

Why Your Meetings Are Broken (And How to Fix Them for Good)

2025 Nonprofit Summit of the Midlands

Mary Sand, PhD







What is your greatest struggle when it comes to meetings?



Topics:

- Design Meetings That Matter
- Drive Engagement and Decisions
- Follow Up for Real Results





Stop and consider.....



- Do you need a question answered.....email, call, text, 1:1?
- Is there a sensitive issue.....meet 1:1?
- Is it a recurring meeting with no news or updates.....cancel?

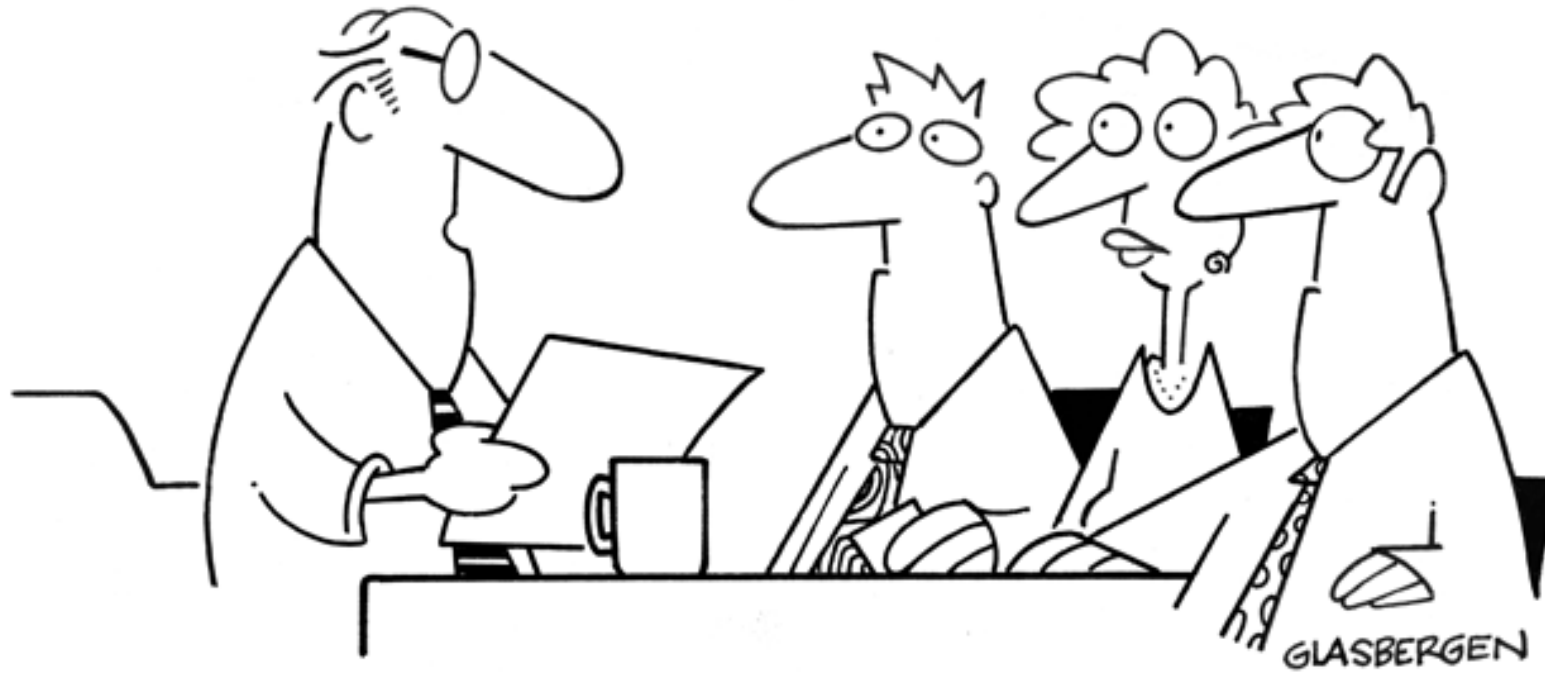


Do the math

Take the number of people attending the meeting and multiply by the average of their hourly rates of pay. That's the cost of a one-hour meeting.

Let that be the wakeup call to lead effective meetings!





**"The purpose of today's meeting is to look very busy
like we're actually accomplishing something."**



Design Meetings That Matter

- Prepare Effectively
 - Meetings versus Presentations
- Set Clear Agendas
- Establish Expectations



Preparation for the Meeting

- Send agenda with sufficient lead time for attendees
- Communicate specific preparation needed by attendees
- Agenda items aligned with attendees and purpose of the meeting



Participant



Preparation for the Meeting: **Participant**

- Request an agenda prior to the meeting
- Ask if there is specific preparation needed



Agenda

- Seek input from team members
 - Agenda items due by _____
 - “That sounds like an agenda item.”
- Select relevant topics for attendees and who leads each topic
- Identify each topic as:
 - Share information
 - Seek input for a future decision
 - Make a decision
- List agenda items as questions to be answered
- Estimate realistic timeframes per topic



Agenda:

Participant

- Request to have topic(s) included on the agenda
- Seek clarity regarding each topic:
 - Share information
 - Seek input for a future decision
 - Make a decision
- Ask what questions are to be answered



What would most improve meetings at your organization today?

- Clearer agendas
- Clearer takeaways

Source: Becker's LinkedIn Poll, October 2025



Set Expectations

- Ground rules
 - Texts, Emails, Calls
 - Confidentiality
 - Participation
 - Preparation
- Parking lot
- Refocus after interruptions, derailling behavior, etc.
- Silence is agreement

**WHAT
DO
YOU
EXPECT**



Silence is agreement

- End the meeting after the meeting
- End the “I reserve the right to weigh in later”
- Take anonymous polls and/or votes
- Small group discussion
- Encourage preparation before the meeting
- Be clear which decisions will be made in the meeting



Set Expectations:

Participant

- **ASK!**
 - Ground rules
 - Texts, Emails, Calls
 - Confidentiality
 - Participation
 - Preparation
 - Parking lot
 - Refocus after interruptions, derailing behavior, etc.
 - Silence is agreement



Drive Engagement and Decisions

- Boost Participation
- Foster Meaningful Discussion
- Ensure Decisions Are Made Efficiently



Participation

- “Plus One” (denotes agreement with what someone else said and avoids participants repeating what’s been said)
- “Pass” (denotes nothing to contribute)
- “Who has the first question?” (instead of asking, “Do you have any questions?”)



Participation:

Participant

- Suggest the use of “Plus One”
- Suggest the use of “Pass”
- “I have the first question and I’m curious what questions others in the group have.”



Participation



Participation (safe space and invitations)

- “What problems are we going to have?”
 - Challenges, Obstacles, Pushback
- “What ideas do you have to overcome those problems (challenges, obstacles, etc.)?”
- How will the staff (or clients) react to this change?”
- “What is the impact to your team?” (interdepartmental)



Participation:

Participant

- “Can we discuss what problems might occur and how we might overcome those?”
 - Challenges, Obstacles, Pushback
- How do we think the staff (or clients) will react to this change?”
- “I’m curious, what do you think the impact will be to your team?”
(interdepartmental)



Participation in Virtual Meetings

Setting participants up for success

- Announce who I'm going to call on in what order, then ask the question
- Send emails or texts the day prior and ask people to come prepared to start the conversation on specific topics



Participation in Virtual Meetings: **Participant**

Setting yourself up for success

- Contact the meeting organizer before the meeting to ask if there is anything specific to be prepared for
- Focus, focus, focus!



Code Word

- Safe approach
- Raises awareness
- Anyone can call it
- Examples
 - Off track
 - Time
 - Offensive comments
 - Emotions
 - Etc.



Code Word:

Participant

- Request
- Share the benefits



Decisions

- ❖ Group Consensus
- ❖ Majority Vote
- ❖ Leader's Choice



Follow Up for Real Results

- Simple and Actionable Strategies
- Accountability
- Track Progress





**“As I read the minutes of our last meeting,
please keep in mind that each minute
actually felt more like an hour.”**



It's a Wrap

- Confirm decisions
 - Define next steps
 - Develop communication points/plan
 - Gather meeting feedback
-
- Send meeting notes and/or follow up notes (within 24 hours)
 - Key decisions, assigned action items (owner), deadlines, and links to notes or documents.
 - Manually created
 - AI created (review and edit)



It's a Wrap: **Participant**

- Request that final decisions are stated
- Ask what the next steps are and who is responsible for what
- Ask if meeting notes will be sent



Accountability

- Clarity
 - Define and document individual responsibilities
 - Describe deliverables
 - Declare deadlines (follow up if missed)
- Cadence
 - Regularly reference these commitments in future meetings
 - Visible tracking



Accountability



- Use open-ended questions
 - “Tell us about your progress” or “What progress have you made?”
 - Prompt reflection and transparency
- Foster a supportive, team-oriented atmosphere
 - Focus on constructive feedback
 - Identify and work to remove obstacles
- Follow up individually as needed



Accountability:

Participant

Do what you were assigned (or volunteered to do) by the date in which it is to be done



Track Progress

- Tracking tools only work when
 - People participate in a timely manner
 - Leaders hold the team accountable
 - The information brings value
- Clear targets and finish lines (from x to y by when)
- Review progress at meetings, highlighting both achievements and gaps
- Celebrate success



Application Opportunity

- What needs to change in the way you are **planning** meetings?
- What needs to change in the way you are **leading** meetings?
- What needs to change in the way you are **participating** in meetings?



What is your greatest struggle when it comes to meetings?



Thank you

Mary Sand, PhD
marysandphd@gmail.com
SandConsulting.com
605.212.9374

