Nine steps to running world-class meetings
A lack of strategy and planning means many meetings are a waste of time, but applying simple rules can make all the difference, writes Dr Ken Hudson

Q. What consumes most of your time at work?
A. For most people, the answer is always the same – meetings!

Yet in spite of their criticisms that meetings are too many, too long and rarely produce an outcome, most managers and leaders do little to address such a key organisational failure. This article outlines nine principles that anyone can use to plan and run world-class meetings.

1. Meetings are a last resort
In the 1960s there was a Japanese television show about a band of Phantom Agents (good guy Ninjas) who managed to always defeat the bad guys (not sure who they were). In the title scene, one of the agents is chastised by the leader for using a gun – “We are Phantom Agents, a gun is the last resort.” It is a similar situation with meetings. Leaders have to be like phantom agents and only use meetings as a last resort.

Bringing people together in a formal setting is both costly and time-consuming and should be considered as a last option after all other ways of collaborating and interacting have been considered (e.g. email, phone call). In my recent research with leaders of fast-growing businesses, one leader observed that whenever someone wanted to meet with him, he simply rang to see whether they could sort it out on the phone rather than have a meeting. In the majority of cases, he told me, they resolved it on the phone.

It is also important to consider this at the end of a meeting; do not automatically call another meeting. There are other ways to ensure that momentum is maintained and follow-up actions are completed.

2. Meetings are important
In a team-based, fast-moving, collaborative environment meetings are here to stay. So rather than moaning about them, managers should take them more seriously. A well-run meeting can communicate, inspire, create and decide. Meetings reflect the culture of the business and the values that leaders espouse.

The starting point must see leaders raise their expectations of how meetings perform; they should demand their meetings be world-class. To achieve this, meetings have to set clear goals which are
monitored, measured and reviewed just like any other organisational activity. It is a conundrum why managers aim to deliver world-class products or customer service yet accept ordinary or even unproductive meetings where they spend the bulk of their time. Meetings are opportunities for leaders to role-model desired behaviour and to teach and develop others – so the next time you are late for a meeting, consider what message it sends.

There is also another reason why meetings are important to any manager, leader or HR professional. Recent research by Steven G. Rogelberg (et al.) has found:

“In three different studies, the single most powerful factor in job satisfaction was how one feels about the effectiveness of the meetings he or she attends. Employees who attend a rash of bad meetings are stressed, dissatisfied with their jobs and more predisposed to leave.” (1.)

3. Running and planning a meeting is a skill
Running a world-class meeting is a skill that can be developed with practice and focus. Yet it is a skill most leaders lack – try to recall the names of any leaders or managers in your business who can run results-oriented, energetic and engaged meetings. I suspect there will not be too many on your list.

There is a reason why this is the case. Meetings involve four different types of intelligences:

a. rational (e.g. plan, define, control etc)

b. creative (e.g. brainstorming new ideas, solutions and questions)

c. emotional (e.g. how you manage yourself)

d. social (e.g. how you manage or interact with others).

(See for example, Daniel Goleman: http://danielgoleman.info/ for more on the last two types of intelligences).

A truly effective meeting manager uses all four intelligences and can harness the appropriate intelligences of all participants so that the goals of the meeting are reached and people feel motivated when they leave.

4. Meetings can be designed
Getting two or more people together for a specific purpose (my definition of a meeting) can be designed in much the same way as you design a new product or service. You do not have to be caught in the one-hour meeting straightjacket. There is an infinite array of design elements you can use so that no two
meetings are ever the same. For example, you can vary: who attends; the venue; the agenda; the time of day; the technology involved. And it can be a sit-down, stand-up or even a walking meeting.

Designing a meeting requires imagination. There is no reason why participants should ever be bored and we know that the more engaged the people are in a meeting, the better the outcome.

5. Hudson’s law of meetings
The next principle is an extension of Parkinson’s Law (not the British interviewer). Cyril Parkinson, tongue in cheek, suggested that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion” based on his experience in the British Civil Service in the 1950s (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkinson’s_Law).

Hudson’s Law states that “meetings expand to the time set for the meeting”. By this I mean that whatever the length of the meeting, it always miraculously tends to take up the time allocated (and sometimes more) almost regardless of the objectives of the meeting. As the default meeting time is one hour – guess what? Most meetings are an hour. But why are most meetings one hour? No one really knows.

The upshot of Hudson’s Law is that if you want to get more done in a shorter time, reduce the length of the meeting. In a division of a major company we made the default time 45 minutes. This 25 per cent saving in time across every meeting was a profound shift and employees reported that they achieved the same amount, they had more time to prepare and meetings actually started on time.

6. In planning a meeting think why, what and then who and how
The most important question in calling and planning a meeting is ‘why’ the meeting is being called. Every meeting should have a purpose (e.g. the reason I am calling a meeting is to make a decision whether to employ a new graduate this year).

The next question is ‘what’ you want to accomplish at the meeting (i.e. the goals or desired outcomes). For example, one of the key objectives of this meeting is to develop an action plan to announce a price increase within the next four weeks. It is vital to have a clear purpose and set of objectives because it will determine who should attend, as well as where and when the meeting might be held and how long it should be (e.g. a brainstorming type meeting for a kid’s product could be held at a McDonald’s outlet).

7. ‘Freedom within limits’ enables creativity to emerge
The golden rule is that the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘who’ come before creating an agenda (which is the ‘how’). The ‘why’ and ‘what’ are the ‘ends’ and the ‘how’ is the ‘means’ (not the reverse). Many managers make the mistake of sending out an agenda with a fixed list of items and timings. There are two problems with
this: the first is that often they have not clarified the desired outcomes they want to achieve; and the second is that they do not allow any flexibility if an interesting idea or novel solution or discussion emerges. An agenda is just a suggested plan (and I am all for developing a loose, tight one) but that is all it is.

The aim in any meeting is to achieve the objectives, not to satisfy a pre-set agenda (although hopefully the two are aligned). I have been in many meetings where an amazing discussion is taking place only to be cut short. This means that everyone in the meeting has to reconvene to try to recapture the magic of the previous discussion. Remember with the agenda, less is more. It is better to tackle a few items well and finish early rather than take on too much and leave everyone frustrated.

8. Do the simple things first
This is a key principle. With this way of thinking it is important just to start; it does not matter where. As Seth Godin suggests, “the challenge, it turns out, isn't in perfecting your ability to know when to start and when to stand by. The challenge is getting into the habit of starting”. (Poke the Box, 2011, Page 5).

My suggestion is to start any meeting with quick and easy items. Make a decision, solve a simple problem, get an okay to move ahead quickly – this will create confidence, energy and momentum in the meeting and free up time to tackle the bigger issues.

9. It's okay to say ‘no’!
This is perhaps the most important principle of all. Many managers have been trained to believe that attending every meeting they are invited to is a sign of corporate commitment. Actually it is quite the opposite. It is a sign that a manager cannot prioritise and has confused activity with achievement. It is the results that counts, not the number of meetings.

The burden of proof now lies with the champion of a meeting to demonstrate why a person should attend rather than just assume they will turn up. The very minimum a person should expect is that the purpose (why) and the objectives of a meeting (the what) should be offered as an invitation to attend which (like any invitation) can be accepted or rejected.

In summary, most people are time-poor and want a better work-life balance. This means that the very activity that consumes most of their time should be the one on which they spend most of their efforts to improve. To work smarter not harder means that meetings have to become world-class – nothing else will do.

Dr Ken Hudson is the founder and chief starter at The Speed Thinking Zone, a business consultancy dedicated to helping organisations become more productive, innovative and energised in time-pressure.

Dr Hudson will be one of the speakers at the ALPMA Summit 2011 at the Crown Conference Centre in Melbourne on September 16 and 17. The Australian Legal Practice Management Association is the peak Australian body representing managers and lawyers with a legal practice management role. The summit will feature innovative international speakers, local industry experts and experts from other industries. The theme of adapt, innovate and inspire blends topics on long-term sustainability with day-to-day challenges to provoke new thinking a rapidly changing marketplace. For more details, visit http://www.alpma.com.au/summit_program_speakers

Footnotes