

Article - North Country Business

Meeting Mania and Effective Listening

By Jim Stewart

Jim Stewart is a regular contributor to North Country Business on topical business issues. Jim has now turned his attention to a series of articles on organizational effectiveness.

In the most recent articles I have discussed the fact that how company owners or managers execute the fundamental principles of management, and how the extent to which decisions are made by consensus, can have a significant affect on organizational effectiveness.

Let's turn our attention now to two fundamental dynamics that occur in all businesses, and how these dynamics are handled can have a very significant impact on anticipated outcomes.

Too many meetings and too little accomplished!! Sound familiar? All too often this is the case. Start making your meetings more productive by initiating the following '*effective meeting guidelines*',

- Determine the purpose of the meeting
- Carefully select participants
- Elect a meeting 'leader/chairperson' who will manage guideline adherence
- Distribute a detailed agenda in advance
- Start on time (i.e. reward those that are on time, by starting on time!)
- Review the agenda & add items as appropriate
- Get to the first point quickly
- Keep the meeting on track & on time
- Control interruptions
- Be specific on action items
- Have someone else take notes - role of recorder
- End the meeting summarizing conclusions and next action steps
- Check meeting effectiveness. Was the purpose met?
- End on time
- Write and distribute minutes

We have all been blessed with two ears and only one tongue for a specific reason - to do twice as much listening as talking. If we can condition ourselves to listen 'effectively' rather than 'selectively' and to do more of it, internal and external communications will improve immensely as will the associated outcomes. You may want to try following the "*Ten Commandments For Effective Listening*".

1. Stop talking. You can't listen if you are talking.
2. Put the speaker at ease. Help him/her feel free to talk - i.e. create a supportive environment.
3. Show the person that you want to listen. Look and act interested - provide your undivided attention. Listen to understand (not to debate or oppose).

4. Remove distractions. Don't doodle or shuffle papers. Don't take phone calls. Perhaps the door should be shut.
5. Empathize with the person. Try to put yourself in the other person's position so you can more readily see their point of view.
6. Be patient. Allow sufficient time & don't interrupt.
7. Hold your temper. An angry person gets the wrong meaning from words.
8. Go easy on argument and criticism. Too much of this puts the other person on the defensive.
9. Ask questions or use restatement. This encourages a person and shows that you are listening. It also helps to develop points further.
10. Stop talking. This is the first and last, because all other commandments depend on it. An ounce of listening is worth a pound of criticism!!

The bottom line...in effective organizations people feel they are on a winning team and they believe they're doing something important. They are proud of the organization they work for and they feel they're making a contribution to something that's important to them. Conducting effective meetings and instituting effective listening skills can help to make these desired outcomes become more of a reality.

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