



Meetings Are the Pits! Make Them Profitable

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You might think that driving 150-200 mph during a professional car race is dangerous, but, interestingly enough, for a skilled driver, the safest part of a race is when he or she is on the track, "in the groove," and *pushing the limits!* The last thing that a driver wants is to slow down and pull in for a pit stop! Yet, sometimes, the crew chief has to call the race car in for new tires and/or fuel. At those times, it's all about trust and strategy. It is just understood that, although this outstanding crew will temporarily take precious time away from the race, it will pay off with the increased results at the finish line. But, can you imagine the lost time and increased risks if a crew chief called in the race car for just tires and then three laps later just for fuel? Outrageous, unacceptable, and no doubt a very short career for the crew chief!

**You can't *win* a race "in the pits," but you sure can *lose* it!
And, in the same sense, meetings can't directly *earn* you money,
but they sure can *lose* it!**

In the business world, wasted time, ineffective practices, and loss of direction must also be unacceptable.

It is commonly known that business meetings – like pit stops – are the single most costly communication activity that can be chosen by team leaders. Why is it then that we all know some leaders who notoriously call meeting after meeting, with the most common results being frustrated participants, a pervasive sense of lost time, dysfunctional communication, and/or unclear outcomes? Like pit stops for racers, effective meetings need to be highly choreographed for very specific purposes. The rule should clearly be: *Only "bring 'em in" for a solid reason and, for every minute in the pits, there must be direct evidence that our actions now will improve their results in the short and/or long term.*

Show How You Value Your Participants.

Only call meetings when:

- (a) You need input, debate, and/or commentary from the group;**
- (b) You have clearly established, results-oriented objectives; and**
- (c) You are ready to use active facilitation, troubleshooting, and reflective evaluation.**

Factors to Improve Meetings

The greatest single improvement that can be made for almost any meeting is in the planning and checking of your meeting **RPM (Results, Purpose, and Map)**.

Your first RPM check needs to be to move from a "task focus" to a "results focus." With this in mind, ask yourself: What are my desired outcomes for this meeting? How do these results align

with our organizational vision? If they don't directly or indirectly add to the organizational objectives, don't call the meeting.

At the next RPM task, define your purpose, using measurable results or objectives. Again you can better gather the information you need by asking yourself some questions: What observable actions, products, or decisions do I/we want to have at the conclusion of this meeting?

Finally, create a map that will choreograph how your team will maintain their RPM and speed toward their desired results. Let there be no wasted steps or time.

Checking Your RPM

Steps	Actions
Create a RESULTS -driven atmosphere that focuses input toward achieving the tasks at hand.	Ask yourself: What information is to be shared? What decisions or actions need to occur? Or, finish this sentence "At the end of this meeting, we will have made decisions about _____."
Establish a clear PURPOSE that should be in alignment with your organizational vision.	The purpose of this meeting is to <u>(increase X) by (X%) by (X date and time).</u>
Write / draw and disseminate a well-structured, easy-to-follow MAP .	All participants will have the agenda <i>before the meeting</i> . Clarify participants' roles and responsibilities for <i>before, during, and after</i> the meeting. Use active facilitation strategies to establish clear, purposeful procedures, directions, and outcomes for all participants. Clarify accountability issues, content topics, guidelines on sharing, and appropriate topic timeframes.

"RPM: Results, Purpose and Map" and "Checking your RPM" © Kelly Graves, 2007.

Use Active Facilitation Strategies

First and foremost, active facilitation strategies involve creating a team contract for how people will behave before, during, and after the meeting. This pre-planning piece will keep your precious meeting time focused. Remember: you want your team back in the groove. This is to be the best use of the least amount of time away from their regular work. Make sure your meeting "pit crew" is ready to do these things as efficiently and effectively as possible.

1. **Set Ground Rules:** (These are non-negotiable expectations.)

- **Everyone makes essential contributions through participation:** This must be encouraged and may require the leader to pre-teach the skills.

⌚ *To encourage full participation at the meeting, involve all participants at the start by spending a few minutes “checking in.” Done right, this invaluable structured time will create an atmosphere of trust amongst participants and prime the verbal pump. It values participants as individuals, establishes the meeting facilitator as fair but “in control,” and it makes for a clean demarcation of how and when the established meeting times will be handled. Always guide the checking-in time to start and stop per your schedule. Build these features into your meeting map/agenda:*

- ⌚ *5-minute informal conversation period prior to the meeting’s official start time.*
- ⌚ *During the meeting, use paired interviews on predetermined topics to generate ideas and build relationships.*
- ⌚ *Include roundtable sharing of business concerns and good news as appropriate during the meeting, to share knowledge, gain consensus, and build motivation.*

- **Everyone will work together to avoid injuries:** Clarify how to challenge ideas *instead of individuals*. An experienced facilitator or leader is needed to choreograph this. Earn trust through reliability and respect.
- **Everyone will start and stop on time.**
- **Everyone will maintain order and follow directions:** Enforce one conversation at a time.
- **Everyone will use reflection and growth to improve individual and group practice:** Evaluate the meeting through timely feedback. Model listening and learning to improve your processes, as well as your products. Build in time to summarize or debrief after breakout sessions and periodically mid-meeting, as appropriate.

2. **Appoint Roles:** (Make it clear that all share meeting ownership.)

- **Facilitator:** *Objectively* leads meeting.
- **Scribe:** Writes down group’s actions / decisions on FLIP CHART.
 - *Flip Charting: Flip charts are invaluable for:*
 - ⌚ *Keeping meeting focused.*
 - ⌚ *Freeing participants from note taking.*
 - ⌚ *Catching up latecomers.*
 - ⌚ *Depersonalizing ideas.*
 - ⌚ *Retaining the process visually and emotionally.*
 - *Flip Charting Tips:*
 - ⌚ *Write the exact words that people say, if possible.*
 - ⌚ *Share scribe role amongst multiple members.*
 - ⌚ *Keep all information visible (hang charts).*
 - ⌚ *Seek permission to paraphrase ideas.*
- **Process observer:** This person comments when people interrupt or step outside the structures and guidelines for this meeting. This person provides a verbal and objective post-event evaluation to the group on “how we achieved our goals.” Often the “process”

of how we came to make a decision is more important than the actual decision, if we learn a valuable and successful process lesson that can be duplicated.

- **Timekeeper:** Monitors time. Focuses group.

3. Assign Pre-Meeting Tasks: (This is like homework, if you will, to be completed by participants in advance of the meeting. Every successful race car team owner and corporate CEO understands that success is largely determined before the race or first building block is laid down, due to insightful planning, effective practice, and teamwork (trust). How many times do you think a pit crew practices something as simple as changing tires? If you assign pre-meeting tasks, abide by these rules.

- Explain why it is important. Be specific.
- Give adequate lead time.
- Provide clear, detailed instructions for pre-meeting tasks (such as, “Bring results of XYZ, and be ready to report on how they compare with ABC data,” or “Analyze the attached criteria for fit with our organizational vision,” etc. Passive instructions, such as “Bring XYZ” or “Read the attached,” do not yield active results).
- Emphasize need to complete all pre-meeting tasks in advance, and elicit comprehension of and commitment to this expectation.
- Assign task *only* if it is relevant and you really intend to use the knowledge or material at the meeting.
- Have a clear plan built into your agenda for all to see, which shows how completing these assignments will positively impact meeting success at a specific time during the meeting. In other words, you will need to do this task because it is a prerequisite to this success in this activity on our agenda.

4. Limit Presentations / Have Clear Presentation Guidelines: Presentations can be time wasters if they are not planned and facilitated well. Follow these ground rules for quality and critical thinking.

- Separate presentation from discussion.
- Allow clarification questions only during presentation.
- Give participants reflection questions to create a learning organization.
 - ⌚ What points did you agree/disagree with?
 - ⌚ How could the proposal be improved?
 - ⌚ What new questions does it raise?

5. Guidelines for Planning Breakout Sessions: (The larger the group, the harder it is to get *full* participation. Therefore, the best way to maximize and leverage your human capital is to break the larger group into smaller units. The ideal limits for a well-functioning group are 5-8 participants, depending on facilitator ability, member history, and objectives of the meeting. A rule of thumb: anything over 9 participants and results will tend to suffer. Have these smaller units discuss a topic or tackle a challenge within a specific timeframe and then report back to the main group. In essence, breakout sessions work for groups of 10 or more participants and are effective at reducing cycle time and maximizing results.)

- Small teams on same task
- Small teams on varied tasks
- Process for action on team information
- Process for making decisions.

Quantity Is *NOT* Quality When It Comes to Meetings.

Understanding and implementing best practices for meetings and business communication are the actions of conscientious, efficient, and highly-effective leaders. When it comes to meetings (like racing pit stops), *quantity is NOT quality*. If all you need to do is share information, then make a phone call, wave a flag, or send an email, but stop calling so many meetings! Let your results-driven pros stay on the track and “in the groove.” Your team and your business deserve the most efficient and effective race team you can assemble.

Let your results-driven team cross your finish line in record time!