

Unproductive employee meetings

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People who work for me come to me, one at a time, complaining about each other and things that don't work. They catch me in the middle of doing my work, so I tell them to bring it up at the staff meeting so we can discuss it as a group. We get to the meeting, and no one speaks up. Any suggestions?

Staff meetings are the perfect place for exchanging information, straightening out misunderstandings and problems and developing best practices. However stepping forward at a staff meeting can seem like a big risk for people. Fixing this is going to take practice, patience and a few tricks.

Empower Employees

Build a list of issues to discuss using a standard meeting agenda. Take the monkey off your back by rotating management of the meetings. Practice roles. It may take time and effort, but breaking through your current level of frustration will make it all worthwhile.

Decide if an employee is coming to you just to complain, or is actually trying to accomplish something productive. I happen to know this business owner, and find her employees to be good, productive, cooperative people who are genuinely interested in making the business better. Consider their issues seriously.

Train your staff to record their issues in a log book, noting who made the entry and when. As they come to you with a problem, tell them to pull out the log and make a few notes while they wait for you to finish what you're doing so you can attend to their issue. Stop those employees who shrug their shoulders and start to walk away; make them come back and put an entry in the log book.

Tell employees that you're going to rotate management of meetings. Each employee will get a turn running a meeting. If you hold meetings weekly, you'll have up to 52 opportunities each year to let people run meetings. Start with employees who are stronger at speaking, to let others get the idea by watching their peers.

Make it easier for employees to stay on track by developing a standard format for meetings. Here's a typical agenda, modify it to meet your own business' needs:

- Recap of previous meeting – 5 minutes
- Updates on the business, people, clients, current events – 5 minutes
- Updates from people on projects they're are working on – 10 minutes
- Recent issues – person who brought it up describes the issue, group discussion, next steps – 15 minutes to 30 minutes
- Recap of next steps that people will be taking – 5 minutes

This meeting will be done in an hour or less, and everyone will have their say. If employees refuse to engage, take them aside one-on-one and discuss the importance of speaking up at the meetings. If necessary, make participation in the meeting one component of job reviews and bonus calculations.

Prior to each meeting, rehearse with the person assigned to run the meeting. Go through the agenda. Pull out the log book and review the list of open issues. Check off those that have been fully addressed. Together, decide which issues to tackle at this meeting. Ask the meeting director to walk you through how they will bring up issues and get people to talk.

Offer Support

If a particularly shy person has brought up an issue and put an entry into the log book, build a support structure for him. Don't let the shy person off the hook, but don't make him do it alone, either. Ask the shy person to team up with someone in the company who is stronger at speaking. Practice with the issues presenters as well as the meeting leader. Prepare the issues presenters to discuss what they've put into the log book.

Circulate the agenda ahead of time. Give people a chance to see what's coming up. Put peoples' names against the items listed in the issues section, so they know they'll be called on and can prepare.

The above steps may seem like a lot of work – and they will be, in the beginning. Think of what it will be like in a couple months, when you have people trained to take the monkey off your back. Your current level of frustration will change as you turn from being dead center at every meeting to being an observer and contributor. Watch what happens as your employees learn to work together to run meetings and solve problems with each other.

Looking for a good book? Try "Meeting Excellence: 33 Tools to Lead Meetings That Get Results" by Glenn Parker and Robert Hoffman

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