8 Ways to Improve Leadership Team Meetings

When leaders meet, their time is too valuable to waste. Use these tips to get things done.

By Tiziana C. Dearing

Meeting time among senior leaders is like gold — precious, rare, and best in large blocks. Yet few leadership teams achieve the leverage they should from that time. Too often, executive teams find themselves discussing with no outcome, tabling decisions for more information, and reaching consensus that isn't really consensus. These problems waste time, create unnecessary complexity, and undermine leaders' authority with their staff. Considering the costs, leaders can't accept such inefficiency.

Fortunately, eight simple practices will increase the quality and quantity of output from leadership team meetings. What makes these strategies specific to leadership meetings is their focus on *decisions*. You must constantly make and communicate clear decisions about running your organization. These eight tactics will help you do so:

1. Know the Agenda in Advance.

• **Notice** the compound idea here — *having* an agenda, and *knowing* it in advance.

• **Pick a day** at a reasonable interval before the meeting, and make it the due date for the agenda. Do this every single time.

Turn each agenda item into a question.

• **Add** "emergency business" to the agenda, to leave time for unexpected issues.

• **Communicate the agenda deadline** to all direct reports. Make it clear that slipping in items after the deadline undermines success. Don't tolerate it except in times of genuine need.

2. Have a Process.

• **Use the same process** for every leadership team meeting. Such consistency drastically reduces "down time." It also makes some of the other steps in this article — like having an agenda and calling in experts — possible.

• **Don't follow the process so rigidly** that it becomes a liability. As with all rules, this one has exceptions. Still, breaking from the process should be just that, an *exception*. Otherwise the team will never find its groove.

3. Identify Decisions.

• **At the beginning of the meeting, turn each agenda item** into a question. Then have the whole team focus on answering that question. This approach greatly simplifies decision-making.

• **If people propose items that can't be turned into questions, ask them** to spend more time on these issues before the next meeting. If it's not a question, it isn't ready for the prime time of a leadership team meeting, and it shouldn't take up precious meeting time.

4. Set a Decision-Making Threshold.

• **Know what constitutes** a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" team decision. Do decisions require 100% consensus or a simple majority? Can the chief executive or team leader make the final call? Should a certain number of team members be present for major policy decisions to go forward? Without an explicit threshold for agreement, dissenters have room to undermine or even reverse decisions. When the dissenting pressure

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mounts — and sometimes it does, even against brilliant decisions — the leadership team must be able to say, "Look, when x% of this team agrees to something, we've made a solid, final decision. We understand and appreciate the opposing concerns, but we have to move forward now."

• **Remember** that different thresholds pose different trade offs. Picture a continuum, with a single decision maker on one end, and 100% team consensus on the other. Moving toward the 100% end increases the decision's credibility. But it also increases the time and effort required to reach a decision. Sometimes it also threatens innovation; it's difficult to build broad consensus about things new and cutting edge.

• **Be willing** to change your threshold if necessary to get the job done.

Provide Three Things at All Your Meetings

Boost your meetings by keeping these three principles in mind:

Focus on the actual decisions at hand.

- Prepare the agenda before hand.
- Have a standard meeting process.

Be clear about the issues, their implications, and their final outcomes.

- Pinpoint the decisions to be made.
- Agree on a decision-making threshold.
- Use staff expertise to provide information about issues.

Follow through by communicating your decisions to the organization for immediate implementation.

- Write out a summary of your decisions.
- Take good notes.
- Assign responsibility for communicating outcomes.

5. Put Staff Experts to Work.

• **Before the meeting, put a staff member in charge** of each decision to be made. Ask staff members to create tight, concise briefs (around two pages long) summarizing the following:

- the decision to be made
- any background critical to making the decision
- the main pros and cons
- implications of the possible outcomes.

• **Make the brief due** two days before the meeting. Be absolutely firm about the desired content and length of the brief. If a brief is poorly written, too long, or missing key content, send it back for revisions within 24 hours. If this seems harsh, remember that what you're doing is requiring everyone in the organization to think clearly about issues affecting themselves and the people you serve. It's only professional, and it's appropriate.

• **Be sure people read the staff briefs** and make good use of them. Don't be one of those teams that sends your staff on briefing fire drills, only to show up at your own meeting without having looked at the data. That's a waste of everyone's time and disrespectful to colleagues.

• **During the meeting, be ready to call in anyone** who wrote a briefing to answer questions people may have about it.

6. Summarize Decisions.

• **Never leave a decision or subject** and go on to the next without writing out — in complete sentences — the basics of what the team decided.

• **Make certain everyone sees and agrees** on the language of this summary.

• **Don't skip this step!** How many times have you attended a meeting, reached consensus, and then heard someone later say, "That's not what I thought we agreed on"?

7. Create a Record.

• **Have someone take notes** of your meeting. You'll find these notes invaluable. If you discover confusion when summarizing a decision, good notes will sort that out. They're also useful in creating follow-up communications, and they provide good backup when reporting decisions to the board — helping you demonstrate how you deliberated, what you considered, and what data led you to the decision you made.

• **Be sure the note taker strikes a balance** between taking thorough notes and not writing so much that the team feels uncomfortable having a free, open discussion.

• **Choose a note taker** who has knowledge of the team and whom the group trusts. An executive assistant can perform this task well, as can a chief of staff or office manager. Some teams prefer to rotate note-taking responsibility among themselves. This is fine, as long as the note taker still can participate fully in the discussions.

8. Assign Communication.

• **At the end of every leadership meeting, review** the outcomes. Decide who should communicate what, to whom, for each item.

• **Set** firm "communicate by" dates.

• **If necessary, review as a team** exactly what the communication should say.

• **Keep in mind** that the whole point of conducting efficient leadership meetings is to make decisions and put them into action. Spreading the word quickly and clearly will increase the team's credibility and eliminate confusion. ■

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