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HEADLINE: A BAD MEETING ONLY CREATES ANOTHER MEETING

BYLINE: MARCIA HEROUX POUNDS BUSINESS STRATEGIES

BODY:

I've attended meetings during which I've had to literally pinch myself to stay awake. Some people don't make it. A new survey shows that 37 percent of workers say they have attended a workplace meeting where at least one participant fell asleep.

How can we make workplace meetings more engaging? At the same time, how can we make them more productive and efficient?

Interactive Meeting Solutions, based in Santa Rosa, Calif., offers one solution. The company, led by a former human resource manager from Hewlett-Packard, has designed a software system for an optimal meeting.

"You get tired of bad meetings," says Chuck McPherson, chief executive of Interactive Meeting Solutions, which surveyed more than 1,200 workers about meetings.

Optimal meetings are small, usually 5 to 15 people, McPherson says. "Get beyond that and it's very difficult to maintain a collaborative, cohesive environment."

Though technology is incorporated in his meetings, McPherson recommends workers meet in person when possible. In face-to-face meetings, "people can watch other's reactions," he says. "They have to be honest."

McPherson gives clients these "seven meeting rules for success" to help them hold better meetings:

Make sure the meeting objective is clear to you, the meeting leader, and to others.

Choose the right venue. The location and tools should enhance the meeting. Are the participants at one site or many sites? Are you doing a presentation or a collaborative meeting? Consider these factors before choosing whether to hold the meeting in a teleconference, videoconference, Web conference or face to face.

Develop a crisp agenda. "You need an agenda and to understand what the objective is. You need a roadmap for your meeting," he says.

Invite the right participants. If you invite the wrong people, you're wasting their time. If the right people aren't at the meeting, you'll probably have to hold another one. "Oftentimes decisions aren't made because the right people aren't there," he says.

Understand your role for the meeting as leader or participant. Should you be ready to talk about certain issues? Or, is your role to listen and understand?

Capture minutes, action items and next steps and promptly distribute them.

Understand the cost of a bad meeting. A bad meeting only creates another meeting. Also consider, "What's not getting done while you're in the meeting?" McPherson says.

Encourage participation but don't allow team members to be negative. There's a difference between honest feedback and workers who complain but offer no solutions.

Leaders also need to watch out for "meeting bullies," people who tend to dominate meetings. The bully tends to be the leader or one or two of the favorite people on a team, McPherson says.

Interactive Meeting Solutions uses its software to map out meetings. When asked, participants use laptops to post anonymous feedback during the meeting. No minutes need to be taken because everything is documented.

"Imagine going into a meeting where there are no flip charts, Post-it Notes, no sticky dots, where everybody gets to say their piece, where everybody gets to collaborate and vote," he says.

In brainstorming, for example, a question is asked of the group and everyone anonymously inputs as many ideas as they want. Instead of a dozen ideas on a flip chart, "you get 100-150 ideas in less than 10 minutes," McPherson says.

When a team has a good meeting, participants view meetings as important work, rather than a time to sleep. "If meetings go right, participants get energized," McPherson says. "They feel they're getting something done."

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