

Run Meetings Like a Ninja, Not a Samurai

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In 20 years of my consulting organizations about generational workplace behavior, no topic has been a greater source of angst than the cultural change on organizational meetings influenced by those in the Millennial generation.

It brings to mind a colleague named Mark who wants to run productive sales meetings while keeping his young and energetic participants fully engaged. Mark manages a regional commercial sales organization and his Monday morning meetings have devolved into a series of distractions where nothing gets done. His long-timers have learned to be patient and deal with all the details. His young sales people sit there playing with apps on their smart phones, texting friends and "chatting" each other. When he challenged them about this behavior, one said, "We're here aren't we? Why is this meeting so important? We should be out selling."

Mark wants to maintain the energy in the meeting and not become Attila the Hun, but he needs to get through all the information, sales plans and paperwork. How should Mark engage his staff while running productive meetings? The perceptual difference of meetings by professionals in the older and younger generations is almost the same as the difference between a samurai and a ninja.

Mark, like many Matures and Boomers, is a samurai. Samurais were the military nobility of pre-industrial Japan. They were traditional, formal, and followed a set of unwritten rules. During typical meetings led by those in the older generations, there's protocol, there's an agenda, and most within this group wouldn't think of ending their meetings prior to the two-hour time slots set aside for them.

On the other hand, Mark's employees are more like ninjas. Ninjas were trained in specialized arts of war such as espionage, assassination, and hand-to-hand combat. Ninjas had unique abilities that were needed during a time of uncertainty and social change in Japan. Much like ninjas, Millennials have a much-needed and unique skill set during our modern technological and economic shift that don't necessarily "gel" with the protocol and conventions of meetings. They text, surf, chat and have no patience for the agenda.

While it is difficult to alter behavior based on perception and values, there are a couple of addressable issues going on here. First is the rampant use of mobile devices during what would appear to be an inappropriate time. Second is a concern about whether the meeting itself is the most productive use of everyone's time. Let's tackle the second issue first. Productive salespeople generally have little patience for meetings that they view as taking away from valuable time to connect with customers. Their fooling around in the meeting means that the agenda is not sufficient to hold their

attention. Consider whether weekly meetings might be reduced to monthly. Think about what items and information can be provided on-line or in an email so that everyone can view them at a time that is convenient. Consider whether these meetings or at least part of them might be accomplished via phone bridge or Skype. While you may experience some push back from the veteran salespeople who are used to the rhythm of these meetings, this is about business. It is healthy to take stock of standing meetings periodically to see if they are satisfying a need. Ask younger colleagues for suggestions on how the meeting can be improved. While they may be more aggressive in wanting to eliminate it all together, consider their ideas carefully. Get them involved in the implementation of these new ideas as well. That way, they'll be more invested in the outcome.

If Mark makes these changes, it should be easier for him to ask everyone to put down their smart phones and remain engaged during meetings. Meetings will always be with us, but maintaining their effectiveness can be a challenge. If Mark wants to engage ninjas then he must think like a ninja and run agile meetings, nimble and adaptable as business conditions dictate.

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