



Meeting expectations

Meetings are like cups of coffee. When they're good, they are fantastic. But when they're bad, they leave a bitter taste.

A good meeting can be far more efficient than an email, a lot more direct than a phone call, and loads more informative than a PowerPoint presentation. Why, then, do we all have to attend so many bad meetings?

We attend meetings with the express purpose of scheduling further meetings or to discuss the need to reduce the number of meetings that are scheduled. No matter what their purpose, most bad meetings follow a pattern.

NOT TO YOUR TASTE?

Bad meetings – much like old diesel engines – are notoriously slow starters. You know the drill. Attendees slowly trickle in mumbling apologies for absent colleagues while the office busybody makes everyone tea and coffee. Milk no sugar. Sugar no milk. To make matters worse, there aren't enough chairs and someone's written on the white board with permanent marker.

Finally, the meeting proper starts 20 minutes behind schedule. There's a PowerPoint presentation or at least an attempt at one. You can decide which is worse: listening to Brian from Accounts read his last-minute slides aloud in a sleep-deprived monotone or cringing with

embarrassment as Cindy from Marketing digs around for the projector cable that "Should never leave this boardroom!"

Then there are the questions. "I know this is a bit off topic, but ..." And the long answers that end up posing yet more questions. Just when you think you're never going to get out alive, it's lunchtime and the meeting ends abruptly. "See you all next week," mumbles the chairman. "Same time, same place."

THE PERFECT CUPPA

It doesn't have to be like this, you know. First things first: don't have a meeting if there's nothing to discuss. You wouldn't go to your doctor if you weren't sick, so why schedule a meeting if everything's hunky dory?

Some meetings do have to happen every week. But if you keep accurate minutes and prepare concise agendas, they can be over and done with swiftly. Depending on the agenda, try setting a time limit at the beginning of the meeting and see if you can beat it. Sometimes something will come up, which means the meeting takes longer than expected, but on the whole you'll save oodles of time this way.

Another thing that works really well is to conduct meetings standing up. Obviously this is a bit weird if you're pitching an idea to

a prospective client, but it's great for internal meetings. Not only will you not have to bother with dragging extra chairs from the cubicle at the end of the passage, but you'll find that people speak more eloquently and think more clearly with all that extra oxygen going to their brains.

Don't use a PowerPoint presentation unless you need to. Many businesspeople seem to think that a presentation is no good if there aren't any slides, but often the opposite is true. People usually speak much more engagingly if they're not clinging to graphs and diagrams for support.

Finally, instead of making tea and coffee at the beginning of the meeting, do it at the end. If dangling a carrot works for dog training and child rearing, there's nothing to say it won't work in the boardroom. Heck, you can even throw in some biscuits if the budget allows.

SHORT AND SWEET

Implement some or all of these changes and you'll soon find yourself looking forward to meetings. Just one word of warning: no matter how much more productive they seem to be making your office, resist the urge to increase the number of meetings you hold. As with many things in life, when it comes to meetings, less is very definitely more. @

Share your tip for productive meetings and stand to win a prize. Send your letter to magazine@liberty.co.za by 31 July 2013.