

When Bad Meetings Happen To Good People

BY DEBRA ENGELHARDT-NASH



My years in consulting have given me the privilege to observe many offices. I have the honor of working with outstanding clinicians and talented team members. In my experience, the most successful practices combine exceptional leadership and dedicated auxiliaries. By providing opportunities for growth with ongoing training and ever-improving systems, these practices seem to soar effortlessly. This doesn't happen by chance or luck. It requires vision and dedication, strategic planning and communication. There must be time away from the chair to accomplish these.

"Away from the chair" is not the favorite place in the office for most dentists. Business planning, facilitating team meetings, and working through personnel issues place many dentists in a zone of discomfort. Nevertheless, meetings can be hugely productive, especially if you avoid these ten meeting busters:

1. No Agenda

When there is no agenda, there is no opportunity to prepare, no framework for the meeting, and no purpose.

2. Wrong People

Ever been to a meeting where there was no logical reason for you to be there? Meeting time is valuable so it is important for efficiency and effectiveness that as few people attend as is purposeful. People should appreciate that non-attendance at a particular meeting is okay. There are times in the practice for all-team meetings and times to break the team into smaller focus groups to create a faster and more effective change in certain areas of the practice.

3. Overrun

When you sit in a meeting and watch your life slip away, it's likely due to poor meeting management. Nothing is accomplished.

The same items continue to be hashed out with no resolution. There is nothing worse than lack of follow-through and accountability.

4. No Discipline

Some meeting participants do not know how to behave. Ego, lack of self-confidence, and poor behavior can be destructive to meeting progress. Lack of courtesy, understanding, and time for others to say their piece is inexcusable and not constructive for outcomes.

5. The Leader Leads

Here, the meeting is at the beck and call of the leader or chair, who really is holding court, and there's no real desire for democracy. This is a rubber-stamping meeting and is of little or no value. If a decision has been reached and the team needs to be informed, the same information can be provided in a memo or brief announcement.

6. The Leader Doesn't Lead

Here, there is free-for-all, with no leadership from the chair. Poor behavior, lax timekeeping, and no outcomes riddle this sort of meeting, with no measurable results and frayed-tempered, frustrated participants. The team wonders why they showed up. The doctor wonders why he or she didn't prep some teeth in the same time allotted.

7. Environment

Too hot, too cold, no water, no breaks, too big, too small. Have you ever been in one of these meetings? And aren't they awful, so awful in fact that you can't do your best? This is a meeting where the organizers do not respect the participants.

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8. Nothing Happens

A lovely chat, a few disagreements, and "See you next month." This is the nice-to-have meeting, which does nothing and goes nowhere.

9. Side-tracked/New Stuff

With an agenda, people know what the meeting will be about. Or will they? Even with the best agenda, weak processes tend to leave room for new issues, side-tracking, and wasted time. This is solvable with effort from the facilitator.

10. No Review and Growth

If there is no review of just how good or bad the meeting has been, there will be no improvement. The leader/facilitator can add in meeting feedback as the first agenda item and stick to it; it's tough at first but gets easier.

Step by step, you can work with a facilitator or not, to unravel just what needs to change. You will make a big difference, not only in meetings and how productive they are, but also in your capacity to build great relationships with the people who show up.

Making Meetings Work

We have all attended meetings that were boring, mindless, and profoundly ineffective. But meetings don't have to be a waste of time. Rather, they can be productive if the leader or chairperson practices these five strategies and gets down to the business of running the meeting instead of being run by it.

1. Introduction

Provide a quick progress update to allow everyone time in the beginning of the meeting. This helps everyone settle in. What has happened since the last meeting?

2. Ground rules

Have participants agree on ground rules, or expectations, for this particular meeting. These simple rules of the road not only set the standards, but also are gentle reminders to those who are taking a different road or direction. Some examples are: "One conversation at a time," or "We will come to consensus on these particular issues," or "What is said in this room, stays in this room."

3. Pending agenda

When a non-agenda issue threatens to take over the discussion, stop the meeting and write, with permission from the group, this new issue on a wall chart called "unfinished business." By doing this, you acknowledge the item but don't address it immediately. Pending agenda issues are discussed at the end of the meeting or at a later date.

4. Questions

To structure an orderly discussion of each agenda item, ask questions that address these facets of an issue: What are the facts? What are the pros and the cons? What other options are

there? Where should the decision be made...at the management level or by the entire group? What might be the next steps?

5. Breaks

People work better for longer periods of time when they are able to take short breaks, no longer than 5-10 minutes. Breaks are a good time to get feedback on the progress of the meeting or talk with people who have been antagonistic, disruptive, or unusually silent. It's better to take a break, take the pulse, and regroup than to doggedly push on despite a sense that the meeting is getting out of hand.

The Pay-off

Having a good meeting that accomplishes progress is critical in keeping the team focused and enthusiastic. It gives the team a sense of community and allows for better workflow.

Your investment in planning a good meeting will generate a positive impact on your team. Your team meetings will be anticipated with excitement instead of dread. You will create action rather than anxiety. Your meetings will be pertinent, to the point, and purposeful. Everyone will feel the difference: Doctor, Team, and Patients.



Debra Engelhardt-Nash is a team trainer, practice consultant, speaker, author, and co-founder of Nash Institute for Dental Learning. FMI: 704.364.5272 or debra@nashinstitute.com
