

Running meetings that don't suck

Jenica Rogers
SUNY Potsdam
June 7, 2012

- White means everyone should do it
- Green means committee chairs should do it
- Orange means committee members should do it

FOCUS

Know why you're there

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You were asked for a reason, right? So, what's that reason?

What's your role in the meeting? Is it related to your job skills? Your responsibilities? Your interests? Your peacemaking skills?

What're you bringing to the discussion? Knowledge, personality, engagement, energy?

Who are you representing? Your team, your department, your users, your library, your campus, yourself?

Who are you expected to report back to? Is that part of what the meeting expects of you?

Shared services example.

Role: Director of Libraries, chair of Teaching and Learning Roundtable, part of our informal org chart regarding campus IT, and thus part of the Shared Services discussion that is coming from Dave Powalyk and Carey Hatch.

Bringing: Library experience, attitude of collaboration and sharing, relationship with Michelle Currier at Canton, relationship with campus computing staff, willingness to try new things without overly harsh judgement

Representing: College Libraries staff, our users (their interests), and our campus as a whole via my representation of our goals, desires, and attitudes

Report back: To library staff, and to Provost

Know why everyone else is there

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Ask yourself the same things about everyone else. All the facets and nuances that are true for you are true for everyone else in the room. What are their considerations?

- What's their role in the meeting?
- What're they bringing to the discussion?
- Who are they representing?
- Who are they expected to report back to?

Gives you insight into the dynamics of the group, and how the work might be approached by everyone there.

Know your charge or mandate, and your explicit goals

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So, having thought that you, you know why YOU are there... but why are you there? What's the purpose of this meeting?

You might have individual goals -- know those.

You should also have group goals. Make sure those are clear, too.

Dumpster meeting.

Explicit goal: Discuss:

- Status of dumpster removal from Merritt Circle
- Removal of Dumpster from Library
- Other concerns

Group goals:

Reach an acceptable resolution of the conflicting needs to beautify the quad, streamline our waste removal processes, and do effective and efficient work in Crumb Library

Individual goals:

Ensure that my authority as the Director of Libraries is acknowledged by campus colleagues, make sure the best interests of library staff are protected, and be as cooperative as possible with campus initiatives external to the libraries.

Again, everyone else has this kind of mental breakdown. They may not be thinking about it in these explicit terms, but it's true -- everyone has a goal for the group, and an individual goal. Do you know what they are? Can you anticipate what other people's agendas are? And do you know what the agenda for the group as a whole is?

Or, make setting your goals your first mandate

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And you don't know, if this isn't explicit when you walk in the door, and you're the chair, make it explicit. For everyone. This is part of the job of running a meeting. You can't all work toward your goal if you don't know what it is. And you also can't assume that everyone knows what the goal is if it's not clearly stated

Or, interrupt the
flow of the meeting
to ask what the goals
and charge are

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If I do insufficient meeting preparation, I often do what I think of as My Rhetorical Thing, in which I set up the argument I want to make, provide all the data, and then in the end, ask the question I want to get an answer for. Its my default.

But that means that the people I'm talking to have no idea why I'm telling them stuff. And sure, I could probably lead them to where I want to go, but y'know, maybe I could also TELL them where we're going, so that they can follow along. It's like having a topic sentence in your conversation...

And I have one staff member who almost always calls me on it when I fail to have that topic sentence, raising her hand and asking, "Why are we talking about this?" or "What are you hoping we'll do today?"

And she's right. We all need to know that. So demand to know. (Politely.)

Set an agenda, share it, and stick to it

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I call this the Do Your Homework part, for meeting chairs: Know why you're there, know why everyone else is there, know and communicate your goals... and do it all **in advance**.

If you do that, you can also have an agenda. Which you can share in advance.

Agendas should always have start times, end times, and topics for discussion, as well as all the documents that will be discussed in the meeting, unless you're building in group reading time as part of your agenda.

Did I mention you need to do this IN ADVANCE?

And then, once you've made your agenda, you have to honor it.

Start on time.

AND END ON TIME.

One hour only

Because unless it's a "working meeting" or a "project day" or some other euphemism for "getting shit done", no more than 90 minutes. EVER.

COMMUNICATION

Know your topic, and stick to it

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I know we're all interested in the ways our work is overlapping and integrated, but the Collection Development Committee should never be discussing Circulation procedures, no matter how interesting or tangentially related. That's not the work of the Collection Development meeting, and so you're off topic. Stop it.

Be ready to facilitate and lead

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Two pieces to foolproofing your facilitation in a meeting:

Script yourself.

Know what must be communicated

Practice saying:

"So what I'm hearing from Laura is ABC and what I'm hearing from Amy is BCD and it seems like we agree on B and C."

"I can see that there's a lot of interest in Q, but we need to get to Y today, so let's table Q until we can all be prepared to discuss it, and we've dealt with Y."

Scripting gives you confidence.

Scripting gives you an easy answer.

Scripting gives you a backup plan.

And know what you must communicate. Bullet point it, write the narrative, draw a picture, send yourself a voicemail, script it. Whatever works for you, but outline for yourself what must be communicated in the meeting, and make sure you do it. Having a clear plan for what you must communicate, and recording it for yourself somehow, means you will be able to more effectively lead the group where it needs to go.

Be ready to be facilitated and led

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Respect your role in the group

Honor the cues from the meeting's leader

Don't be That Librarian who insists on talking about Things That Are Not On Our Agenda

Have you been talking for a while? Stop talking.

have you interrupted the same coworker four times? Maybe that's not helpful.

Never let one person take over unless they're in charge

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The Librarian Who Is Obsessed With The Serials Set should never be allowed to take over a meeting that is not about the serials set

The Librarian Who Could Not Be Concise If His Soul Were On The Line needs to learn to be concise.

Meetings must have space for questions and conversations, else, why are you having a meeting rather than sending an email?

Practice saying:

“That’s a valid concern, but we’re veering off topic.” *turn to next person* “Kate, you’ve had your hand up, what is your thought?”

“Jason, there are a lot of good ideas in what you’re saying, but they’re hard to tease out. Can you please think about the two things you’re most interested in communicating? While you think, I’m going to move on to Laura.” ...and then come back to Jason. (otherwise people start to think you’re a jerk.)

Never let one person
take over even if
they're in charge

You folks who aren't meeting chairs, though... you're not off the hook regarding communicating.

Demand to be heard if you must. Use those words: "We've heard a lot about your opinion on this, but as a member of this committee I also need to be heard, so I believe ..."
because as I said, meetings need conversation space. and conversation can't happen if one person does all the talking. Enforce good behavior in your leaders.

Practice interrupting

Social norms and the delicacies of politeness often work against us in meetings, particularly if there are bad actors involved. Be aggressive when you have to; if your work matters, then making sure the work gets done matters. If one person is blathering on, your work is not getting done. So take a deep breath, and just start talking. Read your scripts. Fly free on wild emotion. Shut your eyes and blurt it out. Whatever it takes for you. But be take some agency and shut down the rambler.

CULTURE

Build a culture of trust about meetings

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people will avoid meetings like the plague until they are sure that meetings aren't going to suck them dry.

Do the business of the meeting in the meeting

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Not in the hallway afterwards.

Not in the boss's office afterwards.

Not beforehand by the staff fridge.

Not beforehand in your own head.

In the meeting. Only.

Otherwise... why are you having a meeting, again?

I'm not saying you shouldn't strategize and discuss and gather information and form your own opinions, but I am asserting that if the goal of a meeting is to

collaboratively write a document, you should do that in the meeting, and if the goal of the meeting is to

make a decision about how to catalog ebooks, you shouldn't have made a decision before the meeting happens, and if the goal of the meeting is to

openly discuss the pros and cons of a new service, you shouldn't shut down conversation with "we already talked about that at lunch yesterday, and no because purple."

When that happens it conveys that the business of the meeting has already been done, and leaves participants wondering why they bothered to show up.

Know your decision-making model, and use it

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Whatever it is that your meeting's about, how are you going to decide when you get there?

Who gets to say yes or no? Do you know?

Are you going to vote?

Do you have to achieve consensus?

Do you have to achieve majority agreement?

Do you have to convince two key players?

Do you have to convince one woman?

And is your institution going to respect what was decided in the meeting, or is the decisionmaking power actually somewhere else?

If you don't know this answer -- if everyone believes something different -- you are not going to find it easy to do the work of the group and no one will trust that meetings are worth their time.

For example, if you believe, as a group, that the answer is consensus, and your committee has fought to achieve consensus, but your administrative leadership believes you need to convince two (external) key players, you have another problem entirely, but one that also needs addressing.

make sure you all agree inside your group, and that your agreement reflects the reality of your institution. otherwise you're wasting time, and betraying trust.

Pass the donuts

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Not all meetings are donut meetings, but some are, and some are beer meetings. Know your crew, and know their needs and desires. Acknowledging the humanity of your coworkers can take you further than you might expect.

RESPONSIBILITY

Take, share, and honor notes

I, personally, despise minutes as traditionally constituted. But that doesn't mean we can ignore the recording of what we do.

There are a million techniques for recording the work of a group -- shared projected documents, whiteboards, easel pads, recording, laptop notetaking, pen to paper. But capture ongoing discussions and decisions.

And then distribute the notes afterwards. Everyone involved in communal work needs the power to consult the record.

And share the notes with all relevant parties -- share 'em up, down, and across the org chart, as appropriate for your org and your meeting.

Most importantly, don't try to retrofit the notes to match your preferred outcome for the discussion. No one will like you if you do this, and all you're doing is setting yourself up for a game of "No, we said..." in which people's ideological positions become more extreme and entrenched as they defend accuracy of the record.

My personal approach is to send emails after meetings that say things like, "Jenica and Carol agreed that the Bicentennial celebration would be most effective if it spanned an entire academic year but no more than a calendar year."

and

"Carol will set up quarterly meetings between Jenica and Dr. Schwaller; Jenica will reach out to the Vice Presidents and ask for their nominees for the Bicentennial governing board."

Action items and decisions; no lengthy blah blah he said they said she said so moved and seconded

Assign responsibility for tasks

Really. We've all been there. Meetings in which everyone's jazzed and ready to work and change the world... and then nothing happens, even though you talked about seven things that can and should happen next.

The problem, often, is that no one said, "Jason, if you do X, and Amy does Q, then Chad can do R, and when we report back next month, the rest of us can use those three things to tackle P"

It's always easier to let someone else do it... and if no one's EXPECTING us to do it, well. It doesn't always get done.

So, chairs, assign responsibility.

Assign deadlines for tasks

And tell people when to do stuff. Seriously. We all carry differing senses of urgency, and not everyone can see the big picture... so if you need the web guy to post something on a Tuesday so you can do the other thing on Wednesday, TELL THE WEB GUY YOU NEED IT ON TUESDAY. This should be straightforward... but we often miss it, often out of a misplaced desire to not be pushy, or overly structured, or dictatorial. But it needs doing. Do it.

Demand that responsibility and deadlines for tasks be assigned

Your meeting leader isn't doing this? ASK FOR IT. If they can't manage it, can't do it, see if you can get your colleagues to do it collaboratively.

Script it out. practice saying it.

"Jason, if you do X, I can do R, and Amy can do Q, then we can all work on P next month."

Follow up on decisions, goals, and action items

You know how you just assigned tasks and deadlines?

FOLLOW UP.

Some people sort of suck at managing timelines and taskwork.

Some people need reminders.

Some people need to know that someone cares about the work and is paying attention to their effort before they get really engaged.

Some people forget things.

Some people will let you know that, in fact, they're not gonna do that... and then you can reassign it. But not if you don't check in.

Follow up with the people who were supposed to follow up, if deadlines are missed

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Do you care about your communal work? Think it has value? Then YOU check in and follow up, too. Perhaps there's a collaboration just waiting to happen. Perhaps YOUR interest in the work will push the project over the edge. Maybe you'll learn something about a coworker's workload. Maybe you'll see that the timelines you set as a group were unrealistic. Who knows. But check in.

INTEGRITY

Never call a meeting just because it's what you're used to

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Some people just default to “we’ll have a meeting!” and some people also add “of the full staff!” Stop that.

meetings are the most expensive thing we do in terms of staff resources. 8 librarians in a room for an hour? That’s an entire day of personnel productivity. 8 hours of staff time. Was it worth it? Did you need to spend 8 hours of personnel time on that discussion? A full staff meeting at my place, that lasts an hour, is 23 hours of staff time. So they better be worth it.

Sitting around a table editing a document as a group is not a meeting, nor is it productive. We all have the internets now. Use ‘em.

Do you need to hear all the voices in the room, or just one, two, or four? If the answer is not ALL, do not bring all those people together, just the ones you need.

Do you need all those people to hear the voices speaking, and interact with the voices speaking? Only pull those people together if the interaction or face-to-face learning matters... else, send an email.

Do you need an hour to make this decision, or will 10 minutes suffice?

Can you do this by email? One on one? Or over the phone? Or is there value of having all these people together that other methods don’t have?

And if you have a regularly scheduled recurring meeting, do you have an agenda EVERY TIME YOU MEET? Have you assessed the above every time you meet? Secret: regularly scheduled meetings can also be canceled.

Always consider these things, and know your answer to those questions. Meetings should be last resorts.

Only call good meetings

Seriously. You have the power.
Only you can prevent forest fires.
Only you can set and send agendas that match the goals and skills of your meeting group.
Only you can make sure that the meeting group is the right people in the right place at the right time for the right reasons.
You can make it work even better by facilitating, leading, and directing discussion, by sticking to your agenda, by honoring the time commitments of others, and by following through in comprehensive and responsive ways.
if you can't or won't do that -- stop calling meetings. Because you're probably calling bad meetings, and there are way too many of those. People hate you. Stop it.

Only participate in good meetings

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You don't always have the power to refuse to show up, but consider it.

Do you have the power to decline to attend?

Do you have the voice that can say "this is a terrible idea" or "I don't have time to spend on something that's not been thoroughly planned"?

Don't volunteer to be part of groups that you know will be a disaster.

Communicate that disaster is imminent when you know that's true.

And, when you can't avoid bad meetings, lead from the middle. Try to encourage best practices. Be a hero.

**tell me your horror
stories
and
ask me questions!**