Positive Leadership in Project Management [1]

The Art of "Meeting Leadership" [2]

By Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow

Meetings are, generally, a daily occurrence for the practicing project manager and it seems that, with all of the experience people have in facilitating a meeting, many meetings end up being a costly waste of time. I have spoken with project managers from a variety of organizations, industries and levels of management and when the subject of meeting effectiveness comes up, the discussion includes the question "Do you frequently attend meetings that do not actually result in a useful outcome?" Or, "Have you ever attended a meeting and couldn't understand why you where there? The truly amazing thing about these questions is significant number of people who answer yes! In every classroom, or seminar I am facilitating, whether there are 10 people or two hundred, the response is always the same: A large percentage of meetings are unproductive and unnecessary.

It seems that the business world, in general, is spending enormous amounts of time, energy, and money having people attend meetings that produce no results. If someone in an organization were to actually calculate the amount of money spent on these unneeded or poorly run meetings, the amount would be shocking.

Here is simple method to calculate the cost of a meeting in an organization:

1. Meeting duration – in hours   _____
2. Number of people attending the meeting   _____
3. (Number of people) x (meeting hours) = total person hours   _____
4. Estimated hourly cost per person attending (Fully Loaded Rate)   _____
5. (Fully loaded rate) x (Total Person Hours)   _____

This simple calculation (it can be used for in person and virtual meetings) will give you an idea of the cost an organization will incur for just one meeting. Other factors may include travel time, food and beverages, meeting room rental, and technology costs (virtual meeting platforms). Another item to consider is the meeting ROI. How many people at the meeting were determined to be critical to achieve the purpose of the meeting? Is there an opportunity cost for those who attended and were not really needed

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[1]This article is one in a series on Positive Leadership in Project Management by Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow, popular speaker and author of books on leadership in project management published by Wiley and IIL in the United States. Frank is widely known as the originator of the International Project Management Day, the annual celebrations and educational events conducted each November by PMI members, chapters and organizations around the world. Learn more in his profile at the end of this article.

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at the meeting? Was the meeting time appropriate or too long? Did it start late? What was actually accomplished?

Another item to be concerned about is that many people are aware that the meetings they attend are unproductive, unnecessary, or attended by the wrong people and they still keep attending! This may be associated with organization politics and the "legitimate or formal power of individuals who schedule meetings.

An actual quote from a manager: *"We will continue to have meetings until we determine why nothing is getting done around here!"*

Considering the challenges of planning and leading effective meetings, it's important for project managers to develop and practice a set of Effective Meeting Leadership Skills. I know of several project managers who run very successful and productive meetings and their reputations as project managers are extremely positive across their respective organizations. People who attend their meetings appreciate the coordination, the minimal non-productive time, the attention to time constraints, and the preparedness of the project manager. These **Meeting Leaders** are demonstrating one of the many positive aspects of professional project management. Make no mistake about it, project management is far more than the ability to conduct a good meeting, but meeting management is certainly an important skill to keep sharp, especially in the current business environment in which virtual meeting management skills are critical.

There are numerous sources of information about how to conduct a successful meeting. Most of them seem to include basically the same list of do's and don'ts. Based on my experience in the classroom and in the work environment, most people don't need to attend a two day course in meeting management; they do know what it takes to conduct a good meeting, but sometimes a few helpful hints can make the difference between a meeting that adds value and one that contributes to the team's desire for some extra snooze time.

To conduct a truly effective meeting and to be perceived as a *Meeting Leader.* instead of a *"meeting impeder"* consider your meeting as a project. That's what it is, a project with a start and end time, resources, constraints, purpose, and a budget. Think like you are spending your own money and you want to get the most out of it by capitalizing on the time you have with your team or meeting attendees. Since you are the project manager of the meeting, you are positioned as the leader, and the attendees, as stakeholders, are looking for you to set the meeting tone, keep them focused and control non-essential discussions and interruptions. Take charge and get your meeting off to a good start. Start on time, and make sure you end it as planned also. People really appreciate when you manage time well.

The following are tips from people who have earned the title "Meeting Leader" and the respect of their co-workers and managers:

1. Conduct a "To meet or not to meet" exercise. Is a meeting really necessary? Can information be distributed another way? Consider alternatives.

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2. Always think "Meeting Purpose" first. Why are you having the meeting? What is the desired outcome?

3. Food is a great way to get things started. Once the meeting starts, the food is removed. People who arrive late will not have an opportunity to partake in the refreshments. This will encourage them to arrive on time and it also sets the stage for a more focused meeting by removing the distraction (this of course will depend on the type and duration of the meeting but food management keeps things under control). In the virtual environment, depending on time of day, allow some time before the meeting for participants to arrange for their personal refreshment and food consumption. Its best to conduct meetings without the distraction of viewing people on computer screens eating and hearing the accompanying sounds (people forget to mute).

4. Agendas should be prepared and distributed well in advance of the meeting. Attendees should be able to review the topics beforehand and come to the meeting prepared. An easy way to help plan for a meeting is the use of the meeting "PAL" – Purpose, Agenda, Limitation (meeting time duration).

5. The meeting purpose is specifically stated and only those who really need to be there are invited. (Duly appointed representatives with decision making capability are invited when a key player cannot attend).

6. Check the meeting technology to ensure everything is working and all participants have the correct meeting access information. Ensure there is meeting attendance security.

7. Start the meeting on time and set meeting expectations. Its not a good idea to read meeting rules like they were part of martial law, but some reminders about meeting etiquette are always appropriate early in the meeting. Especially during virtual meetings.

8. Practice listening as much as possible. Do not interrupt or cut people short. This is a rule everyone should follow. Occasionally you will have to deal with a person who is disruptive, very vocal, or in some way reducing the value of the meeting. Quick action on the part of the meeting leader is required to prevent, frustration, loss of respect for the leader, and damage to relationships that you have established. You want people to participate, gain from the experience, and feel as if the time was well spent. You also want them to be willing to attend your next scheduled meeting, so demonstrate control.

9. Publish meeting minutes very soon after a meeting.

10. Maintain your motivation to improve. Obtain meeting feedback and determine where improvement is needed. Do not let a few "great meetings" result is complacency. Conduct a meeting leader self- evaluation.

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I think the key is not to just act like you are in charge, but to be in-charge, be the leader. Make your team feel it. Immerse yourself in the role of leader. Time is limited, so make the most of it and respect the time constraints and other priorities of your meeting attendees. You want them to say as they are leaving "Great Meeting. Thank you, when is the next one, I wish all of our meetings were this well run."

Meeting Leadership is just one of the many roles of the successful project manager. Set an example, set a standard. Your organization will appreciate it.

About the Author

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   Frank P. Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprizes Inc. and Project Imaginers. Frank is an accomplished leader and contributor in the discipline of project management. He is the author of 12 published books, the past editor of the All PM Newsletter and the author of over 160 project management articles. Frank provides training and consulting internationally and has educated and entertained countless audiences with a special blend of project management knowledge and tasteful humor. He is also an experienced and well-known project management instructor and consultant and a member of the PMI ® Seminars World team of trainers. Mr. Saladis' 35 year career includes 28.5 years with AT&T, 3 years with Cisco Systems, and more than 25 years as a professional trainer, facilitator, mentor and keynote speaker.

Frank is the Originator/Founder of International Project Management Day which launched in 2004 and has been growing in recognition yearly. The goal of International Project Management Day is the worldwide recognition of the many project managers and project teams in every industry including nonprofit organizations and health care who contribute their time, energy, creativity, innovation, and countless hours to deliver products, services, facilities, and provide emergency and disaster recovery services in every city and community around the world.

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Frank was PMI's 2006 Person of the Year. Frank is a Project Management Professional, a graduate from the PMI Leadership Institute Master's class, and has contributed significantly to the organization's growth and knowledge base for more than 20 years. His leadership activity within PMI included the position of President of the New York City PMI chapter from 1991-2001, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and Chair of the Education and Training Specific Interest Group. He received the high honor of the "PMI Fellow Award" in October 2013 and received the very prestigious "PMI Distinguished Contribution Award" in October 2015.

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