



Pippa's Advice on Getting the Best from Meetings

What makes a good meeting, apart from fresh croissants, coffee and fruit (breakfast) or platters of sarnies from Pret or M&S (lunch) of course? I only ask because the culture of meetings can vary widely from one company to the next. Some adopt a 'less is more attitude,' and hold them sparingly, whereas others view them as the only way to decide anything and will gather people in a boardroom at the drop of a hat.

This is the joy of being freelance you see, it allows you an insight into different working practices. This in turn affords you some level of understanding into what works for the employees and what doesn't. For instance, I worked at one company where if there wasn't a tonne of meetings in the diary for everybody every day it was a rarity. Meetings were held about how many meetings to hold, about why there were so many meetings and where to meet. In fact there were so many meetings held, most of which were completely unnecessary and certainly didn't require me to be there, that it was hard to get anything actually done. So much of my job requires time at my desk in order to plough through admin and field off emails, that eventually it became quite intolerable having to be present at so many meetings. It was a waste of my time. They didn't seem at all relevant to me and I regularly found myself having to stay behind extremely late in order to finish what I should have been concentrating on during the day. I left after six months. I had three meetings with my boss to discuss my departure....

Other companies get the balance just right in terms of making sure communication is flowing between different departments, that agendas are clear to all and ensuring information is fed back to the relevant people after.

So I thought today's piece should contain a few tips on how to get the best out of the business of meetings.

Delegation

Have you ever attended a work meeting where lots of stuff is decided only nothing seems to ever get actioned or come to fruition after? Personally I have experienced this plenty of times but have come to realise that assuming someone else will take care of things is a very human trait, particularly these days when everyone is so up against it. So, just as it's important to decide who the designated driver is before getting squiffy, or who is in charge of the passports when travelling in a big group, it's essential to appoint someone as being in charge of following everything through after a meeting has finished.

This is a side bar but hopefully once you'll find interesting. Steve Jobs famously insisted that every item on a meeting agenda have a designated person responsible for that task and any follow-up work that happened. He called that person the DRI—the Directly Responsible Individual. He knew the public accountability would ensure that a project or task would actually get done, and he wanted to set clear, organized instructions for his team to follow.

It goes without saying he was expert at running a company well and I can totally see why this worked. Once you've been allotted the person responsible you have to do it or take the blame. Of course it sounds like such a simple/obvious idea in some ways and yet the majority of managers and leaders completely fail to do this. I guess they're assuming we're all desperately keen to take on extra responsibility I suppose and yet if something is never stated as your responsibility why would you take it on? This doesn't make us lazy but if you're busy in the first place it just doesn't follow that you're going to add to your load by nominating yourself to do things on behalf of everyone else. This accounts for why we've all left meetings feeling really good about what we've discussed only to later wonder why so little happened as a result. Where did the momentum go?

If nothing actually happens as a direct of decisions made in a meeting then of course this renders said meeting pointless and may mean a rematch is required. So my first tip can affectionately be known as 'what Jobs said' or 'delegate someone to make sure what is decided actually happens.'

Do this in front of everyone and no one will be in any doubt as to who is then responsible.

Meeting Notes

After a meeting everyone splinters off and attention is instantly diverted. Apart from anything else (depending on popularity) you may have had 89 missed whatsapps, three Instagram notifications and a friend request from someone you haven't seen for seventeen years on Facebook. Plus your inbox will have swollen (sounds painful) and your presence will be required somewhere else. So perhaps it's no surprise that the good intentions you've left the meeting with can quickly be forgotten or overridden by something else. This is why it is imperative that someone has also been given the task of taking notes which can then be distributed to everybody involved plus anyone who was unable to attend.

It being 2017 formal minutes are not necessary. A long dull transcript which has even recorded that Brian from accounts left to go to the toilet at 11.07 or that Sandra from HR had half a bagel and a biscuit is pointless. What's required is a concise summary of what was agreed with a very clear set of intentions. Similarly to my first tip this will also help maximise post meeting productivity.

Timings

Be sensible. Have a sense of how busy everyone is before calling a meeting. Ask yourself 'is this vital and will it achieve' because you are asking people to allot a chunk of their valuable time to it. Calling a meeting about using less company envelopes will just irritate. Make sure meetings are efficient and that people don't end up veering off the agenda. This is a recipe for over running and for blurring the point. Mornings are often the best time if you want the best heads on things too. By late afternoon some will be suffering from a slump and have lost focus, so mornings can often yield good results in terms of people's attention.

Booking a space

This can be a minefield – trust me. As a PA it will often fall to you to book meeting rooms and all I can say is get people onside ASAP so that you can ask them to try wherever possible to give you as much notice as possible as rooms get booked up so far in advance. A meeting can be a debacle if the room isn't appropriate. It's always worth asking things such as will PowerPoint and therefore sound be required? How many people will be attending? Are refreshments required? And, is the meeting very confidential? The answers to these may well affect what room you book.

So I hope that's given you some food for thought. Meetings are necessary and an important part of corporate life so let's make them as productive as possible.

Right, I'm off now, got meetings to attend. There's the one with the man about the dog, then there's one after work with Paul from Tinder and after that I've got a very important one booked in with my sofa and back to back episodes of Catastrophe.

See you soon fellow worker bees!!

Love Pippa.