The Power of an Agenda

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How many meetings have you attended that didn't start on time, didn't have any structure, and didn't result in concrete action items, didn't have an agenda? Perhaps these painful experiences are the reason so many despise meetings or check-ins. The purpose of a meeting session is to encourage progress in a project, not take away precious time, which is why the most effective meetings have agendas.

However, merely creating an agenda is not enough – the goals must be clear and the structure must be adhered to. A Harvard Business Review article stated, "What matters is not the agenda itself but the relevance and importance of what's on it, and how the leader facilitates discussion of the agenda items."

Setting the tone prior to and at the beginning of the meeting is crucial; your agenda should communicate the structure, expectations, topics, and goals to accomplish. People need to know the meeting will start on time, how the meeting will be organized, and what will be talked about in what order – every single time. Setting boundaries can help prevent someone from hijacking the meeting or going off on some tangent that should be addressed elsewhere.

Using Your Agenda as an Anchor

With an effective, established agenda in hand, facilitators can leverage it to reign in meeting hijackers. When it comes to project meetings, or what I call "project control meetings," time is of the essence. There's simply no time for irrelevant discussion. Project control meetings are the update meetings, ideally lasting less than an hour, that occur throughout the life of the project either every week or every other week. Each control meeting looks at the project plan, which is static, and makes the course corrections to true it up.

These meetings are intended to update your plan to reflect what has actually happened since the last update. We know what was supposed to happen, but what actually did happen? What do we need to add that we didn't know about before? What durations need changing? What start and finish dates need changing? Once you plug all of this new information back into your plan, the plan is correct, accurate, and reflects reality again. Unfortunately, these updates almost always result in schedule slippage.

A Well-Structured Agenda of Topics

As mentioned above, merely having an agenda is not enough; it must effectively address pressing topics. The first part of a control meeting should always involve updating the project plan to reflect current reality. The second and much more difficult part is making up for these missed deadlines, or slippage. If a project slips by two weeks, the control meeting should help determine how to get those two weeks back. You do that by manipulating the critical path and making decisions regarding what could change. Unfortunately, this conversation always invites the risk of hijacking because the people in the room are problem solvers. They want to solve project issues rather than look at scheduling issues. This is an extremely easy trap to fall into and must be avoided.

As the facilitator, leverage the agenda to remind people that solving project or product issues is not the point of the control meeting; the purpose is to address schedule issues and remove any slippage. As the facilitator, you need to be strict when you see that someone is attempting to hijack the control meeting. Set the tone and create a precedent where control meetings are short, succinct, and to the point. Whether your agendas are in the form of a question, as suggested in the HBR article, or merely the four time-boxed topics of a project control meeting (issue collection, project update, validation/compression, issue resolution), the best way to ensure success is by using a well-prepared and structured agenda.

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