By Calvin Sun

"That meeting wasted my time."

How often have you made this statement? Like you, I've attended many unproductive meetings, but a recent one topped them all. I had been talking about my consulting and training work with an employee of a company in central New Jersey. Things had gotten to the point that, after receiving information about me, the person suggested that I come to his New Jersey office for a meeting he would set up that would include him and his boss, the director of a training program for new professional hires.

The day of the meeting came, and I made the two-hour drive to the New Jersey office. I met my contact, who brought me to a meeting room with two of his co-workers and his boss. Following our introductions, the boss asked me about the work I do, and I described it. After hearing it, the boss said, "I'm sorry, but that work isn't in line with what we had in mind."

What went through my mind at that moment is probably unprintable, but you get the idea. Of course, the trip proved to be a waste of time for me. However, maybe some good did come of it, because ironically, thinking back about it gave me the idea for this article.

The following tips, which apply both to attendees and the chair of the meeting, will help minimize the chances that you'll be similarly aggravated.

1   Determine whether the meeting really is necessary

Does the meeting really need to occur? Do multiple people *really* need to interact with each other? Reducing the number of attendees saves time for everyone, both those in the meeting (because it probably will end sooner) and for those not attending (because they can do other things).

If the meeting involves a review of documents, status reports, or other material, sending them to attendees prior to the meeting saves time and might even make the meeting unnecessary. Consider my example of the New Jersey meeting: I wonder whether the boss had even reviewed my materials beforehand. Had she done so, or had she spoken to me by telephone, it would have saved time for everyone.

Even if you determine that a meeting *is* really necessary, does it have to be in person? Consider a telephone or video conference call, which can save time, money, and energy (and which is an option I should have considered for my New Jersey meeting).

2   Be punctual

Have you ever been on time for a meeting and found that only about three-fourths of the attendees were present? Did the meeting leader say, "Well, let's wait a few minutes for more people to arrive"? Think about the message that action sends. You, the person who showed up on time, are being penalized for doing so. The people who are late, conversely, are being told that their lateness has no consequences. How likely is it that you will be punctual to the next meeting this leader holds?

I've heard of companies that remove all extra chairs from the room once the meeting starts, forcing latecomers to stand. While that technique may be extreme, it does reflect the idea that peoples' time should be respected.

In the same way, if you're going to be late, try to let the meeting chair know in advance. Simply showing up late might send a message to the other attendees that to you, the meeting is unimportant.

If you're the chair, try to end the meeting on time. Attendees have other commitments, and keeping them late is unfair to them and to the others with whom they have commitments. A friend blogged about how she hinted about the late running of a meeting, which was supposed to end at noon: Her stomach growled audibly at 12:05.

#3: Be wary of recapping for latecomers

On a related note, be careful about recapping a meeting for latecomers. By doing so, you are in effect starting the meeting over.

#4: Be prepared

Did you receive background material prior to the meeting? Reviewing it and being prepared with comments saves time for everyone. You might even spot something that could make the meeting unnecessary, as in the case of my New Jersey meeting. If you have questions about the material, consider e-mailing them to the author or to the other attendees in advance, so they have time to think about what you've asked.

#5: Have an objective

Author and consultant Stephen Covey counsels readers and clients to "Begin with the end in mind." When planning a meeting, therefore, ask yourself "What do I want to see as a result of this meeting?" Put another way, ask yourself (as a famous politician and U.S. president did), whether, at the end of the meeting, you and the attendees will be better off than you were at the beginning.

If you have no objective and no purpose, why meet at all?

#6: Publicize the agenda

Having and distributing an agenda prior to a meeting alerts attendees to the nature of that meeting. Attendees who believe a particular item should be added or removed have an opportunity to discuss that issue with the meeting chair.

#7: Be clear about responsibilities

In your agenda and in conversations beforehand, be clear about your expectations for the attendees. Regarding a particular topic, are you looking for a short update, a discussion, or a formal presentation? Being clear about expectations leads to efficiency and avoids embarrassment.

#8: Address important things first

Dr. Covey uses a demonstration involving sand and a collection of medium-size and large rocks. He challenges audience members to place all of them into a pail, so that there's no overflowing of sand and the rocks all stay below the top of the pail. After many people fail, Dr. Covey shows them how to do it: He puts in the large rocks, then the smaller rocks, then pours in the sand. Those who fail do so because they reverse this sequence.

In your meetings, as in other aspects of your life and work, try to address the most important issues first. Get them out of the way, so that if you do run out of time, all you have left are the less important things.

#9: Avoid being distracted by side issues

It's easy, during a meeting, to be distracted by side issues. If that happens, you risk losing control of your agenda and the meeting itself. Is the issue one that really needs to be addressed right now? Does it need to be resolved to continue the meeting? If not, consider "parking" it. Section off part of a flipchart page or whiteboard, write the issue inside, then continue the meeting. Afterward, document the issue, as well as any others that have similarly been parked.

If the issue really does need to be addressed immediately, you have a difficult decision to make. Among your current attendees, do you have the necessary people—and only those people needed to resolve the issue? If so, and this issue is important, you may have to take time to address it with the other attendees. If you lack the necessary people, you might have to defer the issue. In that case, try to proceed with other agenda items you *can* resolve.

#10: Document your meeting

Within a day or two after the meeting, distribute minutes so people have a record of it. Make sure that the minutes list the specific people assigned to specific tasks. Without minutes of a meeting, questions will arise as to who said what and who committed to what. Follow-up actions from the meeting might happen more slowly, if they happen at all.

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Version history

Version: 1.0
Published: November 6, 2007

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