# Energizing Practice Group Meetings

by Patrick J. McKenna

It can be very challenging to manage a group of professionals with different substantive skills, diverse experiences, a variety of work styles, and sometimes conflicting priorities. Nowhere is this more visible than in the fundamental workings of practice group meetings.

Casey Stengel, the renowned former New York Yankees coach, once said, "getting good players is one thing. The harder part is getting them to play together". Imagine a professional ball team on which every player could debate the signals and challenge game strategy. This is but one of the challenges in conducting a practice group meeting.

We are no longer surprised to observe the lack of ongoing meetings or formal communication efforts among various practice groups in many firms. The group's surprise may come when its clients learn that the expected group collaboration through shared experience and is all but absent and that those clients are therefore being short-changed.

In these same firms, we observe distraught managing partners (or Executive Committee members) throwing their hands in the air in defeat, exasperated in their efforts to get their groups to meet, finally retreating into a perplexing belief that "professionals despise meetings."

> *The most common frustration within meetings of practice groups being those professionals who are "always late." (Late to the meeting, late to the plane, late to work, late to your own funeral.) Showing up late means that this particular professional made a pretend commitment about starting on time.*
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> *The drama, the wasted energy, the wondering begin immediately: "Where is Paul?" "Is this meeting on his calendar?" "Maybe we should check with his assistant." "He told me yesterday that he would be here." "How are we going to restructure the agenda?" "Why is he always late?" "Doesn't he know that we're busy, too?" "Does someone have to be somewhere else after this meeting or can we extend it?" "Doesn't anybody give a damn around here?!"*

In our own travels across a number of counties visiting managing partners, we are often told about "one particular practice group in the firm whose performance casts a large shadow over the others, because of their enthusiasm, drive, morale, recognition in the marketplace and overall profitability". We find it striking how often a leader who cites one particular group that stands head-and-shoulders above the others, will then tells us, "and of course they meet weekly!"

We have come to believe that professionals do despise meetings - where minutes are taken, but hours wasted; where protracted discussions are absolutely unproductive and result in nothing meaningful ever being accomplished.

We have been in attendance at numerous of these practice group meetings where the members of the group are attempting to wrestle with some important issues. What is most memorable about those discussions is how disorganized they were. Group members rarely seem to speak to the topic at hand, no one sticks to the point, they waste time with trivial items not on the agenda, and a specific course of action is never determined. As a partner in one of these groups observed, "Our meetings are like television soap-operas, you can leave the group for three months and return to pick up exactly where you left off with no new progress having been made."

We have noted several clues that can tell you something is not right in your practice group meeting structure and procedures. Among them are these warning signs:

- practice group meetings start and/or finish late;
- practice group members don't come to meetings or arrive later and later each time;
- no agenda exists, or the agenda, materials and reports are not distributed in advance;
- the agenda lists more items than can reasonably be dealt with or acted upon;
- the practice leader is not prepared;
- some partner is allowed to monopolize discussions;
- only a few members speak; others withdraw nonverbally;
- members interrupt each other or "cross-talk," (excluding others);
- the meeting evidences long drawn out discussions, but conclusions are rarely reached;
- at the conclusion of the meeting, there is no clarity upon who has agreed to accomplish what, by when;
- specific projects are not completed on time;
- there are no consequences for non performance or challenging behaviour.

Recently, we even calculated the billable time cost of one firm's monthly practice group meeting comprised of eight partners and five associates to be over three thousand dollars. Our obvious question to this group at the end of their meeting was: "Do you feel you got three thousand dollars worth of benefit from this meeting or could you each have better spent this time elsewhere?"

It becomes painfully evident that we need to improve the productivity of meetings. Your firm cannot afford to continuously invest time in having numerous professionals gather together only to have them conclude that their time could have been better spent in other activities and that the meeting effort is not significantly progressing their group goals, or their individual client work.

In attempting to tackle this situation, we have often asked partners to explore together as a group their answers to the question: "what benefits should we expect to get out of meeting together as a practice group?"

The benefits that partners identify most frequently include:

- we could learn a bit more about what client assignments the other professionals in our group are working on and what specific issues they are facing;

- we could have members of the group take turns making a substantive presentation to the group on some area in which they are developing expertise or have acquired some new knowledge, especially where they may recently have attended outside courses or seminars;

- we could use the meeting as a forum to orient our juniors, review work assignments, give them feedback, instill some pride, and help them feel like they are part of an important practice team;

- we could invite clients, the practice leaders of other related groups, or even outside experts to come and inform us as to what issues and projects they are working on;

- we could work together on some joint projects especially where it might help make our practice group become more attractive to clients or assist each of us to be more proficient at developing business.

Now this list is not intended to be comprehensive and we invite you to try this with the members of your practice team, but what you will notice is that there are essentially two different types of meetings being suggested here. One meeting involves spending some time sharing information and acquiring knowledge; while the other involves working together on some mutually important projects to determine what we can collectively accomplish together as a team.

To progress this even further, we have learned that to get the best results, the members of a practice group need to invest some time together to identify and agree upon some basic procedural parameters for how their group's meetings are to function. It makes good sense for you and your team members to determine:

- do we want to meet on a regular basis: "what specific benefits would each of us have to realize to make such meetings a worthwhile investment of our personal time?" and/or "how could we better serve our clients from getting together as a practice group on a regular basis to share our knowledge, enhance our collective efforts, and engage in some joint action planning activities?" The members of a practice group should identify (in writing) the specific benefits that each member expects to achieve as a result of their meetings. They should then review periodically whether everyone is satisfied that they are getting those benefits - - and if not, what remedial action should be taken to modify the meeting format or content in order to make meetings more valuable;

- how much time are we prepared to commit to meeting: "what is a realistic minimum time that we would be prepared to start with, to see what we might accomplish?" A realistic minimum, to start, might be an hour. We have found that this time issue is often driven by the size of the group. Larger groups may have difficulty with an hour, but if you are dealing with a situation where people are not used to meeting at all, an hour is at least a reasonable start;

- how much time are we prepared to commit to taking action on joint projects: "how much non-billable time are we each prepared to commit to working on any projects that result from our action planning efforts in meetings?" While we are very comfortable with focusing on billable production, the real value that results from working together as a group comes from our commitment to spend a modest amount of non-billable time, between meetings, working on some specific project that will advance the goals of the practice group;

- what are people's preferred schedules for meeting: "when should our meetings occur: which day of the week and when; early morning, during lunch, at the end of the day, on the week-end?" There are and will always be client fires that irrupt. The degree to which we can al least attempt to work around our client priorities can be enhanced if we can agree on a set pattern for when we will schedule our practice group meetings. We have observed that the best seem to schedule their meetings well ahead of time on a consistent day and time - the second Tuesday of the month at 12 noon - such that everyone is able to block that time into their calendars.

As part of these deliberations, your practice group members should also establish some agreements governing whether everyone is committed to being at the meeting; whether they can agree to start the meeting on time with everyone in attendance; whether people will submit their action reports to everyone in writing a few days in advance of the meeting so as to save time; and whether commitments made to implement a specific task are to be commitments kept. In this way, any practice group can determine their own acceptable guidelines. The best groups then circulate to everyone the group's "guidelines" in writing, periodically reminding members of their mutual agreements, and take a moment every so often, at the conclusion of some meeting, to assess whether the meeting functioned to everyone's satisfaction and consistent with the agreed guidelines.

Now let's say your practice group is prepared to meet monthly for one hour. The key issue then becomes how do we use that hour as effectively as possible.

## PRACTICE GROUP MEETING FORMATS

One of the best ways to satisfy the diverse interests of your group is to devote one meeting to knowledge sharing and skill building, while reserving the agenda of the next meeting for one action-planning issue of importance to determine the group's future direction and/or incremental improvement.

1. THE KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND SKILL BUILDING MEETING

While it is important to find the means to effectively share substantive and technical information: "what different members of our team are currently working on", we would offer a small caution. Some professionals behave as though they believe that the true purpose of every practice group meeting is to provide a forum for their long-winded discussions on what they have been up to lately.

We do need to keep in mind that information can be shared with group members in countless ways, such as: memos, electronic bulletin boards, intranets, e-mail, written progress reports, and even informal word-of-mouth communications during social or office corridor gatherings. Valuable meeting time should be spent tapping into the collective genius of all the minds present but only as it contributes to moving the group forward.

We submit that the highest priority for this type of practice group meeting is to have an agenda that encourages substantive learning and skill development. The very best use of the group's time is to review specific learnings and new developments acquired while serving clients, dealing with client problems, or gleaned by researching new and emerging issues that may impact the group's practice. There is a vast difference in the value of hearing one of our partners talk (in general terms) about a matter that they have been working on, versus hearing about what that partner specifically learned, that might be of use to others in the group, from the way in which a particular situation or transaction was handled.

Therefore, rather than the question: "tell us what you are working on?" the question might be phrased: "what have you learned during these past few month that may be of value to the other members of our group?" Productive time is then spent going around the table, hearing from each individual in turn, on new knowledge they have acquired.

Practice groups find it valuable to devote some time on agendas to hearing from a client directly, perhaps having invited a client to address the entire group on the issues facing their particular industry. Many groups make it a habit to have each of their members take turns preparing a brief presentation designed to enhance the skills of everyone involved. To that end, we have witnessed partners demonstrating to their group the effective use of a new technology (that everyone could benefit from being more familiar with), a partner briefing colleagues on a development that will have impact on the problems facing clients, and perhaps a couple of the more accomplished rainmakers role-playing for the group how they actually handled a particularly difficult client interaction.

> Let's suppose for a moment that you remove the boardroom table from your conference room. Now let's suppose you replace the seats with comfortable armchairs. Suppose even further that you converted your conference area into a living room. How much might this affect the outcome of your meetings? That's how much your meetings are about power – and not effective communications.

## 2. THE ACTION PLANNING MEETING

This is perhaps the more difficult meeting to handle effectively. As one managing partner astutely observed, "The problem is, for professionals, words are action. Professionals make their living uttering or writing words; that's their stock in trade. But in management, action is action, and you have to overcome the tendency, reinforced by years of education and training, of most professionals to substitute words for action. My challenge, therefore, is to get the practice groups to do something."

Since practice group meetings remain the principle vehicle for effective group action and the most visible aspect of the group's progress, in our experience they require that a practice leader adhere to eight interrelated principles that together will help energize these meetings and make them far more effective.

### 1. Set a singular focus

This type of monthly meeting should be devoted to only "one" action-planning issue of importance to your practice group. Consider the following topics and you can well imagine the numerous ideas that might be generated amongst your team:

- what is our practice group's strategy for being more profitable over the next year?
- in what ways can we improve our overall efficiency in handling our kinds of matters and get our client assignments accomplished at a lower cost to us?
- what kind and what amount of training may be necessary to have us each individually performing at a higher level of efficiency?

- what actions can we take to improve our individual billable rates?
- which of our most recent client engagements would we consider to have been our most profitable and what do we need to do to get more of those?
- what could we be doing to ensure a higher degree of morale, motivation and enthusiasm, so that we might better retain our talented professionals?
- what do we need to do to better understand our existing clients, understand what is keeping them awake at nights, and actually be perceived to be more valuable to them?
- what kinds of services might existing or prospective clients like that no one else has offered them?
- what would we need to do to get the very best new clients to use our group's services?

2. "Brainstorm" ideas

Whomever it is in your group that has the responsibility for facilitating discussions at your meeting (most often the practice leader), should proceed (without entertaining any discussion on the topic, which would only serve to take up the better part of the meeting time) to engage the group in a constructive "brainstorming" exercise. The purpose of the brainstorming is to elicit individual action ideas, that if implemented, could serve to advance the group toward achieving progress on their singular objective.

We suggest a brainstorming process to tap the imagination and creativity of the group. Those who are concerned that a creative process will lack substance can be assured that the process merely creates a more imaginative menu and that the subsequent ordering from that menu will be executed with wisdom and discernment.

If we can all agreed to be highly disciplined about getting to potential action ideas and refraining from engaging in lengthy discussions and debates, we can devote about forty minutes to this process. Of course, our natural tendency as professionals, is to enjoy engaging in lengthy discussions, so we have discovered that it is helpful to have your group agree upon some basic rules before they begin.

The accepted rules for this brainstorming activity are as follows:

- say everything that comes to mind;
- no discussion;
- make no value judgment comments - positive or negative;
- record all comments so that they can be seen and get down lots of ideas;
- encourage participation and build on each other's ideas.

Not to belabor this, but you may notice from viewing these rules, that as professionals this is not our normal pattern of behavior. "Say everything that comes to mind?" You may remember that we have been taught to think before we open our mouths. In the process of brainstorming, we want the members of our team to offer their raw, unfettered ideas so that any idea (however crazy sounding) can stimulate a further thought that might offer a real breakthrough. "Make no value judgments?" Here again the normal pattern is to observe someone in the group pose a thought and then one need wait only a nano-second before hearing others respond with the six reasons why that won't work. That may be the way our partners' meetings operate, but in this session your intent is to stimulate a little creativity, so professionals need to be protected from everyone overanalyzing and critiquing their ideas.

Once having agreed to these rules, we can begin the exercise. One technique that helps is to methodically, go around the table asking each member in turn to contribute one idea. Another method is to have everyone write down one idea (anonymously) and hand it up to the facilitator who then records it on a flip chart for all to see. The advantage to using a paper flipchart is that you can mount the charts for everyone to see and retain them for transcribing a permanent record of the group's contributions.

The role of the facilitator is to get everyone's ideas out and recorded. The critical task here is to ensure that everyone's contribution is indeed recorded. Sometimes in the verbal flurry of ideas, it is easy to either miss hearing someone's idea or record it in terms that do not adequately capture the intent. It always helps to ask members of the group to assist you to ensure that all ideas are captured and recorded accurately.  Try to capture a few of the words actually used rather than summarizing or paraphrasing.

3. Ensure ideas are actionable

It is essential for the facilitator to be ever vigilant in ensuring that the ideas expressed are specific, doable, and can be implemented. Sounds easy, but it's not. As professionals we are prone to expressing concepts or goals, and often find it difficult to transform those concepts into actions.

For example, one common concept that we often hear is, "I think that in our group we should always make a point of visiting our clients at their place of business to learn more about them." And we think so too! As a concept it is a good one. The only small hurdle is "how?"

As the facilitator, you must always be asking yourself as these ideas surface: Is this proposed idea specific, tangible and quantitative enough (or is it merely a goal, concept, or objective)? Could some member of our group delegate this idea to a junior for implementation such that the junior would know exactly what initial action should be taken?

The challenge is in dealing with situations where ideas do not measure up to these criteria. The facilitator might want to gently encourage more specifics, without discussion.  For example, you might say to the individual, "George, that idea would no doubt be very helpful to you and the group. Could you expand upon it to help us determine how we could ensure that everyone in our group was doing this consistently and how we would know that it was happening."

Take a moment to explore with George (asking other group members to contribute) how we could do this, what is the action step. You are likely to elicit something like, "Well, we could develop a wall-chart that would display a list of our top twenty clients down the vertical column and the members of our group along the horizontal. We could then initiate a system whereby each of us took responsibility to visit one client over the next quarter and note on the chart the date that client was visited and submit a report to the group on our findings."

As you can see, now you have something specific. The group will be able to assess for itself, at any point, how far along with this action plan they have progressed. Have the top twenty clients been identified? Has the wall-chart been developed? Has a visitation plan been drafted? Have client visits been made and reports submitted? The facilitator's job is to ensure that he or she has helped the group generate a good list of very specific, tangible, quantitative and implementable ideas for moving toward their objectives.

4. Get "voluntary" commitments

This is an action process. To simply engage in discussion may be informative and even entertaining, but accomplishes nothing - - except perhaps to frustrate those in your group who yearn to see the group accomplish something meaningful. Practice group meetings of this action planning nature should concluded with each member taking responsibility for a specific action task. In many meetings we have observed some practice leader arbitrarily delegating various items to members of the group as assignments for the next meeting. That is not the most effective way to get meaningful action. (It might be necessary in an emergency, or for a very junior person who simply needs to accept a few unattractive tasks at first, but will not be effective as a default operating mode with the group.)

It is a myth that people resist change. People resist what other people make them do, not what they themselves choose to do. People fight that which fails to take their needs or interests into account and gives them no room to influence decisions. People do not identify their own projects as "change." They are simply acting on their aspirations to get something done that they can shape and mold. That's why firms that innovate successfully year after year seek their own professional's ideas, let them initiate new projects, and encourage multiple experiments.

As the meeting facilitator, you should reserve the final fifteen minutes to determining which of the ideas, from those generated, are sufficiently appealing to members of the group that they might be moved to "volunteer" to invest a modest amount of their discretionary non-billable time.

The practice leader might say to the group; "We are going to take a moment to review all of the ideas we generated. I then want to hear from each of you in turn. Is there one idea amongst our list, that you feel sufficiently motivated by, that you would be prepared to invest a few hours of your time over the next month to get started on... and please understand, this is to be totally voluntary… no obligations, no recrimination. If you do not see an idea there that you would be prepared to work on, then you may simply 'pass' when I get to you… if you do see an idea that you find motivating then I want to hear from you as which one it is."

We could consume a great deal of time in discussing and debating the relative merits of each idea. The harsh reality in many practice groups is that execution can turn into talking about execution. Instead, we suggest having your professionals look at all of the ideas generated and then individually, one by one, choose an idea that they are inspired by and would help to implement. (The wise facilitator risks by giving individuals the option to pass by not selecting any idea.) The role of the practice leader at this point is to:

- ensure that the idea is not completely contrary to the goals of the practice group;

- confer with each individual on what modest amount of non-billable time they have to work on implementing this idea over the next month;

- determine precisely what the first actions might be to moving this idea forward; and

- have them describe precisely what they will bring back to the next meeting as evidence that something has been accomplished.

The essence of success here is not reliant on picking the best, strategically important ideas to advance. That can wait until your group has had some experience and successes with productive meetings. Rather, the essence of success here is in stimulating members of the group to take some modest amount of constructive action.

## 5. Keep commitments small

Each specific task must be small and doable. It is a common observance that when professionals get caught-up in the process of generating good ideas or are stimulated by an idea that they like (often the very one that they themselves offered), they immediately want to volunteer to "change the world".

Thus, in many meetings we observe professionals volunteering to either take on a number of projects or some task that is clearly so large that there is not a realistic hope that they will implement what they have promised by the next meeting. Following the meeting, that same professional returns to their office with the very best of intentions only to encounter the numerous client fires that burn. The next time they blink they find themselves at the next month's meeting with nothing substantial to report. The group then enters a demoralizing cycle where some members "promise big, deliver nothing, get forgiven" while others think to themselves "why am I doing all the work" or “why do we bother…”

It is important to temper professionals' enthusiasm by reminding them that their billable work will always take priority and determining with them what they think they can really accomplish in the next little while.

We have learned that the best performing groups operate on a simple philosophy. If each of us were to take one small project or the first step to progressing a larger undertaking. If we each were to commit a modest investment (two hours) of our non-billable time to implementing that task over the next month, then cumulatively and incrementally, we would make significant progress over time.

Your role as practice leader is to ensure that the task is very small ("what is the first step that should be tackled to complete this project?"). It is far better to move forward with many small steps, than to not move forward at all. Plans and tactics, however well intentioned, should be clearly secondary to concrete action.

## 6. Establish your "Contracts For Action"

Your further role as practice leader is to ensure that the task is carefully defined (What can we all expect to get from you by the next meeting?"), and completely capable of being accomplished. It is important to return to the next meeting with people reporting small successes, not excuses.

You need to help each professional define specifically what the group should expect to see from them by the next meeting with regard to the execution of their particular assignment. Will your group get a report on some research that has been undertaken; evidence that the initial steps to completion are underway; a summary of the completed project with the outcomes achieved; or a tangible product that can be distributed amongst the members? The task and tangible outcome expected needs to be outlined in specifics. This is where ideas are converted into action.

It strikes us that the topic of "non-billable time invested" is similar to the issue of partner compensation. In partner compensation, it is often a matter not of what I am being compensated, as much as what my compensation is relative to other partners. So too with non-billable time. Members of a practice group get very uncomfortable if they think that others are not pulling their load, and they feel that they are doing all of the work.

In high performance groups the pressure for implementation is peer pressure. In the words of some practice leaders it is expressed as, "Are each of us unconditionally prepared to give our practice group a solid commitment that we will absolutely complete any and every assignment that we voluntarily agreed to take responsibility for?" The underlying philosophy becomes one of not letting the team down.

7. Follow-up between meetings

Since expectations are naturally high following a good practice group meeting, any lack of progressive action by the next meeting is extremely detrimental to group morale. This is the most frustrating problem for busy practice leaders. This is also the one area where a practice leader can have the greatest added-value impact and truly display their coaching abilities.

As a practice leader you have two options following your group meeting. You can either retreat to your own client work and wait for the next month's meeting to see what progress has been made; or you can proactively schedule a bit of time to wander about and offer to help various members of your group with their specific projects.

To achieve continuous action requires frequent interaction. What you might expect to hear from an effective practice leader is: "Hey George. I remember that you took on the project of helping us initiate our client visitation efforts. How can I help? Do you think we might schedule a half-hour together later this week and I could work with you to develop our list of the top clients and a visitation schedule for our next meeting?"

It is ironic that we invest time within our groups to make good plans and then spend little effort in follow-up to ensure that actions are being taken consistent with those plans. If we were to consider where the highest value use of time would be, for anyone who had the responsibility of being practice leader, it would be in this area of following up to help others succeed, by pitching in and giving them a hand to complete their projects.

Because of the time pressures that leaders face and for some leaders the size of the group that they are working with, it may be wise to delegate strategically to an able assistant, secretary, or some other partner who can help out. A deputy can do a lot to keep you informed as to which projects are on track and which may need your personal attention.

8. Celebrate successes

The overall goal for everything outlined here is small, quick successes. The best groups always take time to acknowledge a specific accomplishment and improvement in reaching a personal or group goal.

It is important to recognize that the outcome of present actions plays a major role in determining future actions. At the personal level, if people work especially hard and devote long hours to a project that eventually goes unnoticed, they will soon minimize or abandon their efforts. At the practice group level, if expectations are exceeded but there is no means of expressing pride in those achievements, it becomes a hollow victory.

Just as there is a time value to money, there is a time value to enthusiasm. The earlier you stimulate that enthusiasm, the sooner you can leverage it into real momentum. People like winners. And they like to be part of winning teams. Early wins and clear evidence of early momentum translates into early enthusiasm.

## CONCLUSION

We are convinced that while most professionals may pontificate on how they despise meetings, what they are really expressing is their frustration with having to sit through protracted and unproductive meetings.

When given the opportunity to participate in a highly productive session that results in something tangible being generated (and especially if they see some quick and small successes flowing from the implementation of action plans) in all likelihood, they will be eager to agree that perhaps "we can devote another half-hour to this topic." And, even if that doesn't happen, we are convinced that the group will have accomplished far more than they normally accomplish in less time.

That does not mean that every action will be successful. But, as Wayne Gretzky reminds us, "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take." Practice leaders need to create a climate that tolerates missed shots yet demands that everyone continues to take them.

Results-oriented leaders see themselves as catalysts. They expect to achieve a great deal, but know that they can do little without the efforts of others. Moving from talk to action is imperative, but especially in the times we live in. It requires commitment, curiosity and courage. It requires leadership. Nothing less will break through the competitive pressures of today's marketplace.

# SOLVING SOME COMMON MEETING PROBLEMS

The prctice group meeting should be an integral part of bringing together the members of the team to deal with inportant issues affecting the group's progress. Yet many professionals view these meetings as a complete waste of time, rather than contributing to their success. That's because most practice group meetings are prone to a number of problems, ranging from lack of focus to lack of follow up.

Let's take a closer look at solving common meeting problems.

**• Meetings with No Clear Purpose**

The first commandment of meeting management is: Always prepare an agenda in advance. Include not only topics to be addressed but also the time for each topic and the expected outcome. An expected outcome isn't a predetermined solution. It is notification of what's expected of meeting participants. For example, if "cost cutting" were an agenda item, the expected outcome might be "three viable approaches to cutting department costs by 15 percent."

The preset agenda isn't cast in stone. As the meeting begins, invite participants to add to the agenda and renegotiate allotted times, taking new items into account. Limit items to a number that can be addressed in the time allowed.

**• Late Starts**

If you wait even five minutes to accommodate latecomers, more people will come five minutes later next time. People adjust their arrivals to when they expect the meeting to start. If you always start on time, you send a powerful message. And you won't have to disrupt the meeting to update latecomers if you appoint a recorder to keep detailed notes on flipcharts. Latecomers can catch up by reading the notes.

**• Meetings That Drag on Interminably**

When conversations get intense, it's hard to attend to time constraints. So, appoint a timekeeper and adhere zealously to his or her reminders. When a topic deserves extra time, either the manager or group should decide whether to drop an agenda item to allow more time for the hot one or to defer continued discussion of the hot one to another meeting. The latter course allows time for a new perspective and for the gathering of new information.

Some people are advocates of stand up meetings to keep people from settling in. While the stand-up approach works for ad hoc meetings, it's not feasible for two hours of agenda items.

**• When the Power Partner Won't Let Go**

Managers can dominate meetings in two ways. Either they do all the talking, or they ask for input but make decisions that ignore it. After a few such meetings, people tune out mentally.

Be upfront. If people are there just to listen, tell them so in advance. If you want their opinions so you can make a good decision yourself, tell them that, and show them how what they say will help you. If you commit to group decision making, stick to that promise. Be careful not to coerce others into agreeing with you just because you are the boss.

The best way to police yourself is to appoint someone else to facilitate the meeting. Then you can participate like everyone else. Be sure to pick a facilitator with the skill and courage to restrain you if, in your enthusiasm, you begin to take over.

**• Meeting Reruns**

You know the scenario. Everyone brings a favorite axe to grind. Restricting how often people talk doesn't work because it restricts new input also. Restraining people from raising their pet peeves just
validates their conviction that no one is listening to them. Instead, to discourage the rehashing of old issues, begin by legitimizing them: Record all remarks on the flip chart. The second time an issue comes up, point to the record to indicate the concern has been heard.

**• Nonstop Talkers**

Writing meeting notes on flip charts helps control the nonstop talker too. While thanking the person for giving input, you can point out all her recorded remarks. Their abundance will be a reminder that she has dominated the meeting. Ask her to join you in encouraging others to share their ideas.

You may be able to control a loudmouth next time by appointing him or her facilitator or recorder. Both roles are highly visible, which will make an attention-seeker happy, but both restrain the job holder from giving input.

**• Negative People**

To keep the naysayers from poisoning the atmosphere, make it a practice to defer negative comments until you have a list of what people like about an idea. With the pluses staring them in the face (from the flipchart), people won't be so strongly swayed by negative comments. The owners of each idea will have backing to support their opinions when confronted by "That'll never work."

**• Meeting or Melee**

To keep meetings from disintegrating into arguments, try this ground rule: First agree, then refute. That means that before anyone criticizes someone else's idea, the critic must find something in that idea to agree with. Then the critic states his or her opinion as an addition to the idea, not a negation of it.

**• Majority Rules But Minority Wins**

Voting produces a win-lose solution. And sometimes the losers take all by sabotaging implementation. Guide the group to a consensus decision instead. Remember, consensus doesn't mean everybody has to love the outcome. Rather, it means everyone can live with it. So work on revising those parts of a potential solution that some participants can't live with.

**• What Next?**

Before closing any meeting, summarize all the key discussion points. Then ask each person to recap what he or she is going to do to implement the decisions made. And be sure to follow up with a written record of the decisions and tasks. Then keep in touch with people to find out how they are progressing.