

How to Attend a Meeting

by Dave Barry

To really succeed in a business or organization, it is sometimes helpful to know what your job is, and whether it involves any duties. Ask among your coworkers. "Hi," you should say. "I'm a new employee. What is the name of my job?" If they answer "long-range planner" or "lieutenant governor," you are pretty much free to lounge around and do crossword puzzles until retirement. Most jobs, however, will require some work.

There are two major kinds of work in modern organizations:

1. Taking phone messages for people who are in meetings, and,
2. Going to meetings.

Your ultimate career strategy will be to get a job involving primarily No.2, going to meetings, as soon as possible, because that's where the real prestige is. It is all very well and good to be able to take phone messages, but you are never going to get a position of power, a position where you can cost thousands of people their jobs with a single bonehead decision, unless you learn how to attend meetings.

The first meeting ever was held back in the Mezzanine Era. In those days, Man's job was to slay his prey and bring it home for Woman, who had to figure out how to cook it. The problem was, Man was slow and basically naked, whereas the prey had warm fur and could run like an antelope. (In fact it **was** an antelope, only nobody knew this).

At last someone said, "Maybe if we just sat down and did some brainstorming, we could come up with a better way to hunt our prey!" It went extremely well, plus it was much warmer sitting in a circle, so they agreed to meet again the next day, and the next.

But the women pointed out that, prey-wise, the men had not produced anything, and the human race was pretty much starving. The men agreed that was serious and said they would put it right near the top of their "agenda". At this point, the women, who were primitive but not stupid, started eating plants, and thus modern agriculture was born. It never would have happened without meetings.

The modern business meeting, however, might better be compared with a funeral, in the sense that you have a gathering of people who are wearing uncomfortable clothing and would rather be somewhere else. The major difference is that most funerals have a definite purpose. Also, nothing is really ever buried in a meeting.

An idea may look dead, but it will always reappear at another meeting later on. If you have ever seen the movie, "Night of the Living Dead," you have a rough idea of how modern meetings operate, with projects and proposals that everyone thought were killed rising up constantly from their graves to stagger back into meetings and eat the brains of the living.

There are two major kinds of meetings:

1. Meetings that are held for basically the same reason that Arbor Day is observed - namely, tradition. For example, a lot of managerial people like to meet on Monday, because it's Monday. You'll get used to it. You'd better, because this kind account for 83% of all meetings (based on a study in which I wrote down numbers until one of them looked about right). This type of meeting operates the

way “Show and Tell” does in nursery school, with everyone getting to say something, the difference being that in nursery school, the kids actually have something to say.

When it’s your turn, you should say that you’re still working on whatever it is you’re supposed to be working on. This may seem pretty dumb, since obviously you’d be working on whatever you’re supposed to be working on, and even if you weren’t, you’d claim you were, but that’s the traditional thing for everyone to say. It would be a lot faster if the person running the meeting would just say, “Everyone who is still working on what he or she is supposed to be working on, raise your hand.” You’d be out of there in five minutes, even allowing for jokes. But this is not how we do it in America. My guess is, it’s how they do it in Japan.

2. Meetings where there is some alleged purpose. These are trickier, because what you do depends on what the purpose is. Sometimes the purpose is harmless, like someone wants to show slides of pie charts and give everyone a big, fat report. All you have to do in this kind of meeting is sit there and have elaborate fantasies, then take the report back to your office and throw it away, unless, of course, you’re a vice president, in which case you write the name of a subordinate in the upper right hand corner, followed by a question mark, like this: “Norm?” Then you send it to Norm and forget all about it (although it will plague Norm for the rest of his career).

But sometimes you go to meetings where the purpose is to get your “input” on something. This is very serious because what it means is, they want to make sure that in case whatever it is turns out to be stupid or fatal, you’ll get some of the blame, so you have to escape from the meeting before they get around to asking you anything. One way is to set fire to your tie. Another is to have an accomplice interrupt the meeting and announce that you have a phone call from someone very important such as the president of the company or the Pope. It should be one or the other. It would sound fishy if the accomplice said, “You have a call from the president of the company, or the Pope.”

You should know how to take notes at a meeting. Use a yellow legal pad. At the top, write the date and underline it twice. Now wait until an important person, such as your boss, starts talking; when he does, look at him with an expression of enraptured interest, as though he is revealing the secrets of life itself. Then write interlocking rectangles like this:

(picture of doodled rectangles)

If it is an especially lengthy meeting, you can try something like this

(Picture of more elaborate doodles and a caricature of the boss)

If somebody falls asleep in a meeting, have everyone else leave the room. Then collect a group of total strangers, right off the street, and have them sit around the sleeping person until he wakes up. Then have one of them say to him, “Bob, your plan is very, very risky. However, you’ve given us no choice but to try it. I only hope, for your sake, that you know what you’re getting yourself into.” Then they should file quietly out of the room.