Managing to avoid that old meeting morass

For those of you who missed it, two weeks ago was Boss' Day. Judging by the offices I have seen around our industry lately, this new holiday... which I suspect was created by the greeting card industry, is having a hard time gathering momentum.

Rather, I turn to Scott Adams, the cartoonist and creator of Dilbert, to get a real reading of employee satisfaction. The more employees putting up the cartoon strip in their cubicles immediately after publication, the more likely it is that morale may be sagging.

Adams was an employee at Crocker Bank and later Pacific Bell. He conceived Dilbert to create interest in presentations to management meetings. Adams has said that most of the material for his comic strip comes from real life, examples people send him daily by e-mail. It therefore is no surprise that so many Dilbert strips take place in management meetings.

Management meetings are of increasing interest to many industry observers. Doubtless, reengineering — downsizing and right-sizing — has brought more attention to actual meetings.

Companies have done a thorough job in reducing employees, but they have not effectively reduced the amount of work they expect from the fewer, remaining employees.

With fewer people to do the same amount of work, less time is available for meetings. And this comes at a time when "flatter" organizations mean more people than ever must attend these meetings.

Traditionally, management meetings are common at this time of year. It is the last convenient time to convene everyone before the holiday season. The following are some ways possibly to maximize their benefit.

An agenda is crucial, and it should be decided upon and distributed in advance. Too often meetings are called without any apparent purpose.

Agenda topics should be classified as to the amount of time that they will be given. Barring some significant revelation or unexpected development, these time allocations should be adhered to.

Otherwise, precious time may be consumed by minor issues, cutting short discussion of important issues and demoralizing staff members who prepared for other topics and find that their time has vanished.

Meetings should start promptly. I have heard of companies that lock the conference room doors to keep latecomers from disrupting meetings. Latecomers can negatively affect a meeting, as they often need to be brought up to speed on matters that have been already discussed.

Senior executives should set the example by being on time and avoiding interruptions of the meeting. Mindful of the intrusion telephones can create, some companies are now building conference rooms without telephones. Additionally, portable cell phones and beepers should be turned off.

Proper meeting planning dictates that attendance be kept strictly to a minimum if discussion is expected. (If the meeting is a sales roll-out or a like event, that is a different issue.)

Although many companies seem fixated on saving costs, they ignore the personnel expense squandered in a meeting with excess attendees.

A properly planned meeting accommodates the agenda and the people. Meetings should not be marathons and realistic breaks should be scheduled.

The law of diminishing returns quickly consumes the attention spans of participants. Meals should be planned and ordered in advance. We've all attended meetings where lunch plans were the most thoroughly discussed agenda topic.

Finally, the tone of the meeting must reflect a realistic understanding of the organization's culture.

If the company traditionally welcomes discussions of controversial issues, then the agenda can reflect such. If, however, the corporate culture is a closed one, then employees may fear retribution for remarks and debate and discussion should be eliminated.

In companies with diverse cultures, different customs should be explained to the initiated. For example, some non-American companies convene a meeting strictly to declare results — not to discuss alternatives — even though this may not be the clearly stated plan.

Other companies consider a sales meeting an extensive recap of accounts by each individual salesperson attending. Help your employees to understand what is happening — and to know when to say nothing.

It is useful to have a single note-taker to record the meeting, an organized individual who will understand the key points. A full meeting transcript is overkill and interferes with meeting follow-up. Minutes heavily edited to remove controversial items only minimize the meeting.

Finally, an action plan and key follow-up items provide valuable tools to close the meeting and ensure positive action.

Of course, you must ensure that assigned activities are actually completed. The management adage that you get what you expect — not what you inspect — applies here.

Management meetings need not be a morass. Keeping focused on the management, rather than the meeting, will take you a long way.

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