

The Road

to Good Meetings

Follow these simple rules for more effective production meetings. Not only will your company run more smoothly, your employees may even enjoy themselves.



It's the weekly production meeting and Joe is going on and on about the Smith job. He's two days ahead of schedule thanks to the wall and roof packages being delivered early – at the same time, in fact. But he's worried that someone in the neighborhood might take them. And speaking of that neighborhood, he tells the group, they should all visit Smitty's Diner nearby. They serve great ham and eggs.

At this point, nobody is listening. After about 10 minutes of hearing Joe talk, the other participants start thinking about their own concerns. "Carpenters tend to get bored in production meetings or see them as a waste of time," says Tim Faller, a production consultant for Field Training Services.

Who wants to sit in a room and hear someone drone on while their own pressing work is put on hold? No one. Yet week in and week out, this is what happens in many production meetings.

Some production managers, however, have developed a different,

more effective approach. Their meetings solve problems, prevent common mistakes from slowing down work, and help everyone manage their time better. These production managers claim that their employees actually like these gatherings and although their personal styles may vary, they all agree that the path to good meetings is guided by a few simple rules.

Rule 1: Use meetings to debug problems. Production meetings, if run well, serve the workers. “If you solve problems for people so that they can go back to work, they’ll want to come to your meeting,” says Bill Daniels, CEO of American Consulting & Training. He frequently coaches clients on how to improve their meeting techniques.

According to Daniels, what you don’t want is a meeting like the one above, where Joe runs through each of the 20 things he has going on and reports that they’re all on schedule. “You can applaud people briefly for accomplishments,” Daniels says. “But the message should be: Use the meeting for what hasn’t been solved.”

For example, before his lead carpenters arrive at their Wednesday morning production meeting, Brad Geer, production manager at Fannin Remodeling Co., in Toledo, Ohio, expects his people to study what’s coming in the week ahead. The result? Carpenters show up prepared to talk about current

schedules, subs and budget.

“If one guy is off schedule, another guy probably has an idea to get him back on schedule,” Geer says.

The same sort of trouble-shooting happens at production manager Andy Hannan’s meetings for superintendents held every other Wednesday at MARK IV Builders in Bethesda, MD. “Someone will say, ‘How do we get you caught up?’ or ‘What if you tried this?’ If we didn’t have these meetings, that wouldn’t happen.”

Rule 2: Keep your eyes on the road ahead, not on the rearview mirror. Meetings should focus on the future, Daniels says. “The past is important only from the standpoint of what needs to be done differently tomorrow. Meetings are not a time to find out who screwed up yesterday. That isn’t going to do you much good.”

An added bonus of looking ahead, according to Geer, is that it’s a great way for workers to save time later on. This goes against the instincts of many carpenters, however. “A carpenter would rather work on the wood right in front of him,” Geer says. “But an hour spent scheduling can save a day on the job. Our meetings force them to study their schedule once a week, since they know they’ll have to talk about it.”

Rule 3: Tell them why they should care. To keep a crowd interested, the conversation should be relevant to everyone.

person’s job? If so, Faller says you should make sure there’s something about it that everyone can learn from. And if you’re going to do that, he says, “You should already know what that something is. You don’t want to spend 10 minutes listening to Joe ramble on before figuring it out.”

His recommendation: Instead of starting the meeting with, “Joe, how’s the Smith job going?” say, “Joe, you and I talked about this earlier. Why don’t you tell us about the problem you’re having with Mrs. Smith’s job?” You’ll help everyone enter the conversation more quickly and spark better solutions.

Rule 4: Write an agenda simple enough for a fifth-grader to remember. Your meeting should be so predictable that people will know how long it will last, what is expected and when to speak. A good agenda creates that predictability.

Agendas weren’t in the picture when Geer first joined Fannin Remodeling as a carpenter. Production meetings were a disorganized free-for-all. “Instead of an agenda, they distributed notes afterward. Anyone could speak up about whatever was on their mind and it would turn into a shouting match when something was off schedule,” he says. “Now the meeting has a very scheduled agenda and is run very tightly.”

His simple agenda looks something like this: Budget, schedule or manpower issues with each carpenter’s job;

and potential snags in terms of and company education.

Rule 5: Homework and prep work can trim back meeting time. Instead of gathering all her production managers each week for a lengthy meeting, Tammy Russo, senior production manager at the Arlington, Massachusetts.-based Feinmann Remodeling, expects a “status report.”

Every week, each production manager turns in a status report that hits the highlights of each job: Projected completion date, budget, labor update, projected gross profit, scheduling (by category of subcontractor), payment information, pending change orders and sales feedback.

Every other week, Russo meets one-on-one with production managers for 15 minutes, using the status report as the agenda. Afterward, they all sit down as a group. That one-two punch keeps the team meeting from running too long—and from becoming bogged down by minutiae. “It’s more of a strategy meeting,” Russo says. The key is the pre-meeting prep work—the time spent on the status reports, project

Want to talk about one plans and benchmarks. Having all the info at their fingertips, sparks conversations like, ‘Do I have the right man for this job? Maybe we should bring in someone better at framing.’ It helps people ask questions and it helps us manage time.”

Rule 6: Really listen. Listening is the ultimate sign of respect and it’s crucial to running a good meeting, especially with an audience of lead carpenters or production managers.

Consultant Daniels suggests trying this tactic at the start of any production meeting: “Ask them to talk about something good that’s happened this week. No one gets more than 60 seconds. Let them listen to one another.”

Encourage them to be specific. If you hear, “Everything’s going OK on my site,” ask more questions. The goal is to draw out useful information that everyone in the room can relate to or learn from.

Rule 7: Know when to stop listening. Ramblers need to be contained or the group will quickly lose faith in the benefits of the meeting. Flashing a “time-out” hand

sales referrals; safety training; **signal or saying “too much information!” is how Hannan’s superintendents keep one another from getting carried away. It’s one of the “Rules of Engagement” the group created for all meetings. When someone who’s having a great week gets carried away, Hannan says, a peer is usually the one to speak up and say TMI!”**

“I can appreciate that it’s going well for that person,” he says. “But these guys have to get back out there, especially the one who’s not doing too well. What we need is to figure out how to fix the things that are broken.”

Be respectful when pushing a meeting alone. Brad Geer cautions, “If you don’t give a carpenter the respect he deserves, he easily takes offense.” Couch any cut-off in terms of how it benefits everyone : “I’m not trying to cut you off; I’m just trying to get you back on the jobsite quicker.” With these rules in hand, you can get them out the door and on the road fast—with time to spare for a plate of those ham and eggs.

Alice Bumgarner, freelance writer

What’s on the Agenda?

Keep eyes from glazing over during production meetings by adding these crowd-appropriate items to your agenda:

One-minute highlights: Each person talks about something specific that went right during the past week. Benefit: A positive moment in a meeting that might be focused on problems.

Remodeling job issues: Any trouble spots involving budget, safety, schedule or manpower. Benefit: Peer-to-peer problem solving.

Sales referrals: Each salesperson talks about referrals they’ve received due to the carpenters’ good work in the field. Benefit: Quick, positive feedback that allows carpenters to make the connection between their work and new business.

Safety training: Review OSHA—as well as off-the-job—safety information. “Sometimes it’s as simple as a skit about ladder safety, MARK IV’s Andy Hannan says. Benefit: Workers stay safe.

Skill training: Discuss one aspect of how the business works. Example: “Last meeting, we did change-order training,” Hannan says. “I put a change order example on the board and asked the superintendents to calculate it as they saw it. I had three people do it one way and three do it another.” Benefit: Smarter, faster teams. “Change orders are a big part of what we do,” he says. “So learning to process them correctly is important.”