



## 10 COMMANDMENTS OF A MEETING



You've been sitting in the meeting for 93 minutes. It feels like 93 days. It was supposed to last an hour, max, but the Senior VP is in the room, and the point of the session was to discuss his pet project, and no one wants to be the first to crack. Everyone else is busy making gratuitous points designed to flatter Mr. Big. You're entertaining fantasies about throwing a cream pie, or worse, at the blowhard who just won't stop talking about how successful the project will be. You know it's doomed to fail; it's the high-tech equivalent of selling ice to the Inuit.

You're asking yourself, who's in charge here? How did all these reasonably well-intentioned people get so far out of whack? And, more to the point, how can this juggernaut be stopped?

Since mass laryngitis is not an option, you need the Ten Commandments of Meetings. Moreover, you need to post them prominently in meeting rooms so that everyone can begin to follow them – especially the leader. Remember that even Moses had trouble with his unruly flock from time to time, so be prepared for the occasional outburst of the modern corporate version of Baal worship.



### **Thou Shalt Always Know What Time It Is**

The clock is God in meetings. Out of respect for the commitment and sanity of everyone who attends, meetings should never run over the time allotted. Especially regularly scheduled meetings. If the session gets bogged down in an issue, table it for another meeting. If the meeting must conclude by taking an action or decision, then schedule it accordingly. Tell all the participants before the meeting starts that it will go as long as necessary to reach the stated conclusion. Don't mislead people by minimizing the amount of work involved; that kind of trickery will only come back to haunt you.



### **Thou Shalt Not Forget the Main Reason for Meetings**

The only good reason to have meetings is to do something together that you can't do better alone. In business, meetings have three primary purposes: communicating, administering, and deciding. Of these, the first and last are most worthwhile. But the focus of all three kinds of meetings should be action. They should either be communicating the intention to take an action or the results of action that has been taken, administering a plan of action, or deciding among alternative actions. If you find yourself calling meetings – or going to them – that have some other purpose, you're wasting your time. And everyone else's. Find something else to do.



### **Thou Shalt Remember the Golden Rule of Meetings: Praise in Public, Criticize in Private**

Shut off public criticism when it arises. It's extremely destructive to morale and should be prevented. Indeed, much misery could be avoided in the business world if all members of the corporate community would remember a simple fact: if they are working for the same employer, then they are all on the same team. Corporate politics we will always have with us, but that doesn't mean that we have to accept them tamely. Help your vocally critical teammates by making it clear, in advance of each meeting, who is in charge, how long the meeting will last, and what the point of the meeting is. Then deal with attempts to take the meeting in other, more vicious directions as simple misunderstandings of the agreed-upon ground rules. Politely but firmly steer the meeting back to the right terrain.



#### **Thou Shalt Not Convene Meetings Outside of Normal Business Hours**

Of course there are times when this commandment must be broken, but they should be reserved for real emergencies. People who schedule meetings for evenings and weekends are merely advertising the embarrassing fact that they have no life - and they're expecting others to give up theirs. That kind of person should not be allowed to run anything, much less part of a modern corporation, because they lack the basic humanity to do a good job. Surviving in the fast-moving, devil-take-the-hindmost business world of today requires good peripheral vision as well as keen understanding of the work involved. Those without the necessary life balance can't possibly understand that world they're in or see around the next business corner.



#### **Thou Shalt Not Use Group Pressure to Logroll Conclusions**

It is simply wrong to use meetings to pressure people into agreeing to actions or ideas that they know to be immoral or illegal in order to promote the business of the corporation. Group pressure is a powerful force, especially where jobs are at stake. Don't misuse it to get people to stray from the straight and narrow, or bend the rules, or set the quotas dangerously high, or cut corners on quality, or any one of a thousand such activities that go on every day in misguided organizations everywhere. Your corporation has a set of values. If it doesn't include adherence to a code of ethics and the rule of law, change the values or find values or find somewhere else to work.



#### **Thou Shalt Not Use Meetings to Destroy Others' Careers**

There is enough room in every meeting for a disagreement without making it personal or destructive. More than that, it's wrong – and politically unwise. Modern corporate life has become so ephemeral and its denizens so transient that your past is bound to come back and face you again, and sooner rather than later. A petty triumph at someone else's expense at one job may well prove seriously embarrassing at your next job. Resist the temptation. Curiously, the unstable nature of today's workplace has encouraged people to take the opposite attitude. The thinking seems to run, "I'll never see these people again, so why not cut loose?" But the opposite is almost certainly true.



#### **Thou Shalt Keep the Personal and the Corporate Distinct**

There's nothing wrong with having friends at work. But meetings are not for social calls. To be sure, a certain amount of socializing at the beginnings and endings of meetings is part of the grease that keeps the well-oiled corporate machine running smoothly. But the balance should be clearly kept on the side of business. Too much socializing will lead to resentment among the others at the meeting who are not part of the party. More than that, it's inefficient, bad for business, and corrosive for your soul. You need to have a life outside the corporate one. If you find that all your socializing is taking place in business meetings, it's time to change a few things.



#### **Thou Shalt Remember that the Best Model for Meetings Is Democracy, Not Monarchy**

Resist the temptation to railroad your fellow participants into a decision you want. You need to lead by moral persuasion, not by virtue of your title. Brute force is not the appropriate mode for meetings, though jujitsu sometimes is. As a leader, you should always strive to understand the

sense of the meeting. If you want to issue edicts, publish them in the media available to you. You don't need a meeting to announce a new course of proceeding that is not up for discussion. And watch out for other participants in the meeting trying to take control. Hijacking a meeting is a cherished corporate game, but a nasty one. It's your job as a leader to prevent that from happening.



### **Thou Shalt Always Prepare a Clear Agenda and Circulate It Beforehand**

It is more than courtesy – it is good efficient business practice to think hard about the purpose, nature and structure of a meeting before it takes place. These thoughts should be codified in the form of an agenda and circulated to all participants well in advance of the meeting. Time enough, at any rate, for the participants to prepare whatever they need to in the way of reports, plans, proposals, or the like. Far too often, people who call meetings grossly underestimate the amount of preparation required of the participants.



### **Thou Shalt Terminate a Regularly Scheduled Meeting When Its Purpose for Being No Longer Exists**

If you can no longer clearly state the reason for having a regular meeting, it's time to kill it. Purposes change, and when the meeting has lost its reason for taking place, be the first one to put an end to it. All periodic meetings should have a stock-taking every few sessions to determine if the meeting still has a purpose. It's just one way to fight corporate bloat and bureaucratic encrustation. Of course, for this discipline to work, you must have decided what the regular meeting was for when it was begun. Goal-setting is just as important in meetings as it is in the rest of corporate life.

The only meetings that people wish had run longer are those magical ones that take place when lovers first set eyes upon one another. Don't make the mistake of thinking that your business meeting is that thrilling. Keep its timing, purpose, and tone in perspective. Live to meet another day.

*Reprinted with permission from Harvard Business Communication: A Newsletter from Harvard Business School. For more information please visit [www.hbsp.harvard.edu](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu).*

1. *International Communications Industries Association, Inc.*