

Minimize Meeting Mutiny

Your team has spent the last three hours in a meeting trying to make a decision about your latest promotional campaign. If you were being politically correct, you'd say the group had reached an impasse – if you were being brutally honest, you'd admit that leaping across the boardroom table and garroting the graphic artist is an increasingly feasible course of action.



We've all been there – trapped in a never-ending meeting with attendees who've reverted to veiled insults, snooty silences and blind stubbornness. You may have wondered why some meetings have the ability to transform seasoned business professionals into bratty children. But it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the formula for meeting mayhem. Essentially, you're taking a group of professionals with vastly different experiences, opinions and beliefs, cramming them into a boardroom and asking them to reach a consensus on a difficult decision in 50 minutes or less. It's mutiny waiting to happen.

To retain some sense of workplace harmony, you need to structure potentially confrontational meetings differently. The following strategies will minimize meeting mutiny and speed up decision-making in your company.

Opinion vs. Fact

Most of us are quite happy to express an opinion – whether we know what we're talking about or not. Opinions are easy because they're based on preconceived ideas and beliefs. Facts, on the other hand, come from external sources or experiences and require some degree of research or knowledge.

In too many conflict situations, people argue their position with opinions rather than facts. They may state their opinion as fact (especially if they have a strongly held belief), but without proof to substantiate a claim, it's still an opinion.

To speed up your meeting, force people to argue using facts only. Without opinions getting in the way, you'll arrive at a consensus and make decisions much more quickly.

Of course you don't want your meeting to resemble a get-together of the Third Reich – that will only frustrate participants and make them more likely to argue the outcome. At the beginning of the meeting, have all participants express their opinion on the subject at hand (it might help to limit each person to five minutes). Once everyone's position is known, restrict the remainder of the discussion to factual statements only.

Conflict vs. Disagreement

It's important to differentiate between conflict and disagreement. Disagreements are healthy. They force the group to consider different options and select the most viable course of action. Conflict however is dangerous because it implies an emotional component. When people form an emotional attachment to a certain issue, project or

strategy, they're unlikely to back down from their position. It's much harder to reach a resolution if someone is going to be emotionally affected by the outcome.

So how do you stop a disagreement from turning into a conflict? Behave like a consummate professional. Don't attack anyone on a personal level. Avoid nasty comments, malicious digs and veiled insults. Be forthright and honest about your opinions and confine them strictly to work – not to anyone's character.

Expression vs. Repression

In the interest of time, it's tempting to exclude key people from the decision-making process – especially if their involvement may cause conflict. But if people feel their opinion wasn't solicited, they're more likely to object to the project on principle, making it more time-consuming in the long run to finish the project. Everyone wants to be part of the process – by giving people the chance to express their opinion early on, you're more likely to have their buy-in for the duration of the project.