



10
TIPS

• **HOW TO** •

LEAD
BETTER
MEETINGS

AND ENHANCE YOUR
ORGANIZATIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS



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About



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Dr. David Rehr is a CEO with more than 25 years experience in advocacy, governance, public policy and management. He is currently a professor at The Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, where he teaches Legislative Advocacy and Strategic Leadership.

Rehr previously served as president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters. With the help of a great team, Rehr increased the effectiveness of the NAB while streamlining its program offerings to anticipate the future. He also initiated and led an industry-wide branding effort to “re-set” inaccurate perceptions of the association and the industry from being seen as “old media” to one that embraces “digital media.”

Before joining the NAB, Rehr was president of the National Beer Wholesalers Association. Under his leadership, NBWA’s visibility in the advocacy community soared, and the association was ranked as one of the top ten most influential lobbying organizations by *Fortune* magazine.

He holds a doctorate in economics from George Mason University, has been named to *Washington Life Magazine’s* Power 100 list, and is annually listed as a Top Association Lobbyist by one of Congress’ “must read” publications, *The Hill*. Rehr has appeared on ABC, NBC, CNBC, Hearst TV, Sinclair Broadcast, FOX Business and countless radio stations.

Rehr is the author of a forthcoming eBook on the successful public affairs campaign on the Digital Television Transition, the largest marketing campaign in American television history, and is the author of the *Congressional Communications Report*, landmark research on communication methods and preferences of congressional offices, their staff and those working to influence them.

International Performance magazine has published two of Rehr’s leadership articles, “Navigating Change: Leadership in Difficult Times,” and, “Leadership: The Word Becomes an Action.”

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A Note from the Author

I wrote this eBook on holding effective meetings because we all waste so much time holding a meeting and pretending to get something accomplished. I hope some of the issues I raise here and some of the tips provided help you, your team, and your organization obtain more success.

Holding effective meetings is one way you can rate yourself as a leader, and be seen as a leader by others. Effective meetings get differences of opinion



resolved. Effective meetings can build better teamwork and empower your people to be more forthcoming with positive ideas, while allowing others to see their expertise.

Effective meetings result in both good stewardship and effective decisions – those attending the meeting understand the mission of the association, the strategic emphasis for programs and initiatives, and how execution will occur. Those at the meeting will also know who is responsible for which aspects of the

campaign, and what the deadlines for action are to be successful. Effective meetings lead to effective teamwork and focused results.

In fact, the meeting becomes one way all of us can cut through long list of emails, texts, social media postings and other forms of digital and non digital communication that does not allow us to hear, see and feel the conversation taking place in real time.

Here is what I don't understand about meetings and hope you can avoid: endless conversations with no closure in site; personality struggles that ooze into the meeting, and the inability of team members to stay focused on a few large issues central to the overall health of the organization.

If you are in doubt about holding a meeting about an issue, do not do it. We should all try to reduce and/or eliminate the desire to meet unless real work can be accomplished. Excessive meetings kill an organization's effectiveness, threaten its productivity, and drive your best employees away. Those are all bad outcomes, separately or in some combination.

I hope you are able to integrate these positive ideas into your organization and make your organization, especially your meetings, effective and results driven.

10 Tips for More Effective, Efficient, and Better Meetings

You can be an exceptional association CEO without having effective, efficient and better meetings. But it is much harder to be exceptional.

Leaders and their team are correct in wanting excellent communication, coordination, and execution of activities. That means at some level the organization needs to bring all those appropriate together to hold a meeting – time when the association’s issues or challenges are discussed with key stakeholders, opinions are offered, and decisions on future direction are made.

“*If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings.’*”

Humorist Dave Barry

To be effective and efficient, we neither want too many meetings, nor too few meetings. We need to have team gatherings that allow the people and the institution to run smoothly, get results, and deliver value.

However, it is not a subjective question for the association leadership or those involved with the meetings. As an economist, we are trained to always think in terms of opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is the price of not taking an alternative action. In this case, for example, the opportunity cost of holding a meeting is the “cost” of salary time and employee benefits being applied to meeting time and not having these employee’s spend the time talking to customers or recruiting new customers (depending on the specific team member’s expertise and job description). The point is that meetings cost both time and money.

We all know that when meetings are not executed properly, meetings can actually harm the productive culture of the organization. It can reduce focus on organization priorities. It can cause personnel issues if some are attentive and helpful, while others are searching social media for the latest video, thereby being disrespectful to colleagues. It can undermine esprit de corps if unforeseen personality issues or subtle rivalries surface. Perhaps without thinking much about it, if you hold a meeting, you want it to be successful as much is at stake.

The late management guru Peter Drucker wrote of meetings, “Meetings are by definition a concession to deficient organization. For one either meets or one works. One cannot do both at the same time.”

Yet, we are wired to want a meeting whenever it is possible to have one. Perhaps it is because we want to be perceived as a ‘team player’ in the organization and want other team members to work with us. Perhaps it is because our expertise on the issue to be discussed is minimal and we want to get insights and ideas from others. Perhaps it is because we want to share the responsibility for failure (and maybe success) if the issue discussed in the meeting turns out to be bad for the enterprise.

I think Drucker was making the point that meetings should not be the first action we take, but rather we should see meetings as a necessary condition to accomplish results. In interacting with leaders across the globe, I frequently hear comments like:



“Our meetings are terrible.”

“They waste time.”

“Very little gets accomplished.”

“Our gatherings result in a call for more meetings.”

Those are statements from C-suite executives are especially prominent whenever I would enter an organization as a new CEO or as a consultant asked to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of an enterprise.

Moreover, the great majority of meetings in which I have been involved are terrible, especially in Washington, DC. In-person meetings are bad enough. But technology has now allowed us to amplify even worse meetings using teleconferencing, FaceTime, and ‘Go to Meeting’ software so we can meet anytime, anywhere, around the globe.

Of course, it is not the people attending the meetings or the software employed to connect us that makes the meeting bad. It is the lack of preparation and seriousness we give to the meeting that makes it inefficient and often a waste of time.

I struggle with holding exceptional meetings every time I am involved in a gathering of individuals focused on the results of a business, association, or monthly faculty meeting in the academic space. Outstanding meetings are hard to have consistently, but having marginal increases in efficiency and effectiveness will give you and your

organization an edge in the competitive marketplace.

Here are 10 tips I have discovered to make meetings more effective and keep them efficient. A few tips are the result of conversation with successful association leaders in CEO Update's award-winning series, *Association Newsmakers*, which I have been honored to host. Others I have either witnessed at other well-run associations or put in place during my time at the NBWA and the NAB.

I would invite you to use all of them or just several. You will find immediate increases in effectiveness and efficiency. At least, that has been the result for me.

Finally, you will also sense an improvement in your organizational culture. Being engaged with team members who experience a 'great meeting' improves the overall association work ethic, reduces negativity and personal angst among your staff, and definitely helps you move closer to achieving the mission of the organization.

1. Keep meetings to a specific date and time.

Time is money. Setting a meeting for a regular date and time allows all the participants to set aside time on their calendars to attend. It eliminates the need for dozens of emails to find out what time works for everyone. Meetings should last no more than ninety minutes at the maximum but generally a sixty-minute meeting works best. Various association leaders tell me that from their experience, the level of meeting engagement declines as time drags on. A regular schedule and a specific amount of time will keep the team enthusiastic about attending and the discussion lively and productive.

2. Allow the participants to preview agenda items.

If you do not have the time to construct a thoughtful agenda and distribute it to the participants before the meeting, you shouldn't have the meeting. Period. The goal of the meeting should be to have the most informed discussion among the participants. That only happens when everyone knows what will be discussed. Slapping an agenda together a few minutes before the meeting and making copies immediately before it starts is a sign of an unnecessary meeting and a waste of time for those involved. Team decision-making can only be effective if the participants have time to really think about the items being discussed.

“*The least productive people are usually the ones who are most in favor of holding meetings.*”

Economist Thomas Sowell

3. Assign specific items to specific people.

I don't know about you, but 90% of meetings I have attended have no individual assigned to a specific item. Therefore, there is no accountability for discussion and, more importantly, for post-meeting action. This reveals the use of my time at the meeting is a waste. If this occurs once or twice, my attendance falls and my attention (even when I am physically sitting in the meeting) is elsewhere. However, attendance and participation skyrockets when participants know they are being held accountable and that real work is getting done.

4. Estimate time for each item discussion and post it on the agenda.



Have the person responsible for the specific agenda item and/or the overall meeting assign a time constraint or value to each topic and place the time next to the agenda item.

For example: HR Benefits Update (8 minutes).

Just having the time listed keeps the presenter and the discussion focused. By providing a soft time limit, you reduce the possibility of the meeting being extended where the conversation goes on and on, drifting into issues tangential to the agenda. This drives the productive team members nuts; it also diminished all the other agenda items as your team is mentally exhausted from discussion.

5. Enact a 'no electronics on' rule during the meeting policy.

Technology is everywhere. But it distracts, especially in meetings. As CEO of the NAB, I imposed a "no electronics rule" during meetings.

It is disrespectful and counterproductive if team members spent all their time hunched over looking at their mobile device that they tried to hide under the table. My own preference is for everyone to leave their electronics in their office.

Face it, the probability of something really "big" happening during the meeting is close to zero. Everyone can wait sixty or ninety minutes to see an Instagram picture, read a joke on email, re-tweet a Twitter comment or find out where your significant other wants to go after work for dinner.

This is especially true in Washington, DC, where some individuals spend a portion of their career using their phone to demonstrate their self-importance or that he or

she must be ready for a call from a top official. But I have never been in a meeting where that occurred, and I have been in plenty of meetings where the self-important team member forgets the agenda issue discussion, what is expected for them to do, or undermine our association's momentum by not paying full and complete attention.



Taking a break from technology also allows your other team members at the meeting to hear your well reasoned and thoughtful analysis of what is necessary to be done and emerge successfully.

Importantly, if you are the leading the meeting, leave your smart phone at your desk as well. You are the leader. You must model leadership.

6. Penalize those individuals who show up late.

Starting a meeting late because team members casually show up wastes economic resources and undermines respect for team members. If you start a meeting 15 minutes late for 52 weeks a year for 10 team members, you have lost 130 working hours annually. You can calculate the labor cost by just multiplying that number by your average hourly salary to get an idea of the cost to the enterprise.

Moreover, starting late fosters a culture of disrespect. Other people's time is as valuable as those who show up late. Respect them by showing up on time.

One major business organization I know fines individuals for showing up late (they collect a late fee which is then donated to a charity). Another organization just locks the door and team members are left out of the meeting and face the embarrassment of not being included.

You can find lots of ways and successful examples to demonstrate that 'time is money' and that the team needs to show up on time. You will be surprised how those who were previously late now show up on time, and that there will be a more respectful attitude of others after you have initiated this tip.

7. Minimize reports of past actions.

Your meetings should be focused on the future. Keep “reports” of past actions to an absolute minimum – if you allow them at all. Yes, you want to recognize individuals who have succeeded and achieved great results for the organizations, but your meetings should be about the future. Generally, too much time is spent on reviewing the past.

This is especially true for association Board meetings. Gone are the days when association staffs print up hundreds of pages of background material and “dump it” on the Board before the Board meeting begins. Thick pages of content do not mean progress. In our new world of Board engagement, thick lengthy reports mean that the organization is not focused.

8. Engage in a real conversation.

Even today, I enjoy watching the late 1960s TV comedy, *Get Smart*. Maxwell Smart, the main character, would always insist on “the cone of silence” – when he would meet with his supervisor, The Chief.

The cone of silence was a contraption of two transparent plastic hemispheres that are electrically lowered around the heads of the two main characters as a security protocol. It usually malfunctioned in the comedy. It made for funny scenes but reminded me that there could be no honest conversation because the physical space of the cone prevented it.

My point here is that you need to create and sustain an environment where team members in a meeting can tell the truth and not be discouraged from providing their honest opinion. You need to have a meeting environment where someone – anyone – can speak “truth to power,” as only then can you make meaningful decisions on critical association issues.



Meetings are only effective when individuals provide their honest reaction and the discussion is based on reality. Great enterprises usually begin to fail when the team does not provide realistic, straightforward, brutally honest feedback. Sometimes this is hard for the leader to take. But that is why you are paid to be the leader.

9. Rotate subordinates into each meeting so the perception of “secrecy” is eliminated.

Junior associates spend a lot of time at the ‘water cooler’ or at the local Starbucks talking about all the “secret” discussions going on at the meeting they were not invited to attend.

At the NAB, we regularly invited junior staff to ‘sit in’ to observe meetings. Guess what? All the side discussions disappeared and everyone felt more engaged in the association. This improved morale and ensured the staff doing the work could have a better understanding of how the enterprise was progressing.

10. Resist the temptation to end discussions with the phrase, “Let’s have another meeting” whenever possible.

If your discussion around an agenda item ends with the phrase, “We need to schedule another meeting,” you may have to rethink how you are approaching decisions.

Yes, difficult issues may need more than one meeting. But if the organization’s meetings end with “We have to have more meetings,” you have operational issues which need addressing. Successful, savvy organizations do not consume themselves in meetings. I know you know what I mean. Keep meetings to a minimum.

As Drucker rightly pointed out, if you are meeting, you are not working.

“Meetings are a symptom of bad organization. The fewer meetings the better.”

Peter Drucker

The Bottom Line on Meetings

Remember, meetings consume resources – there is a cost to a meeting. They must demonstrate a return on investment – staff time, preparation, intellectual capital used during discussion, and execution strategies. A successful meeting must generate organizational actions that move the enterprise toward success of its mission or strategic goals.

If your meetings cannot increase effectiveness and efficiency of the organization, it would be better just not to have them at all. They will not be missed.