

Make Meetings Work for You

A sizeable part of the leader's job is to have meetings with management. If you think back on your most recent meetings, you may agree with the almost universal opinion that meetings are one of the most time-consuming and least productive activities in the workplace. In fact, one analyst thinks American businesses waste up to \$37 billion a year on meetings.

Your meetings can be different, however. The key is to think of each meeting with management as a chance to use *proactive* strategies to get what you want.

Here are some ways to take full advantage of every meeting to get management's agreement on your union agenda.

- ▶ *Be prepared* - whether you're proposing a new program or suggesting modifications to something planned by management, get all the facts. Research every reason why the program or the changes you are suggesting would be a good idea. Think about what management might not like - and research that too.

- ▶ *Provide a meeting agenda and purpose ahead of time* - Let everybody - especially management - know clearly, well in advance, what the meeting will be about.

- ▶ *Acknowledge management concerns as you make your proposal* - Set a rational tone for the meeting by stating your ideas and at the same time, showing that you understand their point of view. When management realizes that you've paid attention to their needs, they will be more likely to accept your ideas.

- ▶ *Listen calmly to the other side* - If people raise objections to your plan, don't get angry or answer out of hand. Take a moment to think, and then try rephrasing the objection. "Let me make sure I understand. You're saying that having joint informational meetings will take up too much time and cut into your budget. You're under a lot of pressure to make budget, especially now, and you don't see how you can give up any time."

When your opponents hear your restatement, they know you have listened to them. They can be disarmed because you have stepped to their side. They will probably be more ready to listen to you, and may be more receptive to your ideas.

- ▶ *Avoid personal attacks* - When people disagree with you, resist any impulse to strike back with insults or ridicule. Remember that the whole point of being in the meeting is to break the cycle of 'action-reaction.' By *reacting* impulsively with personal attacks or anger you play into your opponent's hands. Instead, take a few minutes to refocus your thoughts on the *problem*, not the *person* you're dealing with.

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- ▶ *Get everyone involved* - Ideally, you want to walk out of the meeting with an agreement reached by consensus, with everyone present taking part in the final decision. Try to build consensus by summarizing the debate at an appropriate moment, voicing the objections to the plan and restating the answers to those objections. If there are people at the meeting who haven't spoken, ask them for their input.
- ▶ *Watch for nonverbal clues* - People may not say anything - but they may show signs of disagreement or discomfort. These nonverbal cues can include shifting around in a chair or a worried expression. Don't hesitate to ask these people directly what they are thinking - it's always best to get any disagreement out in the open.

At the same time be aware of your own nonverbal behavior. Fidgeting or other signs of nervousness can make you appear less confident and put people off your ideas.
- ▶ *Keep a record of what's said* - You should take notes during the meeting for your own records. Highlight any problems or questions that you can't immediately answer. You may want to jot down your impressions about how the meeting is going, where the major sticking points seem to be, and who seems bothered by what.

Remember that your goal is to walk out of the meeting with management's full cooperation and support for your plan. You'll reach that goal faster when you maintain a rational, problem-solving approach.