

Azzarello Group

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The Meeting Everyone should Stop having!

By *Patty Azzarello*
CEO Azzarello Group, Inc.

8:58am: You get to the conference room. It is dark an empty. You wonder for a moment if you're in the wrong room or if the meeting has been canceled and no one told you.

9:00am: You are in the conference room. You are alone.

9:05 Eventually a few more people come in, but not everyone.

9:07am Seeing that not everyone is there, some of the early ones defect, for coffee or a phone call. It now becomes a game of chicken....

9:12am: All but one are in the room... the search party is deployed.

9:17: Everyone is in the room, but more than half have set up camp with their laptop and are fully engaged in other work.

9:18 The meeting starts. Less than half the people are listening.

9:20 The topic of the meeting is introduced as achieving success in a particular area.

9:21: The topic of the meeting becomes: this is really important, but we don't have the resources to do it.

10:20: The topic of the meeting remains: this is really important for even more reasons, but we don't have the resources to do it.

11:20: The topic of the meeting has not changed, only gathered more detail: this is even more important than we realized, but we don't have the resources to do it.

Stop this meeting!

On a global scale, this meeting occurs countless times a day, without delivering any meaningful output. Just about everyone I know goes to this meeting over and over again.

There are many reasons to stop having this meeting, but there are two really big ones.

1. It wastes time.
2. It doesn't accomplish anything. (which basically resolves to #1)

First, just fix the basic time wasters.

Start meetings on time, and ban email in meetings.

Develop this culture on purpose or suffer - late meeting habits are both annoying and costly. Do the math on wasting 20 minutes several times a week, for 10 or so high paid employees.

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Ready, Set, Stall...

Try scheduling 25 and 50 minute meetings instead of 30 minute and 60 minute meetings. It lends an element of precision (people will know you are serious) and gives people time for a break between meetings without being late for the next one.

Take it seriously. Start meetings on time and have consequences when people are late. At least in your own organization, people will get the idea, and meetings will be on time, and you'll be giving people real work time back.

And when you ban email in meetings you will see a whole new level of the quality of discussion which means that you can have a shorter meetings!

Everyone will be surprised at how useful the meeting was, and you'll score even more points for being a great leader.

I have done this over and over again -- it just works.

Next, refocus the endless, useless discussion on something that causes forward movement.

This meeting is a very good example of an approach I use to turn discussion into action based on the following equation:

Situation + Response = Outcome.

This meeting topic of "this is important, but we don't have the resources", is a classic discussion of the "Situation".

"Situation" discussions take the form of talking about things like the product capabilities and weaknesses, what the competition is doing, the market dynamics, the customer issues, the lack of resources...."

"Situation" discussions are basically, collectively admiring the problem.

You can indeed spend endless hours in this meeting with smart people saying really smart things and never get anywhere.

To get action, and real results, you need to move the discussion to the "Desired Outcome", and then focus on your "Response" or action plan on filling the gap.

Here is how to achieve a breakthrough:

1. **Offer a definition of a Desired Outcome:** e.g. "We must improve the product to meet standards defined by X, to eliminate issues impeding our sales growth."
The first thing you will find is that not everyone agrees that whatever you propose is indeed, the Desired Outcome. If that is the case, don't bother talking about anything else other than getting an agreed Desired Outcome defined - anything else is just a waste of time.

And if you spend hours getting a clear desired outcome defined, that is time well spent.

2. **Once you get that defined, throw it against the wall and see if it sticks!**
Really, write it on the white board or project it, and find out what people say. You will find that being explicit in writing will smoke out that some people still

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don't agree (or weren't really listening, or were betting this wasn't real enough to invest any energy) on what you are all actually trying to achieve.

3. **Edit the written Desired Outcome description until you get it agreed.** Once that's done, you're still not done. Nodding heads are a red flag, not a green one. If people leave the room at this point, nothing will happen. If you actually want to do what you're talking about, you need to ask the following questions:

- ✦ What skills will we see acting once this outcome is achieved?
- ✦ What resources have been added, removed, or changed which resulted in getting this done?
- ✦ What additional challenges have been overcome that enabled us to achieve this Desired Outcome?

These are the questions that will reveal the gaps and point to a clear course of action. (Your "Response")

At this point, instead of having a generic "resource issue":

You will have a team completely aligned on a Desired Outcome (because alignment of resources is the only true measure of actual alignment)

And you will have a very clear picture of the specific resources needed to get it done.

"More resources", becomes "Harry for 7 days, and Jill doing these 3 things, etc.", and it doesn't seem so impossible anymore.

I have never run this process and still been stuck at the end of it.

But, at this point, you're still not done. If you want to make sure that this actually gets delivered, what I like to do is go around the room and ask each person to articulate the answer to the following two questions:

1. In your words describe the decision we just made and what we are going to do about it
2. What will you do differently tomorrow as a result of this discussion?

If you do this your chances of actually delivering the outcome go way up.

If you commit to changing the culture of your meetings, remove the time wasters, and focus on outcomes, you will be a more successful business leader, your team will be more engaged, and you will finally be able to deliver what you keep talking about.

For more information about this process check out the [Strategy into Action workshop](#):

Patty Azzarello was the youngest person to become a general manager at Hewlett

Packard at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B global software business at the age of 35, and became a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. A few of her roles were the VP and General Manager of HP OpenView, CEO of Euclid Software, and Chief Marketing Officer for Siebel Systems.

Patty is the CEO of Azzarello Group, www.AzzarelloGroup.com a unique services organization focused on helping business leaders actually get done what they want to do, and get a bigger payoff from their hard work. Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools to business leaders, through products and services including articles, e-books, mentoring programs, executive coaching, public speaking, small business retreats, and business execution workshops

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