

Bringing the Message Home



Follow-up is the critical cornerstone to accomplishing goals set forth in the meeting

By Mary Tomlinson and John Dreyer

Everyone agreed it was a great strategy meeting. The discussions were lively and productive. Energy abounded. Ideas flowed. The team jelled and drew up a forward-thinking plan for future growth. Participants returned to their offices confident and ready to take on the world.

But soon that same team was floundering and frustrated. No progress on the plan was made. Productivity lagged, and morale headed south. The great initiative wound up dead on arrival.

What happened? When success quickly wilts and turns into failure, the process has a fatal flaw, one common to many organizations: The basics of follow-up have been neglected.

As the planning begins for a new meeting, one item on the agenda always should be to develop ways to reinforce the gathering's message after the attendees have returned home. Adhering to the advice that follows will help keep the mission from collapsing when everyone gets back to their offices and their everyday workload.

Plan Ahead

Know the next steps. Lock the windows in the conference room. Bar the door. Do not, under any circumstances, let anyone leave the meeting until the steps for executing the plan they have devised have been spelled out clearly.

If the follow-up isn't articulated, all that creativity and inventiveness that came out at the meeting becomes nothing but daydreams. It's like conceiving the idea for the wheel but never actually building one.

People the projects. Likewise, nobody leaves the conference room until each has been assigned a role in the execution of the plan. Hand out tasks. Ask participants to volunteer to see it through. Develop work teams. Assign specific responsibilities.

Identify the most talented people for the projects you have decided upon, and give them their assignments. Or let people choose the committee on which they will serve (everyone must find a slot), because there's often less procrastination when people have chosen how they want to contribute. But the leader should be prepared to make the final decisions and explain his or her choices regarding who does what.

At the end of an intensely productive meeting, there is a temptation for everyone to pat themselves on the back and say, "We'll figure out the details later." But what doesn't get done today might not get done tomorrow.

Set a timeline. If you don't establish the schedule, the next-step projects will wither on the vine. Not knowing when the work is due gives its owner more flexibility than he or she really wants.

Timeline triggers, report- due dates and firm deadlines actually can energize those who have been given ownership to execute their part of the plan. Deadlines also establish opportunities for flagging unforeseen glitches in meeting goals before it is too late, providing strategic moments for reassessing the overall project and its components, and keeping the players engaged in the team effort.

Select an enforcer. Every effective meeting leader needs a powerful and persistent pest, an encouraging enabler, as her right hand. This person just might be the most valuable player on your meeting team, the one who will keep the plan on track.

The enforcer doesn't let the meeting end without accomplishing the goals laid out above. Most important, he or she nudges each element of the plan along every inch of the timeline. Of course, for this person to succeed, the enforcer has to be empowered by the leader.

Check the progress. Before leaving the original meeting, schedule another gathering to check how the plan is going and whether timelines need to be adjusted.

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