

Four Rules for Holding More Effective Meetings and Cultivating Better Outcomes

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Most construction company team meetings waste time. Years ago, in business-coaching a large site-improvement contractor, I was asked to attend their weekly Monday field meeting. The meeting, attended by all the foremen and field superintendents on staff, was led by the general superintendent and lasted over 90 minutes. I watched as he told each of the company's 12 supervisors what to do on their respective jobs that week, what equipment they were getting, which crew members were assigned to each job, and what materials to order.

During the meeting, no project supervisors were asked to report on the progress of their current jobs, next week's activities or upcoming project goals, and no one was asked to address any problems, questions or challenges. The meeting ran too long, leaving no time to discuss results, training, safety, or provide recognition, encouragement, or company updates. In my eyes, this meeting was a total waste of time and accomplished nothing to improve results, maximize profits, or reach schedule or field production goals. Many of the meeting's attendees had the same view, expressing they often did not find these meetings to be helpful or motivational.

Do Not Waste Valuable Time

It's difficult for project managers, superintendents and foremen to accept responsibility and achieve results when they are expected to spend their time sitting around listening to a



senior manager or business owner tell everyone what to do and how to do it. When people are told what to do – rather than being allowed to make their own decisions – they are not accountable for the outcome.

When the boss is in charge, the boss is responsible for results. To make matters worse, most of these meeting discussions only affect one person or one job, while everyone else is forced to listen as the clock ticks onward. Typical of many meetings, there's always one person who asks a question, which results in a 20-minute discussion tied to that topic alone, often suspending productivity for the rest of the attendees. In many cases, these conversations can and should wait to be addressed one on one.

Focus on the Effective

The purpose of holding team meetings is to achieve goals, improve on deficiencies or reach results, but there is almost never enough time to hit these topics with any heft. When teams gather to talk about problems, logistics, people, equipment, tools, and materials, the topic of achieving results is often, at best, an afterthought. To achieve company goals, meetings must be effective, and teams must focus on what is regularly required to meet those goals.

The first priority of an effective team meeting is to review production and performance to date, assess how much work is left to complete and address how teams will accomplish the remaining work and tasks required to finish safely, on-time, and on-budget. Most field problems, contract disputes, crew scheduling, equipment mobilizations, and contract documentation issues should be solved in small meetings, or even in simple conversations between the project manager, superintendent, and foreman. Consider the wasted time involved in holding this conversation in a meeting setting, and don't involve the entire staff on what could have been a small group chat.

An effective team meeting is to be considered important and mandatory, and is not rescheduled for weak reasons. Best-in-class contractors hold recurring weekly and monthly meetings, which result in higher margins and better results. Low-performing contractors tend to make excuses for canceling or moving meetings, or back out of meetings for other reasons that somehow take priority over helping supervisors focus on goals and accountability.

Meetings can actually save time and money if the purpose and top priority is for everyone to focus on accomplishing results. When a meeting is effective, both managers and employees leave with duties and goals their aligned, leaving teams to reap the benefits of clear expectations and accountability, and eliminating the urge to micromanage.

Drive Productive Conversations

The typical meeting opener starts with a problem or complaint: "OK, we're finishing jobs late and not hitting our numbers. So, we've got to fix the problem. Any suggestions?" A better meeting opener may still address the problem, but may also communicate goals and build morale, such as, "OK, we all know why we're here. We're finishing too many jobs late and as a result, our profit margins are fading. This won't be easy, but we can fix this. Let's dive in, work together and make some improvements."

After you've brought your team up to speed, consider the following guidelines to help shape stronger, more productive outcomes.

1. PRIORITIZE

Remember, the top team meeting priority is to achieve and improve results. Try not to cover tactics, logistics, or have group discussions at this meeting – you will hold separate meetings to schedule crews or equipment or solve specific problems.

2. THINK ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE

Try outside-in thinking:

- » Visualize looking in at your problems from the outside. Assess situations as if you had the opportunity to completely start over. What could be done differently for a better outcome?
- » Invite an outside consultant to comment or offer insight on the situation. What would someone without an agenda or affiliation say about your issues?

Treat all ideas equally:

- » There are no bad ideas. Everyone on the team is equal and has the right to provide input whether they end up being viable ideas or not.
- » Never criticize anyone's suggestions or decisions. Keep the forum open.

Present issues as questions. Instead of “Let’s talk about labor always being over budget,” approach with, “What can we do to improve our schedules and regularly complete our crew labor hours on-budget? Team decisions are final.


3. KEEP A SCHEDULE

The best meetings start and end on time, are quick, interactive, challenging, involve everyone, and don’t cover agenda items that can be handled outside the meeting with the necessary decision-makers.

4. BUILD AN AGENDA

The worst meetings have no agenda; require no punctual start and end times, nor mandatory attendance; offer no informational reports; and spend too much time on specific issues. In a bad meeting, the leader is not prepared, nor in control of the meeting or group discussions – the leader also does all the talking and offers little or no interaction to attendees to avoid any conflict with their given directives.

Maintain Consistency

Effective meetings can increase bottom-line results if you hold them regularly and they’re focused on achieving results. Without consistency in scheduled team meetings, your results will not change. When you don’t take the time required to prepare, meet, address, improve, update, and track progress toward achieving your goals, it’s hard to hold people accountable or expect them to hit any targets. When they are run properly, team meetings build camaraderie, focus and positivity – and they deliver results. 



About the Author

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