

Nine Rules for Fighting Endless Meetings

by Jon Miller

I've heard that at Toyota the meetings are 60 minutes long, with 50 minutes of actual meeting time and 10 minutes to get to the next meeting. The use of the standardize A3 size one-page format to communicate the progress on PDCA problem solving keeps meetings on time. This is truly impressive, but we won't all get there in one leap.

Here are nine rules for fighting endless meetings:

#1 Start on time. You don't arrive 15 minutes late for a school examination. You don't arrive 15 minutes late for your flight. If you do, you don't fly. You don't arrive 15 minutes late for a job interview. Yet once we pass the test, make the flight and get the job, we think nothing of making others wait for meetings at work. Why?

#2 Have clear objectives. Meetings will be more productive when you start with an agenda that answers the questions: Why am I at this meeting? Who requires that I be here? When does this meeting end? How will we know if the meeting is successful?

#3 Be prepared. Review the agenda or other background information ahead of time. Know where the meeting will be held and how long it takes to get to and from that meeting place so you can be on time.

#4 Be engaged. This starts with turning off your cell phones or blackberries. Ideally, put them all on the table where they are visible to all. Make reaching to answer them is a visible offense. Pay \$1 towards charity if you reach for your phone, unless it's an emergency. As long as meetings are kept short, you can get back to people who call you in a reasonable amount of time. Stand up rather than sit, it will keep you more aware.

#5 Communicate visually. Humans process more than 80% of information through their sense of sight. Psychologists say most of communication happens through body language, then tone of voice and a smaller portion through the actual content of speech. Give and read visual cues. Use images to tell a story and anchor your communication, rather than talking on and on about something without structure.

#6 Solve problems. If everything is going well, why meet? Ideally meetings should help solve problems. If there is a clear objective and a problem to solve, the meeting can end either when the problem is solved or everyone knows what to do to start solving the problem. Problem solving is engaging, and in that is what we are all here to do.

#7 Practice genchi gembutsu. Whenever possible hold the meetings at the location where the particular problem or issue being discussed has occurred. This is more visual, engaging, and improves direct access to the facts. This speeds up problem resolution by taking away opportunities for conjecture and blurring of the actual condition.

#8 End on time. You need to get to the next meeting on time.

#9 Avoid the Three Evils of Meetings as taught by Takeshi Kawabe, former executive of Showa Manufacturing Co. and student of Taiichi Ohno:

1. Meet but don't discuss
2. Discuss but don't decide
3. Decide but don't do

These nine rules will develop the behaviors to support more effective meetings.