

Work Smart: Taming the meeting monster

Written by Julie Desmond
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If you follow Gram around for a day, you'll spend most of that day in meetings. Gram manages six teams in a high profile department. Gram is responsible for a fat budget, so his teams have to be effective.

Many employees dread meetings. The very word, Meeting, in the subject line of an email can make people cringe and hide their calendars. Gram spends most of every day involved in meetings, and yet no one complains when a meeting is called. Gram's meetings are effective because, some of the time, his teams may not realize there's a meeting being held. How does he do that? Gram says the keys are consistency and a conservative guest list.

Gram's teams are subjected to only one recurring gathering weekly. This is a formal team conversation, with a strict agenda. The meeting starts promptly. Gram provides a written agenda that looks curiously similar week after week. The heading reads: Weekly Team Update Meeting. Below that are two discussion topics, and below that a series of five numbered lines. This is the to-do list. As each person gives their update in a prescribed order and with no sidebars or digressions, the others make notes on the to-do list and follow up after the meeting. After updates, the group discusses the topics of the week. At the thirty minute mark, the meeting adjourns.

These meetings are consistent: the routine of the meeting ensures that everyone plays by the rules so the session is efficient and effective. They also have a conservative guest list: if you aren't on this team, no need to stop by.

The other meetings dotting Gram's day don't look like meetings at all. For example, when a salesperson brings in a contract, Gram always walks the seller to the Wall of Fame where the sale is posted and discussed: Where did this relationship come from? How did the sale occur? What additional needs does the buyer have? This is a brief, stand-up, celebratory meeting. But it is a meeting. And it is effective because it has consistency and a conservative guest list.

Other, similar get-togethers occur at prescribed times. The favorite is a 3:00 hot-lap. This is a brainstorming session with anyone who needs to get out of the building. Those who join in walk about a quarter mile through nearby neighborhoods. The discussion is high-energy and may or may not involve business. It's like open-mike time with the boss and it's both consistent and optional.

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Training meetings take place when Gram pulls a chair up to someone's desk. These visits happen on short notice. They usually include 2-4 employees who are struggling with similar issues.

Consistency and a conservative guest list. Just because someone needs a meeting, doesn't mean it has to look or smell like a meeting.

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