Cardinal Rule #1—End on Time

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Repeat after me, it is not okay to end meetings late. When moderators say, "I am sorry we ended 15 minutes over time, but I hope you found it valuable," it is not really all right. People have commitments. Sometimes, they are rushing to airports or to pick up children at day-care; sometimes, it is to cheer their child on at their soccer game or to make a dentist's last appointment for the day. If you are their manager, it is likely they will have to tough it out and be late.

If attendees at your meeting are late for another meeting or engagement, others might be waiting, putting the next moderator behind in timing. If the meeting has already started, it makes the person who joins late on a conference call or webcast appear disrespectful or lackadaisical.

Why it happens

Meetings run overtime for a number of reasons. Too much time is spent socializing with attendees at the beginning. There may also be lengthy discussion over an emotional issue or debate about the appropriate next steps. Sometimes, the moderator is too wordy or down right unclear. As a result, there are lots of unnecessary questions and sidebar conversations. Additionally, the topic may be too vast to discuss in the allocated time frame or the moderator related unnecessary details.

What to do about it

Obviously, it is important to conclude a meeting on a timely basis. So what are some strategies?

1. **Send out an agenda with time frames attached to areas for discussion and ask for approval of both the agenda and the allocated times.** Then, if debate continues beyond the agreed time, the moderator should interrupt and ask people how they would like to proceed, reminding them of the remaining agenda items. Further discussion can be tabled for another meeting or the agenda set aside or adjusted.

2. **Don't cram too much information into a meeting.** If there is a lot of information, consider scheduling two meetings or reserving discussion of some items for later.

3. **Identify any emotional areas and allow more time for discussion.** As the moderator, have a sense of the reactions certain issues will have on people. Will certain departments or people be skeptical of the data or how it was collected? Will they be defensive of why sales went down or angry about proposed cutbacks in staff? If so, be sure to overbudget time for discussion.

4. **Arrange the agenda so that the most important items are discussed first**. Sometimes too much time is spent giving the history. While context is important, attendees are usually more interested in solutions. They fully recognize that things didn't turn out well, but their focus is on the future.

5. **Be flexible**. Sometimes, a senior executive offers a lengthy opinion. As the junior person, the moderator cannot interrupt. In those cases, the moderator must be prepared to adjust his content quickly and on the fly.

6. **Be brief**. While the moderator can't always gauge the amount of discussion between attendees, he or she can monitor his own words and be concise. Nine times out of ten, participants prefer an overview. If they want more details, they will ask for it. If the moderator distributes handouts with the details prior to the meeting, attendees can come in with their questions. Technical deep dives on a topic can thus be avoided.

7. **Begin on time**. If the meeting is supposed to start at 9, start at 9, not 9:15. Make your opening remarks meaningful and capture attention with a humorous anecdote, relevant story, or startling statistic.

While there are times when as much as you plan, things go array. Ending late should be a rarity, not the typical occurrence. Those moderators that keep the meeting on track are respected and appreciated.

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