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MAIN SECTIONS

- [News](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Spurs](#)
- [H.S. Sports](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Automotive](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Consumer News](#)
- [Market Reports](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [S.A. Life](#)
- [Travel & City Guide](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [News Wires](#)

MULTIMEDIA

- [KENS 5 Video](#)
- [Slide Shows](#)
- [Web Cams](#)

OPINION

- [Editorials/ Op Ed](#)
- [E-N Columnists](#)

SPECIAL SECTIONS

- [NCAA Basketball](#)
- [Iraq: After The War](#)
- [Great Day S.A.](#)

DIVERSIONS

- [Comics & Games](#)
- [Contests & Promotions](#)
- [Horoscope](#)

SPECIAL INTEREST

- [Lottery](#)
- [Celebrations](#)
- [Crimebase](#)
- [Personals](#)
- [What's Happening](#)
- [E-mail Services](#)



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- [Yellow Pages](#)
- [Newspaper Ads](#)
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- [Coupons](#)

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Business

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Story Tools:  

Successful meetings of the minds

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Elizabeth Allen
Express-News Business Writer

Here's a thought: Rather than enduring the meetings where some people drone on while others nap, why not make them more interesting?

After all, as author Patrick Lencioni says, eliminating meetings isn't the ideal so much as making them useful.

While one survey says a third of workers have been at one where somebody fell asleep, at some point meetings are inevitable. The painful ones lack "passion, courage and a little bit more structure," Lencioni, author of "Death by Meeting," said.

Meetings are a ritual of daily life in corporate America. But smart managers look for ways to make them less tedious.

In his book, which is a fictional account of a company that comes back from the brink by changing its approach to meetings, Lencioni's characters come up with Daily Check-Ins, Weekly Tacticals, Monthly Strategies and Quarterly Off-Site Reviews.

"Managers who don't like meetings don't like their jobs," Lencioni said. "We have to make them these very effective working sessions."

He draws a parallel between meetings and movies.

"Meetings have two advantages over movies: we can take part in them ... and meetings are relevant to our real lives," Lencioni said. What bad meetings lack that good movies have are conflict and resolution.

"We need to find the most difficult issue that we need to be wrestling with, and then put it square on the table," he said.

Russell Noll and Michael Bakke of San Antonio's Noll.Bakke Realty Advisors both have bad memories of meeting fatigue.

"I spent so many years in structured, formal meetings that I felt like, number one, were not as productive as they could be," Noll said, "and the meeting took precedence over results."

Because Noll.Bakke is a nine-person firm, it was easy for the partners to jettison

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structure.

"We do a lot of spur-of-the-moment, walking-around conversations," Noll said. "That has replaced the need for a structured, set meeting."

That hasn't eliminated the Monday 8 a.m. meeting that Noll said helps everybody touch base and get going.

It's crucial for meeting leaders to keep unimportant topics off the agenda. Gloria Corey, SBC Communications' executive director of events, keeps her staff's weekly meeting productive with an agenda and time limits.

If an item hasn't been resolved after 15 minutes of talk, she said, they can come back to it. But that hardly ever happens.

"There are not too many subjects where further discussion is additive," Corey said. "There is a point where people are restating, using different words."

While Lencioni cautioned against relying on gimmicks, technology has provided managers many more options for handling their meetings. Groupware, for instance, is software that brings people to a meeting by laptop — even if they're in the same room.

Chuck McPherson, president of Interactive Meeting Solutions, contends that his software, IMS Trackmeet, makes meetings real.

McPherson's software is for the big, strategic meetings, rather than weekly updates. His company, which did the survey showing that many people sleep through meetings, consults with his customers and sets it up with the particular meeting's objectives in mind.

When everybody contributes to the discussion by laptop at an appointed time, he said, it's anonymous. So there's no point in posturing and no reason to hold back.

"This is where you're taking a team of people and actually pulling the best ideas out of everybody's head," he said.

Corey has found groupware useful when it's inconvenient to bring in executives from other cities.

"We've had 'Net meetings' with everyone at their desk and somebody going through PowerPoint," she said. "We've also used what we call Web conferences with audio and PowerPoint."

Gordon Kuenemann, executive vice president of Promised Land Dairy, thinks the simple tool of e-mail has helped reduce the need for meetings.

"An e-mail that's copied to everybody on your management team or even on your sales team really helps people know what's going on," Kuenemann said.

Being able to send such housekeeping information around by e-mail can eliminate the need to include it at a meeting. That can make it easier to achieve Lencioni's streamlined vision.

"You have to raise people's level of interest and anxiety," Lencioni said. If not, "then you probably shouldn't be having a meeting."

eallen@express-news.net

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