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## How Not to Run a Meeting

*Five easy ways to waste time in meetings*

John M. Nevison, PMP

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

### **1. Don't create 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 attend 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 make available, the better.

The lack of an agenda will lower expectations for what can be accomplished and ensure a leisurely pace, which will waste additional time.

You can further contribute to the attendees' mystification by distributing reams 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 meeting 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 your efforts to waste time.

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

It is a cinch to let the meeting just fade away 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 can contribute to post-meeting time wasting. 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 the meeting.**

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!

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**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)\*\*

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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:**

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### **About the Author**

**John M. (Jack) Nevison**, PMP, is President of New Leaf and a co-founder of Oak Associates, Inc. He is the author of six books and numerous articles on computing and management. During the course of his business career, Nevison has built and sold two businesses, managed projects, managed project managers, and served as both an internal and external consultant to Fortune 100 companies. He is a past president of the Mass Bay Chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI®), a past president of the Greater Boston Chapter of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), a certified Project Management Professional (PMP), and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Dartmouth College.

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