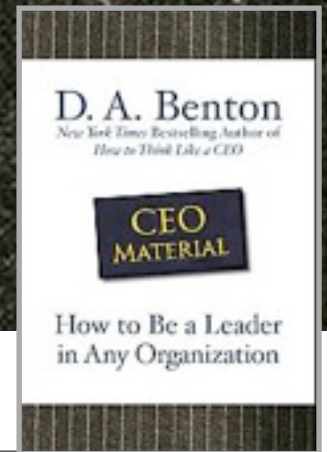




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Run an Effective Meeting and Be an Effective Meeting Participant



by D. A. Benton



Most people don't run bad meetings—they run *awful* meetings. Yet, at great expense and time, they continue to have them.

If you can't run an effective meeting, it's better not to have one. The damage you do is multiplied by the number of people there.

Leaders participate in lots of meetings. A vice president alone can have, on average, 70 meetings in a week. Men spend, on average, 11 hours a week in meetings; women spend 8. Of people surveyed by Poly-Vision Corporation, 75 percent said that their meetings could be more effective.

Have fewer meetings and only for very important reasons. Identify a problem, solve a problem, or dispense information to a group simultaneously. Do away with a meeting if the only reason to have it is that it's Monday morning.

Keep the number of people at meetings as small as possible while still including everyone who needs to be there. A meeting becomes more complex with more people.

Focus, and then narrow your focus. Use an agenda to stay on track to deal with the

issues. Your job as the meeting leader is to set the agenda, manage disruptive behavior, break deadlocks, do a postmortem, follow up, and plan the next meeting.

Get attendees used to a few simple rules: (1) Deal with difficult issues first (maybe 50 percent presentation, 50 percent discussion), and (2) Don't let someone's pet peeve dominate.

I have strict rules for staff meetings, which I will tell people in advance:

attendance required, no gossip, no sidebar conversations, stick to the subject, [and] comments limited to three minutes each. Unless someone is expecting a baby, turn off cell phones and BlackBerries.

Decide who will run the meeting in advance and how others will get feedback from the meeting. Free form may be good for brainstorming, but not for dispensing information.

Physically set up the meeting. Set up the configuration of the room; where various people should sit to enhance the meeting objective.

If the meeting is in the boss's office with the boss behind his or her desk, it will be more intimidating. It might be more effective to go to another person's office, a boardroom, or a totally neutral off-site location (e.g., a restaurant, hotel, etc.).

Consider the time of day when people are there emotionally and intellectually. If you're going to "come down on people," do it at the end of the day so that they can go home and think about it. If you're going to praise them, do it first thing in the morning so that they are in a good mood all day.

Start and end on time.

Seek opportunities to build attendees' self-esteem. You won't get cooperation if you put people down in front of others or put them down period. Use humor. Humor relaxes people and eases candid communication. A serious discussion can be equally effective if an attitude of good cheer is maintained.

And finally, make the meeting quick; don't let it drag on.

Be a good meeting participant too. You're there for one reason, and that is to listen *and* contribute. It's a mistake to just sit there and "take things in." Your involvement can be as simple as a head bob, a "Good point," or a

comment like, "Tell me more about . . .," for example, every 15 minutes or so. This doesn't mean that you should interrupt. When you contribute, do it at a moment when you aren't talking over someone else's words or cutting them off. Basic courtesy is noticed.

Contributing does not mean dominating, hogging attention, or grandstanding. When you ask questions, you contribute; when you pontificate, you look silly, waste everyone's time, appear arrogant, and learn nothing.

Don't scrunch and hunch. You will appear bored, tired, lacking in energy, lacking in support, out of it, and not a team player. Sit up straight (it will help your energy), and keep a relaxed expression on your face.

Relax your hands, and sit asymmetrically with your upper body. Don't fiddle, squirm, or play with your pen, coffee cup, etc. Don't touch yourself or pick imaginary or real stuff off your clothes or your body. You come off as totally self-focused, show poor manners, and look disgusting. You want to look controlled versus anxious to be out of there, even if you are anxious to be out of there.

And in a meeting, don't keep a running conversation going on in your mind. Shut it down. Listen to what others are saying without

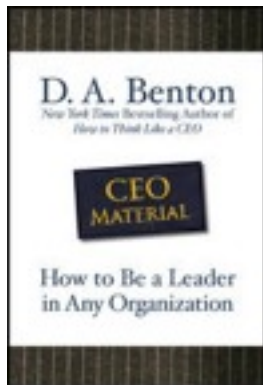
interrupting, finishing their sentences, or guessing what they are going to say.

Don't forget that you are on stage and being watched all the time. Your boss figures that however you handle yourself in a meeting is how you likely will appear in other venues when representing him or her. Your boss wants someone who makes him or her look good. Again don't be afraid to judiciously joke and kid. You'll improve communication with confident, good-natured humor, look smarter, relax others, set an optimistic tone, and get the same important work done.

Afterwards, memorialize what you garnered from the meeting in a brief e-mail: "This is my understanding. . . ." You keep lines of communication open, minimize misunderstandings, and document in case you end up in court some day. ###

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Debra Benton is an effective, charismatic and powerful speaker/consultant/author. In 1976, she founded Benton Management Resources, and has since been in business successfully for over 30 years.



In *CEO Material*, D. A. Benton shows you how to become highly visible and absolutely indispensable to your organization. You'll learn how to project confidence, even when something hasn't gone your way. You'll recognize the value of being a generalist, able to comprehend every facet of your business's structure and function. You'll find out how to keep learning and growing so that you never feel stuck, much less appear so to decision makers. And most importantly, you'll master four C's that no true leader can be without:

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- Constant Communication
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- Coworker Collaboration

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