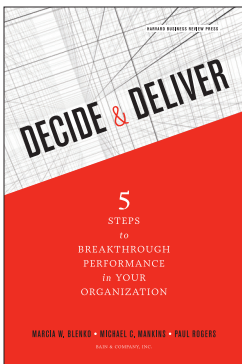


Decision Insights

Refresh, refocus and remind: Nine practical tips to keep meetings centered on decisions and action

By Paul Rogers and Jenny Davis-Peccoud



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Meetings. No company can live without them, but it sure is hard to live with them. Maybe that's why our clients have come up with so many helpful tools and techniques for breaking through the usual meeting logjams.

Here's the background. In an earlier article, we noted the sorry fact that 85% of managers think their companies' meetings are unproductive. We outlined some broad-brush ideas for transforming meeting procedures and protocols (see the Bain Brief "Decision-focused meetings").


That's when our clients began to chime in. You're on the right track, they said. But in addition to the big ideas, a company also needs a lot of practical reminders, ways of helping people refresh their engagement and refocus on getting things done. A question here, a symbol there, a poster on the wall—anything can work if it helps meeting participants remember that their job is not to natter on or nod off but to make decisions and take actions. What follows are some of our favorites.

1. **BlackBerry bags.** Two companies ask participants to put their BlackBerrys and other mobile devices in a ziplock bag. The meeting organizer collects them at the beginning of the meeting and distributes them at the end. The all-too-simple point: We're here to focus on decisions, not on what's happening in the outside world.
2. **Decision declaration.** At the end of the meeting, one client suggests, ask the group to say, Here is what we decided today. Make sure everyone is on the same page, every time. If people postpone a decision, acknowledge that the group decided not to decide. Track how often this happens, and see whether the rate declines over time.
3. **Personal participation.** Here's how a healthcare company does it: Before moving from discussion to decision, the meeting leader asks each participant what he or she would decide and why. The decision maker gets additional input; everyone else gets practice in listening and then articulating their thinking.
4. **Sacred symbols.** One company puts a foot-high statue of an elephant in the middle of the conference table. The moral: When you're discussing a decision, don't ignore the elephant in the room. Another places a carved wooden hippo on the table for the first part of the meeting, when the purpose is to wallow in ideas. When it comes time for a decision, the leader removes the hippo: No more wallowing.
5. **Stand-up sessions.** Plenty of companies have short stand-up meetings at the start of a day, usually to review the status of projects. But as for the longer meetings—aaah, those comfy conference room chairs, just the place to relax for a while. A suggestion: Try having fewer chairs than participants (or no chairs at all) when you get together to make a decision. You'll be amazed how quickly people come to closure.
6. **RAPID reminders.** We're fans of the decision tool RAPID[®], which helps companies assign decision roles to particular individuals. (RAPID is a loose acronym for the key roles: Recommend, Input, Agree, Decide and Perform.) A couple of companies put RAPID posters on the walls of meeting rooms for easy reference. Others put the word on everyone's ID badges. It's all just a way of reminding people to pay attention to their roles in this decision.
7. **Regular "role calls."** Another RAPID-related technique from a client: Go around the room at the beginning of a meeting, and ask each person what role he or she is playing in the decisions at hand. No role? Sorry, you're in the wrong meeting. Also, if senior people habitually send delegates when the leaders themselves should be there, ask the delegates to leave. It might hurt, but it will get attention—and it may get the senior people there next time.

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8. **Do-over denials.** Are too many meetings devoted to revisiting previous decisions? Just say no. One client recommends refusing to reconsider a decision unless there's a very good reason for doing so. A side benefit is that people will make sure to attend the meeting that's making the decision, knowing they can't reopen the discussion next week.
9. **Principles in practice.** Ultimately, the value of a meeting comes down to what everyone does and says in the course of it. Try this: At the end of each meeting, run through a checklist to see if the meeting lived up to the values you're trying to inculcate. Honest debate? Coming to closure in a reasonable period of time? Accountability for each decision role? You can phase out this technique over time as more people understand what's expected.

The most successful companies, we've noticed, aren't too heavy-handed. They rely on nudges and suggestions to make their point—the rapier, not the bludgeon. These techniques work because most people want to do the right thing. They just need reminders.

And what about your company? How does your organization manage the practical task of keeping meetings focused on decisions and action? Send your ideas and best practices to organization@bain.com; maybe we can include them in a future article. 

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