

The Secret to Great Meetings that Every Employee Should Know

WRITER
Ann
Latham

People spend a significant portion of every working week in meetings, many of them complaining about the wasted time and catching up on email while being 'held captive.' I know because I've received many of those emails, along with promises to call if the meeting ever ends. These emails have come from employees at every level of corporations, large and small.

Meetings are perennial objects of complaint in companies everywhere. And yet, if you Google 'effective meetings,' you will be encouraged to focus on all the wrong things while learning next to nothing about the one factor that is essential to a truly effective meeting.

Here is a typical list of suggestions for improving meetings:

- Have an agenda
- Start and end on time
- Assign roles (e.g. timekeeper, note taker)
- Establish ground rules (e.g. no cell phones)
- Assign action items

Let's start with the agenda. An agenda guarantees nothing. Worse, the agendas most people think are the best, just provide the most detail as to how much time is going to be wasted and by whom:

- 8:00 - 8:15 Discuss the marketing plan (Tom)

There is nothing about this agenda item that ensures those 15 minutes will be worthwhile.

Starting and ending on time is fine, though personally, I would rather finish early. And starting and ending on time does not mean the intervening time was well spent.

Assigned roles are another red herring! A really aggressive time keeper determined to keep things moving, can do no more than decrease the amount of wasted time slightly. A thorough note taker will create ample evidence as to how much time is wasted, how, and by whom, but is helpless to prevent it. A focused note taker, determined to only record important points, may finish with a blank sheet.

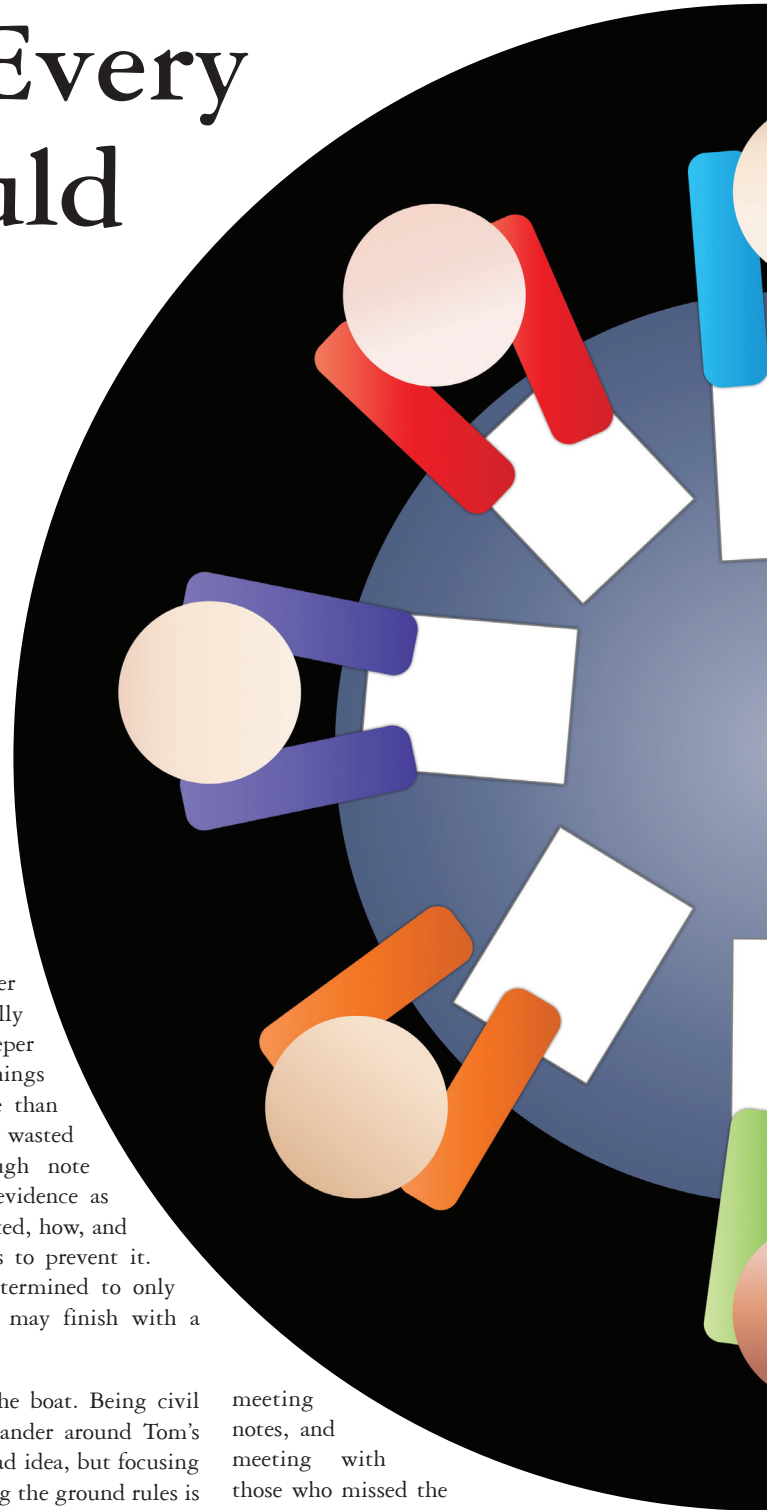
Ground rules also miss the boat. Being civil and focused while you wander around Tom's marketing plan is not a bad idea, but focusing attention on or establishing the ground rules is often just another way to waste time.

Assigned action items are a good idea, but, if you've been to as many meetings as I have, you know that this can amount to little more than a fishing trip: 'What should we do next?' Furthermore, the action items may include wonderfully worthless activities such as scheduling the next meeting, typing up the

meeting notes, and meeting with those who missed the meeting.

So while none of these suggestions is bad, what are they all missing?

The one essential component of a truly productive meeting is a crystal clear destination. Someone needs to know exactly what will be different when the meeting ends – what decisions must be made, options identified,



plans established, action items assigned, lists brainstormed, data collected, gaps filled, risks uncovered, or problems solved. Something has to be obviously different when everyone leaves, or you've wasted everyone's time.

Do not 'discuss the marketing plan.' Discuss is what I call a 'treadmill verb.' Like running on a treadmill, you can discuss forever without ever arriving at a destination. Why are you even thinking about discussing the marketing plan in the first place? Do you need to agree that it is complete? Do you need to identify holes, risks or bad ideas? Do you need to assign action items and deadlines? Figure out what tangible step is needed so you can move on to the next step when the meeting is over. Be absolutely clear about how you will know when you are finished with this topic on your agenda.

Review and report are also 'treadmill verbs' that frequently appear on agendas. When reviewing or reporting, how do you know when to get off the treadmill? How will you know when you are done?

One saving grace of discuss, review and report is that they are verbs. Some agendas don't even use verbs. They just list topics: 'Marketing Plan' or 'Financial Data.' There are usually a few extroverts in the meeting who will run with almost any topic, even 'Financial Data.' They might have wonderful and interesting ideas, but once you've opened the barn door, it can be mighty tough getting everyone back into the barn.

And while the extroverts are gaily talking about finance, the introverts are waiting patiently and silently for some clue as to how they can contribute. Meanwhile, no one knows what the group is supposed to be trying to accomplish. They don't know what will constitute a satisfactory outcome. One of the simplest ways to avoid treadmill verbs, to ensure productive results, and to help

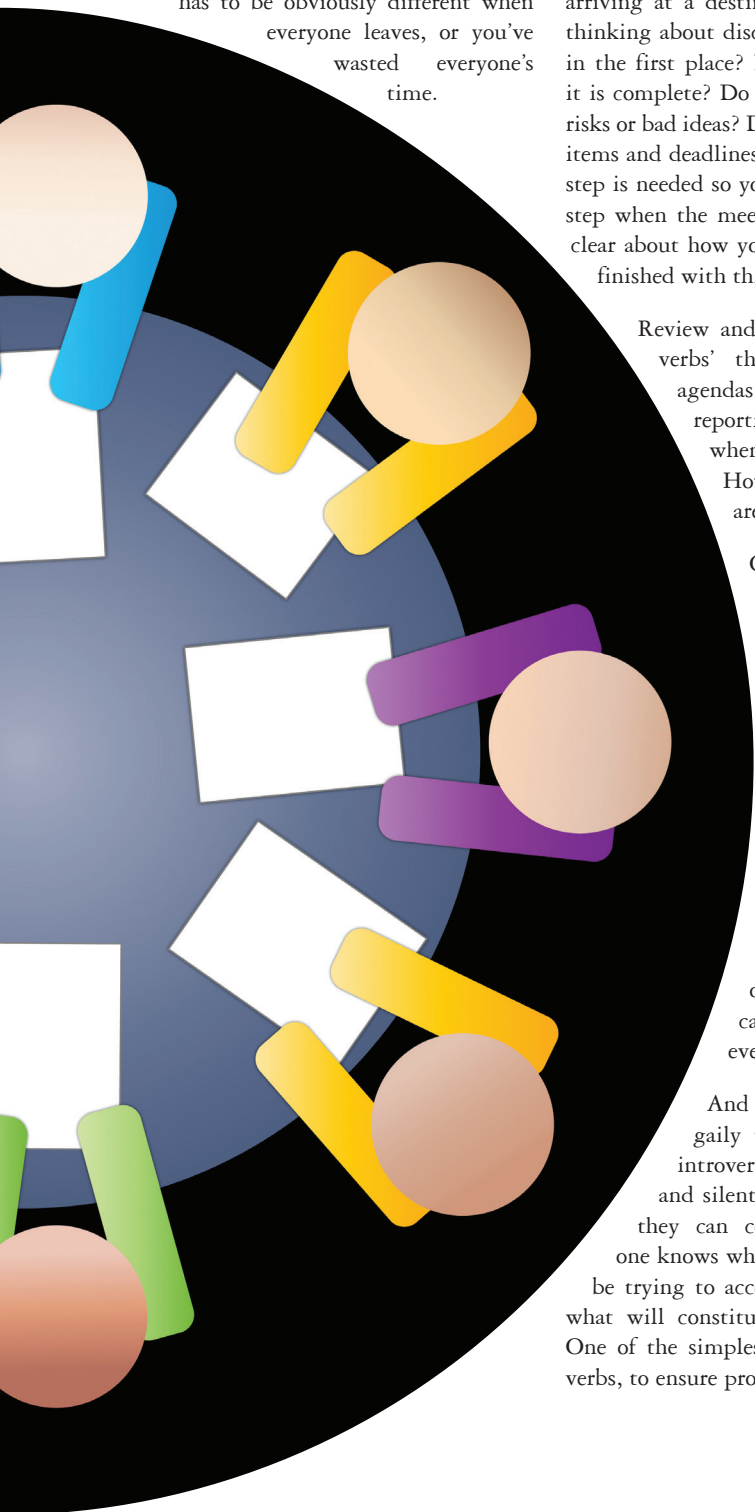
participants contribute effectively is to require that every agenda item be a question. For example:

- Where are the risks in this plan?
- How will we manage the risks we've identified?
- Are we ready to begin implementation?

If you are identifying risks, you will know you are done when you have generated a list of risks. If you are managing those risks, you will know you are done when you have established an action item for each identified risk. If you need group approval to begin implementation, you will know you are done when the group has asked their questions and decided to move ahead, canceled the initiative, or agreed to modifications.

Thus, make your meetings short and powerful by determining what must be different when the meeting is over. How will you know when you are done? Decide what questions require answers.

Whether you are running the meeting or just participating, refuse to step on the treadmill. Don't let the conversation run until you have a clear destination. If you know what needs to be different when the meeting ends, you'll find that most of the other details involved with running a meeting fall into place quite effortlessly. A clear destination is the one essential factor for great meetings.



about the author



Ann Latham creates clarity. She does it as a Consultant for corporate giants like Hitachi and Boeing, which want better results, faster. She does it as a Writer for thousands worldwide, who have discovered great value in her newsletter, articles, books, and comments in publications such as The New York Times, Forbes, Business Week, and Inc. Magazine. And she does it as a Speaker for audiences who want clear, pragmatic, immediately applicable ideas. Ann is also president of Uncommon Clarity, Inc. Ann's book, *Uncommon Meetings – 7 Quick Tips for Better Results in Half the Time*, is now available on Amazon. For more information, more value-packed articles, and a complimentary subscription to her Clear Thoughts™ newsletter, visit uncommonclarity.com.

