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Setting Goals, Attending to Details  
Can Help Make Meetings Effective

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Tom Newton, a consultant and executive coach, walked into a recent meeting he was helping to lead, passed out bingo cards filled with business jargon and explained the rules: The first person to check off a row of terms used during the meeting was to jump up and shout "B.S. Bingo!" (short for "Business-Speak Bingo"). The winner would receive \$20 from the company's president.

That surprised Ross Dwinell, president of Western Benefits Inc., a Portland, Ore., third-party-benefits administrator, who sat next to Mr. Newton. Inevitably, terms such as "synergistic," "win-win" and "at the end of the day" popped up during the half-day strategy session. Before long, the company's accountant blurted out "B.S. Bingo!"

"Overall, the meeting actually went very well," says Mr. Dwinell, although he was \$20 lighter for it. "It focused attention more on the immediate and kept a little more life in the meeting."

Every employee has to sit through boring meetings from time to time. Some people try to catch up on e-mail by pulling out a personal digital assistant under the table. Others do all they can to stay awake. In one recent survey, 50% of workers at big companies said they had attended a meeting where at least one participant fell asleep. At smaller companies, where there is typically less room to hide, the figure was 26%.

Poorly run meetings hurt corporate productivity. From an individual perspective, the inability to run effective meetings can torpedo a career.

Some people have recently tried to improve meetings with the help of technology. Interactive Meeting Solutions LLC, a Santa Rosa, Calif., meeting-facilitation company, provides participants with laptop computers with wireless hookups so that at certain points during a meeting everyone can simultaneously provide anonymous input.

"You don't have people who dominate a meeting," says Chuck McPherson, Interactive's president. "The people who don't talk have an opportunity to talk."

Meetings are also frequently derailed when people who are anxious about being judged or offending others hold back ideas, Mr. McPherson adds. Other times, meeting leaders fail to assign future tasks to be completed by participants. He says he has seen people writing unrelated reports or doodling during meetings. "That is just an indicator that they just shouldn't be there, or they didn't know what their role was, or whoever called the meeting isn't holding people accountable during the meeting," he says.

You don't need dazzling PowerPoint slides to hold people's attention. In fact, an overreliance on visual aids can detract from a meeting's effectiveness, experts say. Instead, meeting leaders can keep sessions lively and interesting by following some basic guidelines.

**Be clear about the purpose of the meeting**, so that everyone, including participants, shows up prepared. Do you intend to just relay information, or do you need to solve a problem? "Too often, people think of meetings as one-way streets," says John Real, president of OpenMic Co., a

Littleton, Colo., Web and teleconferencing company. In many cases, meeting leaders are afraid to admit that they don't have the answer to a problem, Mr. Real says. In fact, presenting a problem during a meeting will often attract and hold the attention of participants.

**Take control.** "You're dead in the water if you don't have a strong leader," says Dianna Booher, president and CEO of Booher Consultants Inc., a Dallas communications-training company. Leaders need to be skilled in the mechanics of running a meeting, as well as versed in the psychological dynamics of group interaction. Set ground rules for the meeting, including a time limit and the input you expect from participants. Know how to gather ideas, how to select the best ones for extended discussion and when to move on to the next topic. Transitions between agenda items need to be swift and clear, to hold people's attention.

**Attend to details.** That includes making sure key participants will be able to attend. Rather than waste people's time with a meeting from which those participants are absent, reschedule. It is also worth trying to create an optimal setting for the meeting. Frequently, meetings are held in spaces that discourage participation, says Ms. Booher, or people who tend not to participate sit in a "drop-out zone" separate from the main group.

**Set practical goals** that people can take away from the meeting. "If you don't do what you set out to do," says Mr. McPherson, "one crummy meeting will only create another crummy meeting."

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