How to Run Your Meetings Like Apple and Google

Careers have been built on poking fun at meetings. From [commercials](#) to comic strips it's no secret that most of us would rather be, you know, working.But there's good news: Rapid experimentation with meetings in the past decade by startups and Fortune 500 companies alike has produced a new set of rules to consider. Here are three that seem to be universal:

1. **All meetings must have a stated purpose or agenda**. Without an agenda, meetings can easily turn into aimless social gatherings rather than productive working sessions.
2. **Attendees should walk away with concrete next steps or Action Items**. [We love Action Items here](#), but we're not the only ones. From Apple to the Toastmasters, the world's most successful organizations demand that attendees leave meetings with actionable tasks.
3. **The meeting should have an end time**. [Constraints breed creativity](#). By not placing an endtime, we encourage rambling, off-topic and useless conversation.

Of course, there's no need to stop there. Truly productive companies always continue tweaking to suit their specific culture. Here are a few highlights:

Apple

During the Steve Jobs era, Apple constantly worked to stay true to its startup roots while becoming the largest company in the world.

- **Every project component or task has a "DRI**." [According to Fortune's Adam Lashinsky](#), Apple breeds accountability at meetings by having a Directly Responsible Individual whose name appears next to all of the agenda items they are responsible for. With every task tagged, there's rarely any confusion about who should be getting what done.
- **Be prepared to challenge and be challenged**. There are dozens of tales about Jobs' ability to aggresively question his employees, sometimes moving them to tears. While you probably don't need the waterworks at your office, [everyone should be willing to defend their ideas and work from honest criticism](#). If a person has no ideas to defend,

they shouldn't be at the meeting.

Catalyst

Catalyst, a group of young Christian leaders in the South, [places an emphasis on keeping meetings positive and loose](). Some examples:

- **The answer is always "yes, and..." and never "no, but..."** Keep things positive and ideas flowing by not shouting down initial proposals.
- **Take a break every 30 minutes.** If your meeting must last longer than a half hour, make sure attendees can get up, walk out of the room and put their brain on pause.
- **Think and dream with out limitations**. Those come later.

Google

In a recent issue of "[Think With Google]()," Google VP of Business Operations Kristen Gil described how the company spent 2011 getting back to its original values as a startup, which included reconsidering how the company approached meetings. Some takeaways:

- **All meetings should have a clear decision maker**. Gil credits this approach to helping the Google+ team ship over 100 new features in the 90 days after launch.
- **No more than ten people at a meeting**. "Attending meetings isn't a badge of honor," she writes.
- **Decisions should never wait for a meeting**. Otherwise, the velocity of the company is slowed to its meeting schedule. If a meeting needs to happen for something to get done, hold the meeting as soon as possible.
- **Kill ideas, and meetings**. After Larry Page replaced Eric Schmidt as Google CEO, the company quickly killed its Buzz, Code Search, and Desktop products so it could focus more resources on less efforts. Focus has to permeate every aspect of a company, including meetings.

37Signals

If it were up to 37 Signals, there would be no meetings at all and discussion would be limited to IM and email. In the company's best-selling book *Rework,* they urge creatives to remember that "every minute you avoid spending in a meeting is a minute you can get real work done instead." In fact, the firm even created National Boycott a Meeting Day in 2011. But if you absolutely must meet, they have three rules:

- **Keep it short**. No, shorter than that. And use a timer to enforce the time limit.
- **Have an agenda.**
- **Invite as few people as possible.**

Reily

This New Orleans-based food and beverage company was profiled in the book *Good Boss, Bad Boss* by Robert Sutton. The company utilizes "stand up" meetings made popular for the Agile method of software development.

- **Schedule the meetings for the same time**. Keeping employees in a rhythm allows them to not have their work unexpectedly disrupted.
- **The stand up is to communicate, not solve**. If your team has a regularly planned stand up meeting, "lack of communication" is no longer an excuse for problems. Just be sure to protect the stand up meeting time by deferring larger discussions to private meetings.

(BTW: If you're interested in the nitty-gritty of the stand up meeting, Jason Yip wrote an entire manual.)

Technically Media

Not exactly Apple or Google, but at my previous company, Technically Media, we worked hard to make meetings as useful as possible. We met only once a week to update one another on progress, propose new ideas and hammer out any problems. We kept to an extremely strict time table and meeting structure as detailed by my fellow co-founder Christopher Wink on his

personal blog. Some key observations:

- **There is no judging in brainstorming**. Focus on capturing ideas before filtering and critiquing them.
- **Bring solutions, not problems**. Solutioning in the middle of a meeting wastes precious communication time. If you can't bring proposed solutions to the table, save it for next time or bring it up in private conversations.
- **Review "homework" from the last meeting**. Not only does it remind participants what happened last week, it holds attendees accountable.

What's Your Approach?How does your organization run its meetings?

Read more from Sean [here](#).