

MAKE MEETINGS MATTER

rather than with each other. Although the type of group and purpose of the meeting determine degree of familiarity, it usually enriches the meeting in many ways.

From my experience in coaching graduate business students from many countries, I have also learned that other cultures value familiarity far more than North Americans, especially in Asian and Hispanic countries. Many American business people have learned the hard way that they need to invest time in building relationships with foreign business associates before charging into a fact-oriented, fast-paced presentation or negotiation. Without knowing anything about the other people in a meeting, participants have to make assumptions as they attempt to discuss, collaborate, and make decisions.

Strategies and Solutions for Boring Meetings

- ⇒ Lighten up and encourage humor and fun in your meetings.
- ⇒ Use a number of different formats and techniques to inject variety and to keep things interesting.
- ⇒ Use games, exercises, and other techniques to enable group members to know one another better and build fellowship.

LIGHTEN UP AND ENCOURAGE HUMOR

Learn to include humor in your meetings. It can be as simple as starting out the meeting by asking participants to share something humorous that happened in their departments, or sharing an appropriate cartoon. (Do you ever notice how Dilbert shows up in your office with regularity?) In Chapter 6, we noted that a useful skill for facilitators is a good sense of humor. There is, however, a distinction between humor and comedy. Professionals get paid to do comedy, and they work hard at their material and delivery. Instead, what we're talking about is finding the humor in everyday

Fun and Fellowship

situations, and observing and reflecting on the absurdity of events, people, and circumstances. Real life is usually funnier than prepared comedy material anyway.

Professional speakers and trainers have long known that wrapping serious messages in relevant anecdotal humor not only makes a more interesting and palatable presentation, but it improves retention as well. In meetings, sharing funny stories about work-related subjects helps everyone relax and builds positive energy.

Be aware that it is possible for humor to backfire. Inappropriate humor, such as sarcasm, can detract from an important discussion, or demean someone who is trying hard to understand something. And, like most things, too much humor is too much. Certainly, ethnic, racist, or sexist comments have no place in meetings. One healthy habit to nurture is the ability to laugh at yourself, because, of course, humans are not perfect. A bit of self-deprecating humor is especially refreshing when it comes from the boss.

Other ways to include fun in your meetings are games, energizers, and exercises, many of which are covered in this chapter and in other parts of this book. Sometimes a simple humorous observation can break the tension and make a profound difference in the direction of a meeting.

My boss Jack and I were reviewing potential design firms to redesign the packaging graphics on several food products. A number of piecemeal changes had been made to the products through the years. Although each change had probably been made for good reason, the line did not stand out among its competitors on grocery store shelves. In fact, the whole array resembled a patchwork quilt rather than a unified product line. Because Jack and I were both fairly new to the company, we carried none of the history and baggage of our predecessors. We were open to dramatic change, unlike our forerunners, who were reputed to be conservative about packaging designs.

During a meeting with one design firm, we noted that there was a considerable amount of posturing and hedging going on among the designers about the current line. This particular firm had done some of the previous

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work, and they were not sure if either of us had a vested interest in the present designs. At one point, Jack, who was the vice president of marketing at our firm, interrupted and observed, “What you’re really saying is that we have a screaming disaster here!”

After gulping and looking at each other, the two designers answered tentatively, “Well, in a word, yes.”

Then we smiled, and Jack said, “We agree!” Everyone had a good laugh, and we finally began to talk about the real issues and possible solutions in an open, candid manner.

Learn to laugh, and cultivate an environment that allows and encourages everyone to have a little fun while setting about the serious task of accomplishing your goals.

USE A VARIETY OF FORMATS AND TECHNIQUES FOR FUN, VARIETY, AND INTEREST

Here are some ways to maintain interest and involvement—and fun—in meetings:

- ⇒ Change some aspect of the meeting about every 20 to 30 minutes. Incorporate a mix of stimuli, such as solo presentations, group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, small group breakouts (see below), videos, panels, team presentations, individual and group idea generation, voting, exercises, and games.
- ⇒ Break a large group (more than eight) into smaller groups often for collaboration, discussion, and brainstorming. Have each group report back to the larger group. This does not have to be done in separate rooms. In fact, there is an advantage to holding breakouts in the large meeting room—the buzz and energy are stimulating.
- ⇒ Hold a stand-up meeting. Few people will fall asleep, and the meeting will probably be much shorter. If the recorder takes notes on a flip chart, no one else has to.