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BUSINESS FORUM

When you bring people together, the challenge is to tap into their creativity
— and not turn them off in the process

Meeting expectations

By **Brian McDermott**

I have a theory that if I listen well enough, everything I need to know about business I can learn from my kids.

The latest example involved a simple truth about why adults hate business meetings, and it inspired me to share some thoughts on how to take the pain out of corporate get-togethers and turn them into gatherings people leave saying, "That was a fabulous use of our time, money and energy. We've got to do that more often."

First, let me acknowledge what I'm up against. Research out of places such as the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California and the University of Minnesota estimates that executives spend 40 to 50 percent of their time in meetings. Other studies show business professionals say that half their meeting time is unproductive and that up to 25 percent of that time is frittered away on irrelevancies.

Think about the implications of those findings, and it's easy to understand the frustration conscientious business folks feel about meetings that seem to go nowhere and take forever to get there.

Minnesota has nearly 2.7 million people in its work force, according to the latest U.S. Labor Department statistics. Forgive the "fuzzy math," but if even 10 percent of us spend half our time in meetings, and half of that time is unproductive, we're squandering a staggering proportion of our work lives. That formula works out to about 500,000 people hours wasted *per day*.

So back to the wisdom of youth. My daughter started high school this year. In reviewing one of her classes for me, she came down heavy on one of her teachers: "All he does is talk. He never lets us do anything."

Keep in mind this is a course she wants to take and a subject she wants to master. The pain is complicated by disappointment.

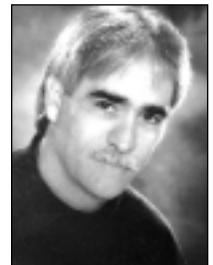
I've felt the same way when leaving many business meetings — well-intentioned affairs with too much talk and too little to do.

'Action learning'

Most of the work I do now is for clients who want help creating meetings that grown-ups won't hate — working sessions that have purpose and produce results. I have a strong desire to stay in business,

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and an ego too fragile for the sights and sounds of heads thumping onto tabletops in response to what I do, so I diligently employ an "action learning" process that our company has developed for designing powerful meetings.

We call the process **LOOP** Learning (Linkage, Obstacles, Opportunities, Plans) because it helps create sessions designed — beginning to end — with pressing real-world business issues in mind, and because it actively involves people in learning about and dealing with those issues. We abide by the need for good meetings to be built around a well-developed agenda, an agreed-upon schedule and

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Meeting expectations continued...

a group commitment to keep the proceedings on track. But we've discovered four things more fundamental that, if accomplished, create high-energy, highly productive meetings:

➤ **Linkage.** A vital early step is to make sure the meeting creates a sense of ownership by the participants for why they are together, and to assure that the agenda draws a connection to a specific business issue. Help people answer the question, "Why is this important — to me, to our team and to the company?"

Linkage lifts responsibility for the challenge off the shoulders of "the boss" who called the meeting and shares it with everyone in the room.

➤ **Obstacles.** Sometimes the most important thing you can do in a meeting is identify what's blocking your goals. Acknowledge that there are barriers, and examine the risks in not overcoming them and of not challenging the status quo. That's not easy, of course, because we're talking about creating an environment where there's openness, safety and authentic dialogue about wasteful practices perpetuated on obsolete beliefs, procedures,

policies and habits that no longer serve a useful purpose. We call them Sacred Dinosaurs. Digging up those old bones requires laying aside egos and the need to be right.

➤ **Opportunities.** Once people understand the challenge and the barriers, turn them loose on generating ideas for improving, changing and innovating current successes and creating new possibilities for growth and success. An important element of identifying opportunities is to challenge the mindset that there is only one right way to do things. What works today might not work tomorrow, so it's important to keep asking questions, knowing that solutions always will be a moving target. Gertrude Stein, the American author who gained notoriety influencing the artistry of Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso, once laid out the challenge this way: "There is no answer. There never was an answer. There never will be an answer. That's the answer."

➤ **Plans.** The final step is to clarify priorities and to make plans and personal commitments for what must be done to achieve the desired business results. Determine who will do what, by when to move toward the goal. Commitment, accountability and reinforcement built into

the learning process help to achieve sustainable results.

Give them their say

The length of a meeting influences what can be accomplished and how, but in almost all situations my company's meetings blend interactive exercises, stories, activities, video vignettes, music, and metaphors and illustrations related to the business objective. Perhaps the only "rule" for using **LOOP Learning** gets back to my daughter's lesson: Give people plenty of chances to talk to each other and share ideas about how to deal with the challenge.

The objective in designing worthwhile meetings is to create a process and an environment that encourages people to think differently, build on each other's ideas and develop high levels of communication, commitment and collaboration.

Think about a classroom full of teenagers. Energy and intelligence abound, as in every work team. When we bring people together, the challenge is to tap them, not turn them off.

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About GrowthWorks

WE ARE expert facilitators.

WE CREATE meetings that matter — working sessions that capitalize on the wisdom, experience, and motivation of each participant to help make their organization more successful.

WE HELP organizations tap the commitment, talent and energy of their people by using dynamic group processes to involve them strategically and creatively in dealing with high-priority business issues.

WE IMPROVE teamwork, communication, strategy, trust, leadership, individual performance, innovation and creativity, resilience, empowerment, and personal growth as a deliberate byproduct of our group processes.

WE ARE QUICK to recognize and clarify organizations' real business problems and opportunities, and quicker still at providing a repertoire of imaginative and effective techniques and strategies for dealing with them.

WE WORK BEST with leaders who act on their belief that people are their greatest asset.

OUR CLIENTS say they can never go back to their old ways of doing meetings.

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