



Why Would Anyone Do That In My Meeting?



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It has been said that if you want to avoid doing any work... hold a meeting! This is ridiculous of course... but it does happen. So be careful!

Imagine that you open a meeting by saying, "We need to talk about the budget." And someone says, "I named my dog Budget because he's too big."

Here are some possibilities.

1) They're uninformed

Many people do not know how to plan, conduct, or participate in a meeting. They think that gathering people in a conference room represents holding a meeting. They believe that planning is unnecessary because they expect everyone to arrive with a common agenda. They think that hosting a discussion actually leads to useful results. These well-meaning attempts at holding a meeting are so counterproductive that they can appear to be misbehaviour. In addition, a bad meeting irritates others, causing them to retaliate with misbehaviour.

Better: Show people how to plan and conduct meetings. Teach them how to use process tools that help people make methodical progress toward results. Schedule a workshop that shows people how to plan and lead meetings.

2) They're bored

Many meetings occur with a few people talking while the rest watch. When this happens, the quiet participants entertain themselves by daydreaming, starting side conversations, or working on other tasks (such as preparing lists of things to do once the meeting finally ends). People with extensive experience in bad meetings have learned how to feign credible interest while being mentally absent.

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Better: Plan activities that involve everyone. Avoid relying on discussion for your meeting because it allows the more vocal attendees to dominate.

3) They're mad

People can be mad for many reasons, such as they feel trapped in an unplanned meeting or they disagree with the results being obtained. They could also feel mad if others are preventing them from participating.

People know that a meeting without an agenda will waste their time, and they resent this. For example, a man once told me that he and his friends would "sandbag" any meeting that was called without an agenda. They made inappropriate comments, introduced distracting considerations, and asked pointless questions. Of course, they acted with such professional sincerity that it seemed that they were being productive instead of disruptive.

Better: Always prepare an agenda. Always contact key participants before the meeting to explain their role and to check if they are prepared for the meeting.

4) They disagree

Meetings are an excellent activity to resolve disagreements. However, if people disagree with the issue, the process, or the results AND are unable to exert influence, they will rebel. This rebellion will appear as misbehaviour in the meeting or (worse) sabotage after the meeting.

Better: Use process tools in the meeting that involve all of the participants. Always contact key participants before holding a meeting on a controversial issue. Use these conversations to listen to their views, explain the goals for the meeting, and promote your intent for a fair resolution. Make sure that you seek a "Both/And" result instead of an "Either/Or" result so that everyone gets what they need.

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5) They misunderstand

Sometimes people misunderstand expectations. For example, an executive was surprised by the negative comments, ridicule, and hostility that occurred during his first staff meeting with a new group. After some investigation, he learned that his predecessor openly criticised and ridiculed people. Thus, this was the behaviour that the staff had learned to emulate. The executive fixed this by a) stating new expectations, b) coaching key offenders, and c) setting an example of respectful conduct.

Better: Cultural management is a primary leadership responsibility. Demonstrate the type of behaviour that you want for productive meetings and provide private corrective feedback to those who misbehave.

An effective meeting is a team activity conducted by a fair process that involves everyone. People respect this approach and will make positive contributions because they know that such a meeting represents a good use of their time.

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