Keep 'Em Coming Back! (Part 2 of 2)

In the previous message, we looked at how to prepare for an effective meeting and the responsibilities of all participants.

This month's message will focus on strategies to deal with specific challenging situations.
Often, the biggest concern in running a meeting is what to do if the participants: all speak at once; have sidebar conversations; make inappropriate remarks; or don't participate at all.
If this sounds familiar, then, please read on…

Guidelines
One of the best ways to create a safe atmosphere where everyone can share their ideas and make comments without fear of judgement or ridicule is to set up guidelines.
Guidelines are free, don't take much time and can be used for every meeting you have with your team.

Here's how it works…
The overall idea is that everyone in the meeting is responsible for making the meeting productive. When people stray from the guidelines, it is everyone's obligation to remind others of the agreed-to guidelines that are in place.

How do you get started?
The meeting leader asks for suggestions on how everyone should interact in order to have a productive meeting.

They might start by showing people this article and say,
- "I'd like to set up some guidelines for this and future meetings.
- What would make this meeting the best it can be?
- How can we speak to each other to make sure our ideas are heard?"

Then ideas are gathered from everyone and written on a flipchart for all to see.
The meeting leader should add their ideas as well. And remember to give the group time to contribute ideas. This is a fairly new concept that may take time for people to be comfortable with.

The most common guidelines are:
- No interrupting
- Honesty
- Participation
- No yelling
- Stay on focus

Once everyone has had an opportunity to contribute to the list, the meeting leader takes the time to look at each person and ask if the guidelines are acceptable.

If for some reason, a person objects to one of the guidelines, a discussion should take place to explain why that guideline should or shouldn't be there. Then everyone can discuss what guideline, if any, should be there instead.
After getting agreement from everyone, the guidelines can officially be established for the team. This, however, does not stop the group from adding or revising the guidelines in the future.

And finally, the meeting leader should say, "It is <u>not only</u> my responsibility to remind people of the guidelines when we get off track – it is <u>everyone's</u> responsibility."

Guidelines should help with the majority of challenges (interruptions, disagreements, sidebar conversations, etc). There are, however, other situations that occur that may require more than guidelines.

Playing Monopoly
At times, when people are involved in a particular issue, they sometimes don't see that they are dominating the conversation. Ensuring that everyone gets heard can be a challenge in this situation.
It is important to acknowledge the contribution of the person talking and then divert to someone else for their comments. Phrases such as:
- "Thanks John-Earl, and now I think we should hear from Billy-Jo-Bob on this."
- "I see how that affects you, Carol-Sue, lets get some comments from the reviewers on this."

Ensure that there are no interruptions while Billy-Jo-Bob or the reviewers have their say.

Participation
At times, it may feel like there are only one or two people contributing ideas or comments. So, how do you get others involved?
One way is to ask open-ended questions:
- "As a reviewer, what impact will this new procedure have on you, Sally-Anne?"
- "Mary-Eunice, how do you see this change affecting your day to day work?"

And as with any open ended question, remember to allow time for the other person to respond.

Staying on course
The meeting starts off well but becomes bogged down on a particular topic and ends when time runs out. The other agenda items are not discussed and the meeting may not be as effective as expected.
A meeting leader must assess the importance of each item on the agenda, and allot time to each topic as required. If one issue begins to dominate, the meeting leader must take control.
Here are some options:
- Write the issue on a flipchart called "Parking Lot" and mention that this will be discussed at the end of the meeting.
- Suggest a further meeting to discuss the issue at a later date.
- The main parties concerned could continue the discussion at the end of the meeting.
- It may be necessary to make a decision on the issue and then move on to the next topic.

Most important is that as the meeting leader; you stay on top of the timing and relevance of the discussion. Also, make sure that any issue has been given adequate attention, so that the people affected by the issue feel that it is being addressed.

Getting to know you…
Instead of always focusing on work procedures or initiatives, why not look at the team meeting as a chance to enhance team relationships.

- **'People' Time** - Have each person take 5 minutes to talk about something that interests them – not necessarily work related. Things like hobbies, favourite travel destination, family, favourite foods, T.V. shows or movies.
  You can schedule 'people' time at the end of meetings or you can have everyone share in one big meeting – the choice is yours.
  Each person should be made aware ahead of time that they will be expected to talk so they can prepare something.

  The end result is that everyone will see that person as a person - not just a worker, reviewer, or team leader.
  This can have a positive impact on future interactions when there are disagreements over work procedures. It is much easier to separate the person from the problem when you can see the person as a person!

- **Brain workout** - Have a quick 5-minute mind teaser puzzle to get the team working together. There are many books available that suggest various mindbenders.

- **MMM…Donuts!** - If the team agrees, they can take turns bringing snacks. Refreshments help create a comfortable environment.

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The goal of running a meeting is to create an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable sharing ideas. And that is a goal that everyone can contribute to.
A resulting bonus from this type of atmosphere is that the meeting will be seen as effective and maybe even fun!

And remember, fun, effective meetings will keep them coming back!

Mike Lund
Conflict Resolution Practitioner