep dives:

Seek input (up to 30 minutes)

Seek ratification of a decision (up to 30 minutes, with info distributed 4 days before)

Brainstorm (up to 90 minutes)

Strategic topic: Over the course of the year, rotate through reviews of vision, strategy, business plan, and financial plan.

Topics can range from productivity of sales, to operational controls, to the P&L. Give significant advance notice, so the team can pre-think on the issue, do homework and come prepared. These sessions should clarify working priorities, as well as challenge participants to deliver to their commitments (per assigned action items).

Leader's responsibilities

To have a good structure, there needs to be a clear meeting leader. I heard a plethora of advice for the person courageous enough to take on this role.

- Rename staff meetings to reflect their purpose: leadership meetings.

- Be the embodiment of the vision, value proposition for customers, and values of the company.

- Do not make decisions in a leadership meeting. Only ratify decisions made outside the meeting. Ensure there is a clear process for making decisions outside the meeting.

- Be brutal about keeping to a schedule. Maintain hard start and stop times.

- If you need to schedule a deep dive outside the meeting, consider just moving the meeting to accommodate.

- Enforce accountability. Pressure team members to stretch, and learn from their mistakes. Don't sugar coat failures.

- Mix up the agenda; invite guests; take field trips.

- Have a "parking lot" for deep dive suggestions.

- Consider banning mobile devices and laptops, particularly for the leader overview and team member round robin.

- Once there is a good foundation for the meeting, let go of it and let the participants evolve it from there.

Team members' responsibilities

Team members have responsibilities too. We've all been in a meeting that went sideways because one or more participants came into the meeting in the wrong state of mind. The tidbits I heard on this topic were a bit more pointed.

- When you speak, clearly separate out facts & issues versus judgments.

- When you listen, give compliments on the good info you hear, and voice your opinion on areas of which you want to see more next time.

In closing, I'd like to thank the multitude of employees and fellow CEOs that contributed to this article, and who also appreciated the purpose enough to ask for a copy when this was done. Please help continue the discussion, by putting your favorite meeting wisdom in the comments.

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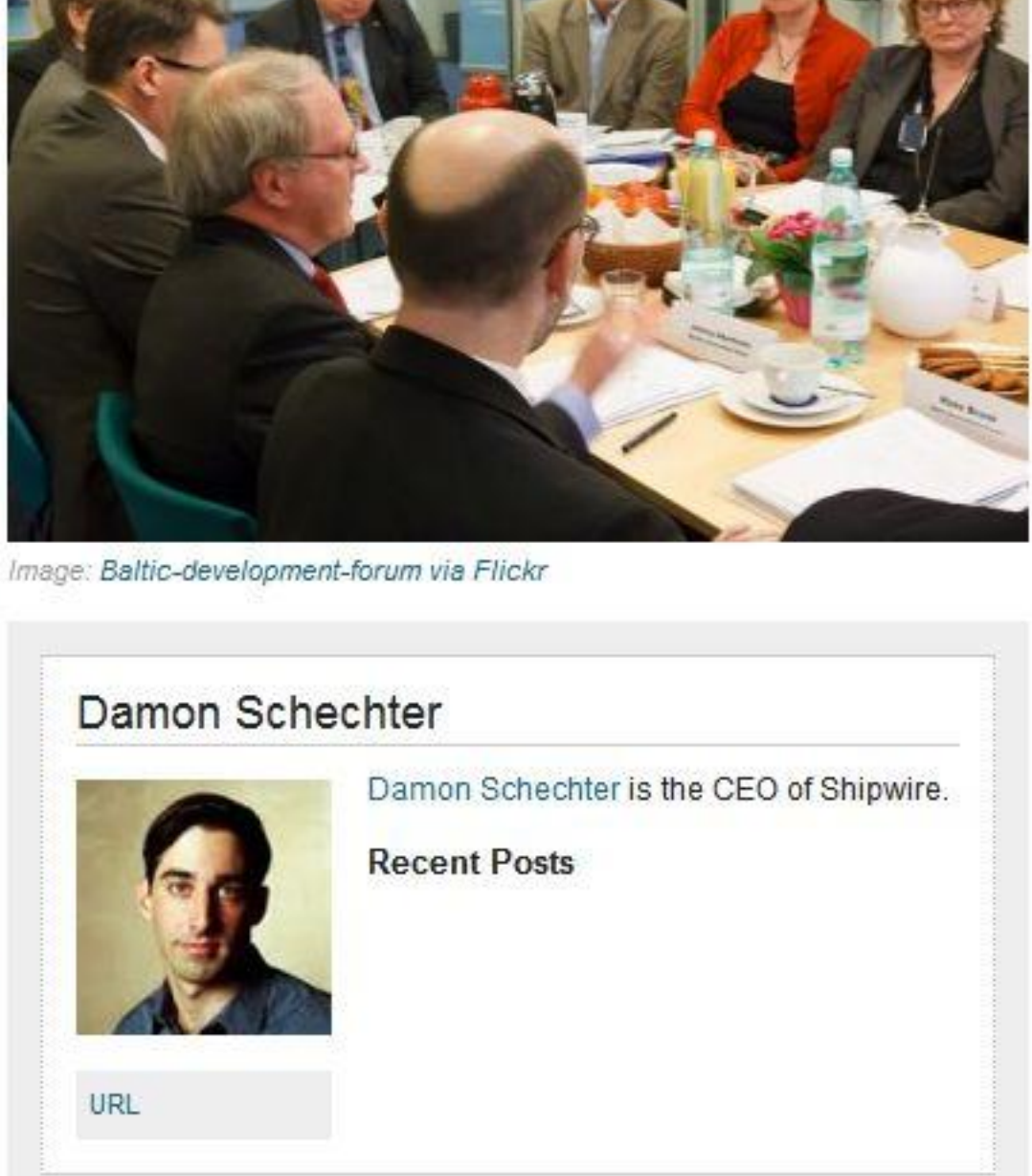


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