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iancarlo Z. spends half his day in gatherings and meeting with clients. He works as a

banking implementations consultant with a several Mexican businesses. “It’s a very big waste of money,” he says. “There are a lot of things that could be resolved without having to be stuck in meetings.” He’s probably not the only who feels that way. “We hate meetings because we see them as a distraction and not as a part of our true work,” explains Emily Axelrod, consultant and co-author with her husband, Richard, of the book [Let’s Stop Meeting Like This](#). The Axelrods believe it’s possible to have meetings that don’t put the collaborators in a bad mood. Forget presentations where only one person talks, make some meetings optional and make sure each participant has an active role in the meeting.

What would an ideal meeting be like?

Emily Axelrod (EA): For me, it would be a meeting in which each person knows the meeting’s purpose and has received the information they need to participate actively. It starts with a welcome exercise so that everyone connects with each other and the task. Then, each person talks about the status of the meeting’s central theme. There is an exchange of observations and expectations, and each member presents solutions. There is energy in the meeting room because everyone is interested in what they are talking about. Then, a decision is agreed upon and actions to be carried out are defined. At the end, everyone is clear on who will do what, when and how.

Richard Axelrod (RA): I would just add that in the ideal meeting, everyone takes responsibility for the success of the meeting, not just the person running the meeting. Everyone contributes useful ideas and promises to work in accordance with what has been agreed upon.

What can a leader do to make a meeting matter to the participants?

RA: Everything starts with planning. First, being in charge of the meeting, you should ask yourself what the purpose of the meeting is and if it makes sense to have everyone involved. Second, you have to define a task in which everyone participates. It could be as simple as making a specific decision together. It’s important to involve all the participants in designing the meeting. If they believe in the meeting, they will feel responsible for it, and its success will matter to them. Many bosses are mistaken in their intent. They ask for people to propose topics, but in the end, nobody does it. The first step is for the boss to be sincere and get to the point.

If you aren’t in charge of the meeting, what can you do to make it better?

EA: You need to ask yourself two things. First: How can I contribute to this meeting? And second: What do I need to do, on a personal level, so that this meeting helps me to do better in my work? If you go into a meeting with this mentality, you are going to get information that will truly serve you.

In the book Stop Meeting Like This, you recommend ‘The meeting canoe’ method. What does it consist of and how does it work in practice?

The “canoe” represents another way of tackling a meeting. Often meetings only focus on the content. Rarely do they focus on the experience of the people in the meetings. The “canoe” is a model of how to present the content. Start with a welcome and an opportunity to connect the people to the task. Then, in an open atmosphere in which everyone participates, the members diagnose the actual state of the topic being discussed and compare some solutions to resolve the situation. Then the time has come to make a decision and to define what each person will do. Finally, everyone sums up the meeting and evaluates the results.

You mention the importance of finishing a meeting well. Why does it have to be done in a structured manner instead of just letting it end?

RA: It’s incredible how many times people leave a meeting with out having understood what they have to do next. It’s very common to leave without having a clear idea of what follows or remembering what each person is supposed to get done. That’s why it’s necessary to review the decisions that were made and the immediate actions each person is supposed to take. You don’t have to have a detailed plan; a clear vision of where you are headed is enough. There are a lot of technologies today that help to bring the group’s notes together and make it a lot easier. The other part of the meeting conclusion is reflecting on the meeting. It’s very important to have a feedback mechanism to understand what worked and what didn’t work. In our experience with CEOs of global businesses, they are often surprised when they see that other people didn’t perceive the meeting as positively as they did. Reflection is also crucial for knowing if the meeting was useful.

Rowing Together

The Axelrods suggest five steps for helping the meeting arrive well at port via the “Meeting Canoe” method.

Welcome

Create an atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable and welcome.

Connection

Assist in building relationships between the meeting attendees so they can work together during and after the meeting.

Discovery

Make a diagnosis of the topics being discussed to find out how things are in the team.

Collaboration

Have the meeting participants contribute ideas that can help to build a better future.

Decision

After the meeting, it should be clear what actions are to be taken.

Reflection

Once there is consensus and the execution of the decisions made is defined, it’s worthwhile to reflect on what the meeting provided.

There is no maximum time limit for a meeting, but do be clear about how long it will last and respect that agreement. **20 minutes** is the maximum amount of time for a slide presentation. 180 |