



# Are your meetings train wrecks?

**(CNN)** -- We're tired of them, frustrated that our time is being whittled away. Despite years of practical advice books and earnest consultants, workplace meetings are still oftentimes a cliché for mismanagement and disaster.

Given the wealth of advice available for running a successful meeting, why do they still go off the rails on a weekly basis?

## **Problem: No one has time to prepare an agenda**

Why do meetings hang on as the love handles on the flank of workplace efficiency? Ron Ashkenas, a managing partner of Schaffer Consulting and author of "Simply Effective," blames basic human nature.

"Most people aren't all that disciplined in their lives, and leaders are the same, particularly when they're really busy," he said. Just like sticking with a diet or an exercise plan, the discipline of good meeting behavior tends to slide -- starting at the top.

Ashkenas has found that senior-level corporate clients "have it on the calendar, are too busy to prepare and send out an agenda, and decide we'll wing it. Then it becomes a recurring pattern -- it just gets reinforced."

**Solution:** Even when human frailty gets in the way of thorough agenda planning, a number of recent books have argued that visual, physical meeting styles can take the onus off facilitators.

"As long as there's a whiteboard and sticky notes in the room, there's a tremendous amount of things you can do very easily to make a meeting come alive," says Dave Gray, author of "Gamestorming," which offers ways to reorganize meetings to boost productive participation.

"You don't actually have to do a lot of planning in order to bring this stuff into a meeting, but you do have to be familiar with the tools," he said.

## **Problem: Workers who are just going along for the ride**

People at all levels of an organization are guilty of sustaining disastrous meetings. It feels good to be included -- an invitation to join a committee means you have status and your input is appreciated, Ashkenas pointed out.

People have an ego-incentive to join in and keep coming back. But the privilege cuts both ways, he argues. If you're important enough to be worth including a meeting, you should also have the clout to take some responsibility for the meeting's success.

"If you're there as a participant, then you have license to say something," said Ashkenas. "If the meeting is pretty bad and you don't say anything, it means you're colluding with that leader to re-enforce the lack of discipline."

**Solution:** Even if you're not leading the meeting, there's no problem with taking control of it if it's not going well, says Kevin Hoffman, who's presenting a panel on reinventing meetings at the South by Southwest Interactive festival in Austin, Texas, this week.

"If you think you know the way it should go, ask for a portion of time on the spot to take a different approach," said Hoffman, who has led countless project launch meetings in his position as a user experience director at design company Happy Cog.

"The worst thing that can happen is that you will break people's concentration, or frustration, to try a new activity. The best thing that might happen is that it would solve the problem."

## **Problem: All work and no play**

In a study published last year in *Organization Science*, [researchers found](#) that even though people grouse about workplace overload from distractions like e-mail, meetings were in fact the worst contributor to long workdays.

But clearly earnest advice about setting agendas and sticking to a time constraint haven't reformed our ways. Recent books have focused on more playful ways to reform the monster meeting.

"We do so many meetings, the way we do them is just habit and routine," Gray said. "There's a cultural issue in a lot of companies that maybe it would be wrong for a meeting to be engaging and fun."

**Solution:** Consider injecting a little play into a meeting. Gray's idea of "gamestorming" calls for the use of games structured activities meant to engage bored participants.

He says this ensures that a leader doesn't hijack the conversation -- or get stuck playing scribe.

"When you play a game like Monopoly or poker or bridge, you don't need a facilitator," Gray said. "Once you set up the rules you can play a game and everyone can be connected."

Also, communication doesn't only have to be spoken. Hoffman from Happy Cog says he always has tools that give people alternative ways to put forth and clarify their ideas during the meeting.

"The ability to back up and say 'no no, this is what I meant' -- to write or draw -- is important," he said.

### Links referenced within this article

researchers found

<http://orgsci.journal.informs.org/cgi/content/abstract/orsc.1100.0573v1>

### Find this article at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/BUSINESS/03/09/train.wreck.meetings/?hpt=C2>

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