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Chapter	06	Management
Section	02	Meetings
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WHY ARE WE HERE?

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Quick Summary: Establishing clear meeting expectations can dramatically improve meeting effectiveness.

Abstract:

The all-too-common response to receiving a meeting announcement is either a shaking of the head or rolling of one's eyes or, perhaps, the utterance of an expletive following the statement of, "Oh no, not another meeting!" In most organizations, these feelings are justified based on past experiences. However, This situation can be addressed by implementing a few simple business practices. These practices involve clearly stating the purpose of the meeting, the meeting's goal or desired outcome, and the knowledge that some standard practices will be followed.

With lawyer jokes holding the number one position, jokes about meetings are probably the second most common source of humor in the workplace. The popularity of meeting jokes is well-deserved. Meeting oxymorons such as "productive" meetings, "decision-making" meetings, and "efficient" meetings are common. One statement spoken quietly is: "I am going to the 'bored' meeting today." Two root causes of these commonly held sarcastic points of view seem to stand out above all the rest. They are Expectations and Mechanics. With a small amount of upfront preparation and communications, both issues can be eliminated or, at least, minimized.

Today, most meetings are announced with a simple, emailed invitation comprising the meeting title, date, time, location, duration, and the list of attendees. Invitation recipients are given the attendance response choice of "yes, no, or maybe." Occasionally, an agenda or a more thorough description is also provided that helps to set the invitee's expectations, but even with this additional information, confusion can still occur. By providing three simple additional pieces of information, much of the confusion can be avoided. The first item that should be included is to clearly state the type of meeting that is being held. Searching the Internet for, "Types of meetings" yields many different lists. Below is a list along with a simple description of each.

Meeting Type	Comment/Description
Status Update	Commonly used to inform a department, group, of the senior staff of other group's progress.
Information Sharing	Commonly a "broadcast" meeting in which a few people inform others, perhaps the entire company, of news, status, or events.

Meeting Type	Comment/Description
Decision Making	Involves a group of individuals brought together to weigh alternatives and arrive at a common decision. (The larger the group, the less likely that a decision will be made.)
Planning	Discuss and, perhaps, decide on future directions for some activities with input from the functions or groups represented.
Problem-Solving	Discuss situations or issues, consider alternatives, and arrive at an approach to address the issue at hand, usually with action assignments made to a few.
Training	Similar to Information Sharing, these sessions are intended to depart knowledge or skills to the participants.
Other	There are a host of other potential meetings types that cannot really be categorized in the above list but seem to be commonly mentioned. They include design reviews, business and sales forecasting, team building, and bid/proposal reviews to name a few.

In the "real world," it is virtually impossible to neatly restrict meeting discussions to one, and only one, of the categories listed. However, any meeting can go significantly off course without identifying an overall intent. Probably the most common example is a status update meeting, attended by a broad group of individuals, morphing into a problem-solving meeting. Invariably, all participants will have inputs and suggestions, even if they are not involved in the issue or have no available facts. Problem-solving meetings are best handled with fewer participants with a vested interest in the issue.

Aside from specifying the type of meeting planned, the second additional piece of information that should be shared is the goal or expected outcome of the meeting. If the goal is to share information, say it. If the goal is to ask for inputs to help make a decision, say it. By stating the goal, the type of meeting label will become clearer to the planned participants and may result in their suggestions of who should attend or if their attendance is not required.

Finally, the third element to help set the proper meeting expectations is to develop company-wide meeting mechanics that become well-known and are applicable to each type of meeting. The article in this collection, "*Make Meetings Work,*" provides an item-by-item activity checklist that captures meeting guidelines that everyone in the organization can quickly embrace. When everyone understands the mechanics involved in the various types of meetings, the "paranoia" of "I must be there for fear of missing something" is replaced with a feeling of trust in others to address the meeting topics and inform non-participants as required. Without trust, the implicit or stated, "You don't need to know" feeling can permeate the entire organization.

Everyone, at every level and in every discipline, must accept that meetings are necessary and are a way of life for any organization with more than one person. Following the three simple suggestions listed above can transform the previously listed meeting oxymorons into actual meeting outcomes, making meetings both productive and efficient.