

I read somewhere recently that some 25 million meetings take place in corporate America every day and that roughly half that time is wasted. Many of these meetings are project management meetings and I am confident that the dismal statistic relating to time wasted is just as applicable in the project context.

Responsibility for minimising the time wasted on meetings rests with the project manager as it is they who initiate and facilitate the process, in most cases. The first step in the lean meetings process is for the project manager to formulate a set of clear objectives that will be achieved during the meeting. This provides the basis for the other key decisions that will lead to less waste.

The objectives are the reason why the meeting is pulled together. Meeting's objectives should be like all project objectives, that is, **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime Bound (SMART). SMART objectives create common ground, expectation, focus and potential for productivity. And like all project objectives, it must be possible to express them in a way that makes it possible to measure the outcomes to verify that success has been achieved.

Time is usually a scarce resource on projects and it is also one of the fundamental criteria on which the success or otherwise of a project is judged. Projects have lots of meetings so the potential for consuming that most scarce of resources is obvious. Project meetings are important and the decisions made are the grease on the wheels of progress.

Once the SMART objectives have been defined, the project manager must ask themselves if the meeting is really necessary. Many meetings come from exactly the opposite direction than that above. I am going to hold a meeting so I've got to decide what to discuss. Think of the very many standing meetings that happen just because they are in the diaries well in advance. Many of them are aimless, useless and wasteful of our most precious commodity.

Could an alternative communication mechanism do the job? For example, email, teleconference, video conference, groupware, bulletin board, one-to-ones or the Internet? The project manager should ask themselves the following questions before proceeding with the meeting:

Do I or someone else possess the knowledge to make the decision on their own?

Can the decision be made by a sub-set of the project team?

Is the synergy of team needed in this instance i.e. is substantial creativity and innovation is required?

Will there be new knowledge created or is it just a rehash of something old?

Is the decision of the type that needs to be made collectively by the team?

Is the topic complex requiring explanation, understanding and acceptance by all the project team for implementation?

Is brainstorming necessary?

Will there be conflict?

If after considering these questions, it is still thought necessary to hold a meeting, the project manager must next decide who needs to attend? Frugality is the order of the day. The more people in the meeting, the less that will be achieved.

In the case of meetings, the old tale of too many cooks spoiling the broth is especially true.

As a project manager, you are obliged to run your meetings in a way that gives everyone present, including unnecessary attendees, a chance to be heard. They will all expect their moment of fame. Unnecessary attendees can be a particular challenge as they probably know that they are not required and that their precious time is being wasted. They may even decide to be obstructive or mischievous!

The project manager should therefore ask themselves the following questions before finalising the list of attendees:

Do they possess knowledge or expertise necessary to achieve one of the meeting's objectives?

Have they skin in the game i.e. will they be impacted by any decisions?

Are they needed because they have the authority to make something happen?

Will they become responsible for implementing some aspect of a decision?

Do they need to be reassured about some situation?

Do they hold strong views that will act as a catalyst for fruitful discussion?

Will they learn, grow or be developed by attending?

Can they favourably influence other project stakeholders?

The fundamental rule is that if they are not needed, they are not needed. Don't ask someone just because they have always been asked. Don't ask someone just because they are funny or are nice to be around. Don't ask someone because they lick up to you and agree with your every utterance. Don't ask someone just because you like them.

Remember, just don't ask them.

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