



By Joe Byerly

Most people hate meetings –especially with large groups.

Sure, meetings are a great opportunity to get business done in the military, but many of the meetings I have attended and personally ran were squandered opportunities. I hate thinking about the hours of productivity lost sitting in meetings. Sometimes this was because of how they were structured; at other times, the people who called the meeting had no idea what they wanted to get out of it in the first place.

In my experience, most meetings fail because many of the participants don't come to the meeting prepared, fail to read the room and end up sucking the productivity out of the room before any real work can get done. Yes. I'm pointing fingers, but one of them is pointing toward a mirror.

For me, meetings have been trial and error experiences, and it took me about 16 years before I came to the realization that I've been part of the problem. Below are three lessons I've learned over the years:

1. Don't shoot from the hip and have your top lines ready.

I've gone to way too many meetings unprepared, not sure of what I wanted to contribute prior to walking into the room. I don't recommend ever bringing a script, but definitely figure out your topline message ahead of time. Your topline message is the idea that you

want the boss or other people in the room to take with them when they walk away from the table. Once you figure this out, write down 3-4 key points that support your message and talk through them.

Even if you have your topline ready and your supporting points in hand, step back and ask, “So what?” If we identify a threat, what are we doing about it? If we identify a risk, how are we mitigating it? By asking, “so what” we not only ensure what we’re communicating is relevant to the listener, and not wasting our time or theirs, but we also ensure that we’re not presenting problems without solutions to our leaders.

2. Don’t go too deep.

I might know 1000 details on the topic I’m briefing in a meeting, but you have to ask yourself: Is it helpful? Maybe not. Therefore, it helps to know what is “above the line” or “below the line” in communication. Above the line is all the information the leader needs to know to make a decision or form a judgment about a topic. Below the line are all the details that aren’t necessary. These two characterizations change as you rise in the organization.

What’s above the line for a battalion commander is (hopefully) different than what’s above the line for a division commander. I’ve lost the attention of many leaders by mixing the two and going into too much detail in meetings, wasting minutes and confusing my messages.

3. Listen. Read the room. Adjust as needed.

I can’t tell you how many times I failed to pay attention and either covered an issue that was already addressed or tried to push through with my prepared briefing even though I knew time was running out (because the major talking ahead of me wasn’t prepared and went into excruciating detail on his topic).

Nothing will take the energy out of a meeting faster than when someone fails to read the room. Even when I’ve sat there with my notecards and top lines ready to go, I’ve learned that I need to continue to edit based on the atmospherics in the room. Is the boss fidgeting in his chair? Did someone bring up a topic that dampened the mood of everyone else, therefore your good idea will fall on deaf ears? These are a few areas that we need to read when in meetings and adjust accordingly. Maybe my three-minute briefing can be shortened to one minute for the sake of everyone’s sanity.

One last thing. Don't ever walk away from a meeting without understanding the due-outs and the next steps on the topics discussed. If you do, then the meeting was a waste. If there's time at the end or before everyone leaves, do a quick check and make sure you heard and understood your obligations.

Meetings don't have to be wasted time. We all have a responsibility to play a part. We need to come prepared, maybe even rehearse, so we aren't reading a piece of paper. We need to understand what's important to the people in the room and not show off our brilliance on a topic. And finally, we need to actually pay attention, read the room and adjust our contribution to the meeting as needed. I will probably never utter the words, "I can't wait for this meeting," but at least I can play my part not to make it a wasted opportunity.

This post first appeared on and is republished with permission of [We Are The Mighty](#)

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)