

Making Teams and Team Meetings More Effective

By Nick Arnette

Whether you're on the marketing team at work or the fund-raising committee at your child's school, meetings are a part of life. Since many missions start with team meetings, here are a few suggestions to ensure your valuable time is well spent:

*** State the purpose for your meeting before, during, and after the meeting. □**

If it's clearly stated, everything you do should revolve around that purpose.

*** Make sure everyone knows what you need accomplish during your meeting, and focus only on that task.**

□ If time remains, you can address other issues.

□ * Place a high value on people's time.

□ Have a definite starting and ending time for your meeting, particularly if your team consists of volunteers. If your team meetings usually start late and end late, you're sending a message that your time is more valuable than theirs. Not good for teambuilding.

*** Resist the urge to retreat.**

A retreat is supposed to be a place to relax and rejuvenate. If you think a retreat is the time for an all day team meeting, think again. It's pretty vexing to sit in a meeting while looking out the window and watching people outside having a real retreat. The time spent planning and driving to and from the retreat can be more wisely spent by staying where you are. It frees

up time and money for your team to have a genuine retreat to celebrate a mission accomplished!

*** Try to have balance.**

Your team may be filled with creative types who are idea rich and execution poor. Embrace those who are the worker bees. They are ultimately those on whom you can count to get things done. Be sure to include them in your discussions.

*** Use inclusive, engaging language.**

Ask questions such as, "What do you all think of this idea?" Or, "Let's hear from team members we haven't heard from yet."

*** Give everyone a chance to talk.**

If a few people dominate the conversation, other team members may lose interest and feel their ideas don't matter. The team may end up missing out on some very helpful ideas.

□* Set time limits before you ask open-ended questions.

Tell team members to answer in a minute or less (or whatever time limit you choose). Otherwise you might spend your entire meeting hearing someone babble □ on and on, which keeps you from accomplishing your mission.

*** Teach people how to behave at a meeting.**

Don't assume that they already know. Remember, most people aren't naturally team players. Tell them it's important to give everyone a chance to talk, not to talk too much, not to interrupt, not to get up when someone is talking, etc. State this up front, then reinforce it during the meeting if needed.

*** Don't ridicule "stupid" questions.**

Have you ever asked a question and were berated because you asked it? A typical response to your question would be something like, "You mean you didn't

know that?" If you want to close down communication and put an end to team building, make people afraid to speak up for fear of being scorned. Yes, sometimes the answers to some questions are so glaringly obvious it's almost all you can do not to say, "Duh!" But don't. Instead, answer in a polite, controlled tone and proceed with your meeting. Ignorance is not bliss on any team.

*** Anticipate "flow killers."**

Are there people on your team who continually ask off-track questions when your team is making plans? I lovingly refer to these people as "EGR"—Extra Grace Required! If you're the leader, try to meet with them before the meeting to reinforce the agenda and subject matter. Ask them—both before and after the meeting—if there's anything else they'd like to talk about so they'll still feel they are being heard.

*** Get a wingman.**

If you're leading a team, you need someone you can count on that's "got your six." This person is invaluable to you during meetings when someone's getting off track. Your wingman might offer a timely suggestion, such as, "Could we talk about this more after □ the meeting since our remaining time is limited?" Or, when you're in need of keeping the team together and focused during a project, they might say something like, "Hey, we're almost done, let's all chip in and help so we can finish." Your wingman is all-important to you and to your team. By the way, your wingman can also be a wingwoman!

*** Inventory your team members' strengths.**

At your first team meeting, have each team member list his or her strengths and weaknesses, as well as any special skills they may have. Take a few minutes for each person to discuss what he or she listed. That way the entire team knows where its strengths lie, what it can do well, and areas where help may be needed.

*** Take one for the team.**

Inevitably, there will be some tasks that no one will want to do. Jump in there and volunteer for them. It will speak volumes about your team spirit and your character, particularly if you're leading the team. If you want people to follow you, have an attitude of servitude.

*** Take into consideration that not everyone will see things the same way.**

There are almost as many differing opinions as there are people. For instance, millennials—those born in the 1980s and 1990s—won't have the same life or work experiences as baby boomers. On the other hand, millennials can add lots of needed energy and optimism to your group because they aren't as likely to be jaded by past experiences. Use your team's differences to your full advantage. Think about it. Aren't horse races based on differing opinions? Be sure to hear every member's viewpoint. You'll be backing the right horse.

*** Hold everyone on your team accountable.** Once you've decided on your mission and assigned your team members tasks to do, hold *everyone* on the team accountable for them. It does no good to spend a day making elaborate plans if there's not a strategy for carrying them out. Like my dad always told me, "Plan your work and work your plan."

*** Accept that not everyone will become a team player.**

This is where most of the conflict usually takes place. Have you ever been holding something heavy and other people are just standing around watching you struggle with it, not even offering to help? You think, how could they not know that I need help? You get angry. You start to fall into the reactive mode.

A possible resolution is to ask for help when you need it and praise the helper for pitching in. Some people just don't have a clue when it comes to teamwork, and you need to show them and tell them what it looks like.

Still, you can talk about teamwork until you're blue in the face (but try not to do that or you'll end up looking like a Smurf) and some people will not want to get with your team's program. There's a good chance they never will. Don't let that affect the rest of your team.

If you are required to keep these non-players on your team—if it's a work situation for example—give them specific individual assignments that don't require much collaboration. In time, if he or she sees the benefits of teamwork exhibited by other team members, they may want to hop on board. If they do, hooray! Just don't rely on it. These people rarely change their behavior. Think of their contribution as an added bonus that you weren't counting on. Who knows, "Lazy Larry" just might surprise your team sometime.

Remember, teamwork doesn't come naturally to most people, and change is extremely difficult for some people. If they don't have to be on your team, find a nice way of giving them the boot! (This is much easier to do if it's in a non-work setting.) You don't want their negative attitude bringing the rest of the team down, and, believe me, it will if you allow it to continue.

Once I was leading a small team of five people. Four of the five would brainstorm new ideas, try new methods of communication, and talk about what we could do to improve our work. One of the five rarely participated in team discussions, took all suggestions as criticism, and literally frowned when anything was asked of him. After a while, some of the team members became resentful because this individual didn't contribute to the team no matter how much prompting we gave him. The atmosphere in the room became toxic when we were all together. He wasn't happy with the team concept, and the bad vibe was affecting our goal to become better at what we do. For you hipsters out there, "This dude was harshing our mellow." We went through the proper channels to remove him from the team. We found that our team was much more efficient and cohesive without him. Even though we were one member short, we had our team back, and we were better than ever.

*** Sometimes it's just not there.**

One person can ruin a team, even if he or she *wants* to be part of the team. It's like dating. Sometimes the chemistry just isn't there. Perhaps though, you can suggest another group that would be a better fit. Mention a particular strength you see in that person that would benefit another team. This is tricky. But just like dating, cut your losses and move on. No harm, no foul.

*** Nobody's Perfect.**

Take it as a given that there will be problems on any team. The damage done in a moment of anger can shatter your team's morale and efficiency. Instead of losing your cool with other team members "in the moment," as we discussed in chapter one, set regularly scheduled times to get together with your team and discuss problems and challenges. When you allow time to pass, some problems seem to diminish on their own, and if not, well then, you can still talk about them at the meeting. Make it a rule that discussions about problems and concerns must be done in a civil manner and that breaking the rule will result in treating the team to lunch, dinner, or both if it gets way out of control!

The preceding article is an excerpt from *Me, We and Glee: How to have a great attitude, work as a team and keep your sense of humor*, by Nick Arnette. Known as *The Feel Good Funny Guy*, Arnette is a popular keynote speaker at business meetings throughout the United States and Canada. You can contact Nick Arnette at www.NickArnette.com, email: nick@nickarnette.com

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