



PROJECT MANAGEMENT

500 Thoreau Street

Concord, MA 01742 USA

+978.369.9009

info@newleafpm.com (1 PDU for \$9.95)

How Not to Run a Meeting

Tips for creatively wasting everyone's time

by John M. Nevison, PMP

A meeting is a golden opportunity to waste a great number of people's time. Here's how to take full advantage of the situation.

1. Don't write an agenda or, if you must, don't distribute it before the meeting.

The danger of an agenda is that it informs people when a meeting will start and stop, what will be covered (and by whom), and when a particular item will be discussed.

The lack of an agenda can do wonders for wasting time. If people don't know what the meeting is for, they will probably come out of curiosity. These superfluous attendees will help to swell the meeting's number from a manageable 4-7 up to the unwieldy realm of 12 or more.

If people know in advance what the meeting is about, they might come prepared and provide a treacherously efficient focus to the discussion. The less information you give people, the better.

The lack of an agenda will lower everyone's expectations for what can be accomplished and ensure a leisurely pace that can waste additional time.

You can further contribute to the attendees' mystification by distributing volumes of background material during the meeting instead of beforehand. Act like you expect everyone to speed-read the material while the meeting continues and you will guarantee real confusion and a nice, slow meeting pace.

2. Don't start on time.

If you start at the appointed hour, you won't waste the time of those who insist on arriving promptly. The longer you wait, the more of the punctual attendees' time you squander, and the more you encourage the laggards to continue their disruptive behavior. If you stall long enough at a series of meetings, you can actually condition people to arrive later and later. As a major time-waster, this technique is not to be ignored.

It is equally important not to end on time. Ending on time allows attendees to plan their day accurately, in advance.

3. If you have an agenda, don't stick to it.

Needless to say, following an agenda can save time. So don't do it. Staying on topic would let colleagues drop in on a part of the meeting of interest to them, using their time efficiently while not adding wasted time to the group's efforts. Staying on schedule might lead to accomplishing the goal of the meeting, rendering a follow-up meeting unnecessary. The follow-up is a major time-wasting opportunity you won't want to miss.

Remain vague about whether an item on the agenda is for information, discussion, or decision. Any clarity will threaten everyone's efforts to waste time.

4. Don't conclude the meeting clearly, just let it peter out.

Letting the meeting just fade away is easy if you don't have a clear agenda for it in the first place.

If, through no fault of your own, the meeting ran efficiently, don't be discouraged. You can wreak major havoc at the end by taking a few simple actions:

- Don't conclude with a review of who's going to do what, or you will miss an opportunity for some creative post-meeting time wasting, as well as a rich source of excuses later (which, in turn, will waste still more time).
- Wait until some people have left before you set the time and place of the next meeting. This will provide the opportunity to play telephone tag for several days after the meeting.
- Conclude on a down note. This leaves people demoralized and contributes to post-meeting waste. If all else fails, point out how little was accomplished. This is sure to insult everyone present and will also lower morale.

5. Don't take, or publish, minutes of what went on.

If you didn't have an agenda, no one will expect minutes anyway. Why surprise them?

You may use the lack of a secretary as an excuse. Don't let on that you could have recorded the proceedings on a twenty-dollar cassette player.

Published minutes are dangerous: they remind people of what they agreed to do at the meeting. Reminders prompt some attendees to follow-through on forgotten action items, others to enquire about action items, and everyone to expect action-items to be completed. Such practices can sabotage all your careful time-wasting efforts.

Don't use this form!

Date: 4 March 2006
(Arrives on the attendees desk 2-3 business days before meeting)

From: Br'er Rabbit

To: Distribution of the Briar Patch Seven
(Keeps number at meeting to under 8, never more than 12)

Subject: Agenda for Meeting, Monday, 9 March 2006, 11:00-12:00, Conference Room
(Title, when, and where)

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the results of recent research on fixing up the briar patch defenses against Br'er Fox. **(Goal of meeting clearly stated)**

11:00 Meeting begins. Resolve small urgent items.
(Clean up minor, distracting, up-beat items at the beginning)

(For each item: When, who, what, brief purpose — info, discuss, decide)

11:05 Research Rabbit will review the results of his investigations. (For information)

11:20 Br'er Rabbit will present the "possible action" list that he made from Research Rabbit's work.
(For discussion by all)

11:35 Course of action will be decided by all. (For decision)

11:50 Harold Hare will present brief items of current business.
(Dispose of minor informational items just before the end)

11:55 Review of action list and assignments.
(Review who's going to do what as a result of this meeting)

12:00 Meeting ends.
(End on time)

Notes:

Score at least 70% correct on the questions below and earn PDUs! See next page for details.

PDU Questions: How Not To Run a Meeting

(\$9.95, 1 PDU)

1. Which is the first rule of How Not to Run a Meeting?
 - a. Don't conclude the meeting clearly
 - b. Don't start on time
 - c. Don't take, or publish, minutes of what went on
 - d. Don't write an agenda

2. Which is the second rule of How Not to Run a Meeting?
 - e. Don't conclude the meeting clearly
 - f. Don't start on time
 - g. Don't take, or publish, minutes of what went on
 - h. Don't write an agenda

3. Which is the fourth rule of How Not to Run a Meeting?
 - i. Don't conclude the meeting clearly
 - j. Don't start on time
 - k. Don't take, or publish, minutes of what went on
 - l. Don't write an agenda

4. Which is the fifth rule of How Not to Run a Meeting?
 - m. Don't conclude the meeting clearly
 - n. Don't start on time
 - o. Don't take, or publish, minutes of what went on
 - p. Don't write an agenda

5. The example form to be avoided is from:
 - a. Br'er Rabbit
 - b. Bugs Bunny
 - c. Elmer Fudd
 - d. Porky Pig

6. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss?
 - a. Br're Fox's Axe
 - b. Research on fixing up the briar patch
 - c. Br'er Bears' club
 - d. The tangle of the briar patch

7. The meeting begins with?
 - a. Introductions
 - b. Resolution of small items
 - c. Clear summary of the facts
 - d. Welcome to attendees

8. Meeting ends with?
 - a. A brief summary
 - b. Thank you to those who attended
 - c. Review of action list
 - d. The ringing of the bell

9. Small informational items are presented?
 - a. At the beginning
 - b. In the middle
 - c. Near the end
 - d. At the end of the meeting

