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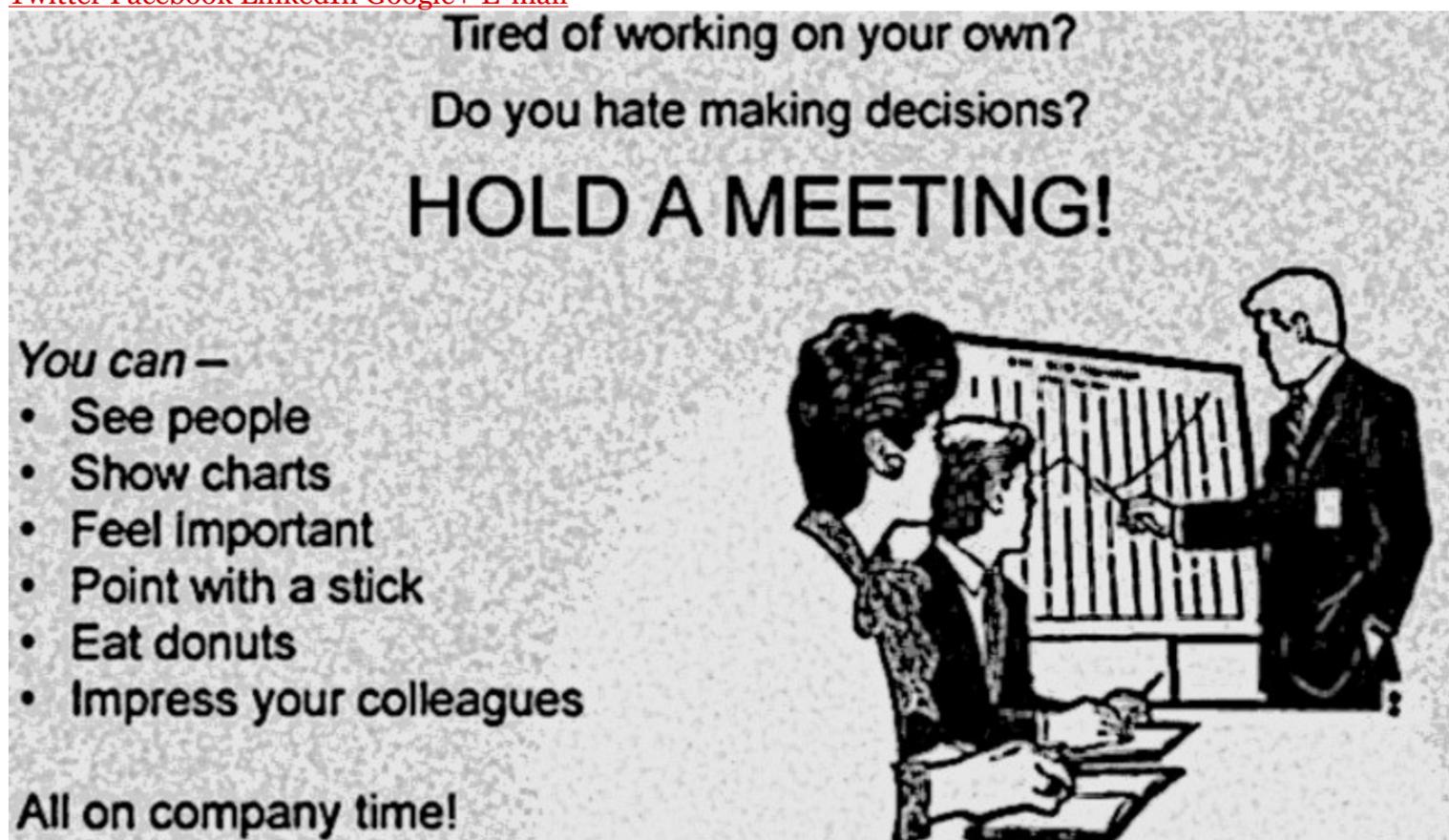
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How to Keep a Meeting Moving

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“The goal of this meeting is to figure out why nothing ever gets done around here” — [Dilbert](#). “We will continue having lots of meetings until we figure out why no work is getting done” — [SomeCards](#). And of course from [PhD Comics](#): “Academia would be a meeting of the minds if you didn’t mind all the meetings.”

Perhaps somewhat idiosyncratically, I actually love a good academic meeting. But I agree that there is really only one good kind: the kind where something actually gets done. A good meeting needs to be a means to an end — a decision, a resolution, a plan of action.

What are some techniques that committee chairs, department heads, and administrators can use to keep meetings moving and prevent them from turning flabby?

Limit the agenda. The ideal meeting, in my mind, has a single item on the lineup. That may not always be practical, but beware the smorgasbord of a thousand agenda items — that sort of meeting goes flabby the fastest. Once participants get wind that there won’t be time to cover every single issue to a point of completion, a sort of unconscious mental deferment takes over, and the result will be (you guessed it) the need for yet another meeting. At the very least, before you chair a meeting, write a quick note about your No. 1 goal for the session: What’s the biggest decision you want made, or the biggest task you need completed? It is much better to try to accomplish less, but insist on consistently accomplishing that thing to culmination.

Put a specific proposal on the table. If you are running a meeting and want to avoid that too-often-

interminable brainstorming phase, don't be afraid to lead with — or at least introduce early — a possible motion or decision. Be gracious and genuine in letting others respond to your proposal. People might want to revise it or reject it, and the price of skipping ahead of the open-brainstorming phase is allowing folks to grapple with and alter your initial idea. But starting with a specific proposal has a nice way of leading naturally to counterproposals, immediately focusing participants on movement and action.

Once decisions are made, put them in writing. Most academic meetings have a minute-taker, but to my mind, minutes distributed hours or days after the meeting are too late to mark and (hopefully) celebrate the stages of decision-making. Consider writing and projecting minutes live, using a whiteboard or blackboard to list plans as they are made. At the very least, stop periodically to explicitly indicate, “So what we've decided so far is ... I'm writing this down.”

Don't let people circle back without a very good reason. The write-it-down technique is not intended to discourage people from revising, adjusting, and fine-tuning ideas — but rather, to confine revising, adjusting, and fine-tuning to a focused period of the process. Action plans should be examined aggressively before they go into practice, and then they should be examined again, aggressively, once outcomes are available to assess. But there is nothing worse than the endlessly retrograde meeting where participants second-guess previously established decisions. If you see that happening, cut it short by saying, “We can always reassess Decision X once we've seen whether or not it is working, but until then, we shouldn't revisit.”

Don't be afraid to call on people. A good meeting should not be dominated by the quickest, loudest, or most aggressive voices. In most meetings, you have to actively manage discussion — just like you do in the classroom — to ensure a give-and-take conversation. Calling on people should not be a “gotcha” (I'm not recommending nabbing folks for daydreaming or shuffling through papers), but rather, a way to indicate that everyone's views are welcomed and essential. If you already call on people as a matter of course (“Veronica, would you be on board with that, or do you have reservations?” “Andre, what are you thinking?”), you can also use cold-calling as a way to rescue a meeting from common pitfalls. One dreaded condition, for example, is the binary stalemate — one forceful person has an opinion, a second forceful person has the opposite opinion, and the two of them are locked in battle. As soon as it becomes clear that a third or fourth voice is needed, call on someone by name in the room and ask: “What might we be missing in the conversation so far?”

Don't be afraid to assign work. Task forces will inevitably involve, well, tasks. And though it is the rare academic who welcomes an addition to their workload, the most effective meetings are often those in which everyone becomes responsible for doing a “next thing.” Sometimes it makes sense for all participants to do the same next thing (e.g., everyone reads a document and simultaneously prepares revisions); sometimes it makes sense to assign people to do different things sequentially (e.g., Person A is responsible for writing a first draft; then Person B will examine and do the next draft). Just like in your classroom, if you get spontaneous volunteers, great! — but don't wait for them, or rely on those giving souls. Practice saying, “Carlos, would you be willing to X? Bob, would you be willing to Y?” As long as what you are asking is not horrendously time-consuming, and as long as you are genuinely understanding upon hearing the occasional “no, please god, not this week!” — then matching humans to tasks (nicely, equitably) is well within the purview of a meeting leader.

Give plenty of praise. If you are going to be a taskmaster — and in the end, you need an element of that to lead a meeting effectively — please don't be a thankless one. A good meeting is a group effort, so be sincerely grateful and gracious. Take time throughout the meeting to tell people, “I like that idea” or “That makes sense.” Reinforce, in particular, behaviors that you would like to see repeated: “That's a really concrete and realizable suggestion,” “It really helps to hear you break it down into actionable steps,” “Thanks for helping us find that initial way in.”

More than anything, people want meetings to matter, and they want recognition that their input matters, as well. Keeping meetings moving is about celebrating the parts that add up to a positive whole, and finding ways to stage and to scaffold progress and change.

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