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7 Rules for Leading Super Productive Meetings

Searching for just the right New Year's resolution? Resolve to make better use of your time.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

Searching for just the right New Year's resolution? Lose weight, save more for retirement, live life more fully... The usual suspects may well be on your list. Or, you could resolve to make better use of your time. Then you can do *all* of those things and still have time left for you and the goals you're trying to accomplish in the coming year.

Recently I heard of an executive who has mastered this skill of maximizing his time, at least in one area of his life: *meetings*. His newest direct report sent him a request to meet and "talk about some things." He immediately shot her back a note with his "Rules for Meetings."

This is what it said:

"Of course, I would be happy to meet with you. Below are my Rules for Meetings. After you've had a chance to read them, please let me know if/when you'd like to meet.

1. All meetings must be 30 minutes or less.
2. Please send the agenda to me before we meet.
3. Determine the objective for the meeting.
4. Identify the decision you need me to make.
5. Bring your recommendation on the decision with supporting evidence."

As you can imagine, this executive kept his calendar clear of many a useless meeting with this approach. (Imagine what he could do with all that saved time!)

You might not be able to get away with that at your place of work, but are there rules you *could* set? Here are a few to consider. Read them all, then choose one or two you'd like to try in the year ahead.

Rule #1. Meetings last only as long as they need to. Determine the amount of a meeting time by how many people will be there and what needs to get achieved. If it's a small group with a short-term objective, 30 minutes might be more than enough--or even 20 minutes, or 10. Let it be brief.

An important caveat to this rule is that some meetings are more beneficial if they are *longer* rather than shorter. Once you have everyone in the room at the same time, focused on a single agenda, take advantage of the opportunity. Make sure you have enough time to be productive and complete, especially for the big important things like strategizing and conceptualizing new ideas.

Rule #2: Always enter a meeting with an agenda. So many meetings start with a vague beginning and wander around from there. You can spearhead a more efficient approach by creating an agenda for the meeting. Even if you're not the one running the meeting, your efforts will keep everyone organized. If you feel doing so may be too presumptuous or intrude on the meeting planner's prerogative, simply make the offer ahead of the meeting ("Would you like me to gather some agenda items?"). You'll be helpful to the meeting planner--and everyone else in the room. You'll all be less likely to deviate from the meeting purpose, which can lead to an incomplete process and--ugh--more meetings.

Rule #3. Spell out the objective of the meeting before it's scheduled. Some people don't give enough time to determining a meeting objective. This step puts you in control and keeps everyone on track. Make sure that all participants are aware of the specific objective to be achieved at the meeting as soon as the meeting is announced, and include it with any additional mentions of the meeting, especially via email, to get everyone on the same page going in.

Rule #4. Know what you personally want and need. Even if you've already made an agenda for the main meeting, you can arm yourself with a personal agenda consisting of items that you want to be sure get covered and the decisions you need to have made. Your private agenda may be no more than a list of bullets scrawled on a sticky note, but it will ensure that no matter how the rest of the meeting goes, it will be effective and efficient for you.

Rule #5. If it's not on the calendar, it doesn't happen. Get in front of future meetings by planning them early--not right before deadlines that leave everyone frazzled and scrambling to get everything done. Instead of waiting for others to schedule stressful meetings during crunch time, be proactive and schedule meetings early enough in advance to maintain a productive process, even if it's not your responsibility to do so.

Rule #6. Be thoughtful about meeting participants. We've all been in a meeting and questioned whether or not we truly needed to be there. Don't let this happen to your participants! Be careful of both what meetings you attend and which people you ask to attend meetings you're organizing. Being thoughtful about who you invite will save both them time, and you.

Always remember that you have more control over meetings than you think. Often we feel like victims--we say that the meetings are too long, not productive, or pull us away from what we need to be doing. If you get in control of your meetings, you can get control of your time. Be the one to say: "Can we keep this short?" or "I'm not sure we need so many people involved." Take a leadership role so that the schedule manifests itself in a way that is concise and clear, which will ultimately help everyone else and make your meetings more productive.

This one step can be a major time saver for your year ahead and the start of a new commitment to making the most of your time.

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