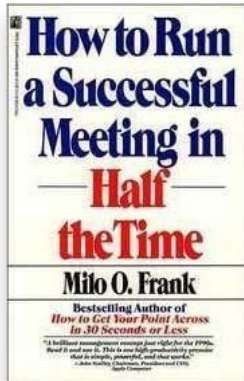


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Milo O. Frank

*Milo O. Frank is a nationally acclaimed authority on communication skills and strategies. He has worked as the Director of Talent and Casting for CBS Television, been a writer-producer of feature films, and vice-President over production for Cinerama, as well as a popular lecturer and seminar leader.*

# How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time

## THE SUMMARY

### Introduction: The Time of Your Life

In my career as a young motion picture agent, I was always trying to arrange meetings with senior executives in order to promote my clients. It took me months to set up a meeting with Steve Trilling, a senior executive who ran Warner Brothers. When I finally walked in to the meeting and began to speak, I heard bells ringing in the distance. His phone rang, he answered, and then rushed out of his office—and never came back. There was a fire on one of the sound stages.

It took me another month to reschedule the meeting. When I finally walked in and we began to talk, I heard bells ringing in the distance, his phone rang, and Trilling rushed out to the second fire on a sound stage in over 20 years at Warner Brothers Studios.

Those were the only two meetings I can recall that I wished were longer! Over the years my work has involved thousands of meetings. Many of them were time wasters, and certainly most took twice as long as necessary.

Meetings are a fact of our everyday lives. When you stop to think about it, how well you present yourself and your ideas and how well you work with other people are the two basic essentials of any career. And that's what meetings are all about. They are an important management tool, and the way you conduct yourself at meetings, whether you are the leader or participant, can make or break your career.

# How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time

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Meetings don't have to be long and unproductive. By mastering a few shortcuts and strategies you can get the job done—in half the time.

## Chapter 1: To Meet or Not to Meet?

You have a meeting when it is the best way to achieve an objective. A meeting without an objective is a trip to nowhere. A trip to nowhere goes on forever! A single, clear-cut objective is a great timesaver for any meeting. You know exactly why you are there and what you expect to accomplish.

It isn't always necessary to even hold a meeting. Ask yourself the following questions to determine if you should hold a meeting:

1. Is a meeting the *only* means of fulfilling my objective?
2. If not, what are the alternatives?
3. Will a meeting use my time and my colleagues time to our best advantage?

Some objectives can be fulfilled by phone calls or other types of communication. A meeting isn't always necessary; it's a discipline to only hold one when it is the best option.

Meetings held on a regular basis—weekly, bimonthly, monthly—are generally tedious and wasteful. Often you are forced to find or create situations in order to have something to talk about. Better to wait until a situation or problem requires a meeting, and then call it. There are many people who think that holding or attending a continuous string of meetings is a sign of their power and importance. The exact opposite is true. If meetings are merely routine or unnecessary, they are a sure sign of bad management.

## Chapter 2: When You Call a Meeting

There are several things to consider when calling a meeting. The first is who to invite. You need to invite those who can help fulfill the meeting's objective. If someone isn't going to help you do that, don't invite them. Unnecessary participants, like unnecessary meetings, are a waste of everyone's time.

That doesn't mean only invite people who will agree with you. A person opposing your objective may do you more harm by being excluded from a meeting than by being present. Often you can defuse any possible hostility by including the opponent in your discussion and showing respect for his position. Most important, you will save time by avoiding hostility, which may lead to the undermining of your objective.

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Another question is how many people to invite. Just remember—the number of people you invite is directly proportional to the length of any meeting. No one will feel excluded or overlooked if he is excluded from a meeting with an objective in which he has no particular concern. (He may thank you for *not* asking him to attend).

An effective meeting is usually the result of good preparation. A written memo or agenda is the best means of giving and securing information and if properly put together will focus you as well as the recipients on the objective of the meeting and the means to achieve it. During the meeting it can also be used as a guide and reference, and after the meeting it can serve as a reminder of what was to be accomplished and a means of checking on follow-up actions. Time spent preparing a written memo or agenda will *save* time during any meeting. But keep it short. *Write no memo longer than one page.*

A good memo will state the objective of the meeting, the issues to be discussed, the time the meeting will begin *and end*, who will be there, and what is expected of them in the way of preparation before the meeting.

Careful preparation is the best way to keep any meeting on target and on time. It will cut your meeting time in half.

Another question to resolve is whether to include meals with the meetings. If your objective is to establish a social as well as a business relationship, it makes sense to have a meal. Depending on the meal you choose—breakfast, lunch, or dinner—you will have different results.

Breakfast meetings will tend to be the shortest and most productive from a business standpoint. People don't hang around because they always have a full day of work ahead of them. Lunch meetings last longer but can still be productive. Dinner meetings can be the best or the worst: the best for a social agenda and the worst for specific business objectives. One doesn't think as clearly at the end of the day, but it is natural to begin to unwind.

### **Chapter 3: When You Attend a Meeting**

If there is a meeting you should attend and you are invited, attend. If you are not invited and it is important, then find a way to get invited. But what about those time-wasting meetings that you cannot control and must attend? Bite the bullet and go, but treat it as career training, not business. Determine how the meeting can be of value to *you*. Recognize that every meeting is an opportunity to fulfill your personal objective.

In order to do this, you should prepare. Putting together a brief, well-prepared message that you want to get across will enable you to redeem the time. A good message will have a "grabber" opening, a main idea, and a demand on the audience.

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For example, I was once in a round-table discussion meeting on television (as a favor for a friend). Just before I went in to the meeting, I saw a newspaper with a headline “Ugly Dogs Die.” It was about two puppies that had been brought to the pound, and because they were ugly, were put to death in two hours. I decided I would do something about that unfortunate situation. It was too late for the puppies, but I would use the meeting about health, business, and communications to find a home for some needy animals. I prepared my message. I knew the subject would never be brought up, since it had nothing to do with the topics.

Someone asked about the most important techniques in communicating. I said, “One of the most important is attracting your listener’s attention. While I was waiting outside, I read a headline, *Ugly Dogs Die*. That really grabbed my attention. I had to read the article.” I had the floor, control, and everyone’s attention. I told them about the article and then said to the TV viewers as well as those present, “Go to the pound and save an animal. It will make you feel good, it will save a life, and it is a known medical fact (bringing in one of our issues) that people with pets live longer.”

The response was excellent, and I was able to make good use of the time.

Meetings can drag on endlessly, and one reason for that is a lack of shared objectives. If people have different goals, paralysis often results: no agreements or decisions are made, no progress accomplished.

There are a couple things you can do to alleviate this problem. First, do your homework. Know before you go into the meeting where people stand—know what they want, why they want it, and what the best reasons for and against it are. Then you can adapt what you say and how you say it to accomplish your own objectives, without alienating those opposed.

The second thing you can do also happens before the meeting. *Get the right people on your side* before you start. Build alliances, share information, get “buy-in” before you walk in—especially from key decision-makers. Sometimes you can even get decisions made ahead of time. Then why have the meeting? Use it as an informational forum, and take advantage of any new suggestions that emerge.

### Chapter 4: The Meeting

Meetings are often pressure situations. If it isn’t time pressure, it’s peer pressure, or the pressure to look good in front of the boss. And, let’s not forget the pressure to make decisions!

It’s vital in any meeting to be able to say what you want to say in an interesting manner and in as short a period of time as possible. You’ll earn other people’s respect, and you will save time.

Seating in a meeting matters. The leader should always sit in the most visible spot. What if you aren’t the leader? The “best” seat is the one opposite him or her; it allows you to talk directly to the leader and to the other participants as well.

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And regarding seating: realize that the comfort of the chair you sit in is inversely proportional to your energy level, which determines your impact in the meeting. Whatever kind of chair you sit in, sit on the edge of the seat. This position keeps you alert, adds energy and projects confidence.

When you are in the meeting, communicating effectively is paramount.

Never read a statement (unless you want to lose credibility). If you have prepared something, speak from notes that will remind you of your content, but don't read.

Often in a meeting someone will pose a question. Any question will give you an opportunity to say what you want to say. It's a technique that's made for meetings. Answer the question, but also make your point. You can learn to make transitions and segues natural, and improve your ability to make your point.

As you are communicating, understand that there are things you can do to improve your impact. Using a personal story is the most powerful technique there is to make a point.

Learn to use word pictures. Spoken words are like smoke in the wind. They disappear quickly from the mind and memory. Therefore you must make people see your spoken words as well as hear them. Word pictures stay in the minds of your listeners. They may forget the words themselves, but they'll remember visual imagery. The sentence "Spoken words are like smoke in the wind" is a perfect example.

Your objective at any meeting is to get your message across as effectively as possible. A personal story or vivid word picture will do that—and in much less time. Like it or not, it's often not what we say, but how we say it that makes the lasting impression. So, take the time to think through what you want to say and how you want to say it—before the meeting. You will save time and have a bigger impact.

### **Chapter 5: Visuals, Props, and Calculated Risks**

Visual aids can help you save time at a meeting. An effective picture really is worth a thousand words. Just remember it is an *aid* to help you communicate. Too often, pictures are used that have nothing to do with the actual point. Or presenters rely on them instead of doing the pre-work necessary to communicate well overall.

And remember—any visual that requires too much explanation is defeating its own purpose. Visuals that consist of just words—especially if you read the words—are often a waste of time. People can read them faster than you can, and the result is often boredom.

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Props are some of the absolute best visual aids. They focus attention and make a point within seconds. This has been proven over and over again by the TV news. When an object is held up, the cameras will invariably zoom in for a close shot.

A third way to gain attention and make a point that will stick is an unusual action. Imagine this scene:

An elegant boardroom, with an enormous table surrounded by chairs of rich leather. The participants are dressed to the nines. There is a feeling of old money and elegance. The president of the company at the head of the table stands and leans forward. Everyone is waiting expectantly. The president then spits on the shining mahogany table. No one can believe it. He then wipes up the spit and says, "Disgusting act, wasn't it? But you will remember it."

The man was president of a company who wanted his advertising agency to produce more imaginative and visual ideas to sell his products, and he didn't want to waste time in a long discussion.

An unusual action is memorable. It makes a point and stays in the mind of the listener or viewer.

### Chapter 6: The Time Machine

There are basic principles of "meeting time management" that you would be wise to consider:

1. Q: How can you make a dull meeting less dull? A: Shorten it. (The pace of the meeting will pick up, people will be engaged, and work will get done.)
2. Q: How can you keep a meeting from running overtime? A: Set a time limit in advance and *stick to it*.

A man I know had an old-fashioned alarm clock. He brought it to all his meetings and told everyone right upfront, "This meeting will be 45 minutes long. When that alarm goes, I go. And when I go, you go. The meeting is over." Not only did the meeting members not resent it, they liked it and liked him for organizing everybody's time.

Meetings should be scheduled as far in advance as possible and participants notified so they can plan. Always state specifically the start time and end time of the meeting. If a meeting runs over, it's usually the fault of the leader. In some cases it is unavoidable, but it is surprising what can be accomplished if there is no other choice.

It may sound peculiar, but time management experts say we're more apt to be on time if we schedule our meetings for, say 2:10 rather than 2:00, because 2:10 is more memorable. The more specific time, the more likely people are to arrive promptly. When meetings are scheduled at rounded-off hours, people tend to allow an extra ten minutes before they think of themselves as being late.



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Which also raises the question: How do you deal with latecomers? When the moment to begin and all are not present, approach it this way:

For the most important missing participant—wait. For a fairly necessary participant—wait a specific and stated length of time. For a shlump—start. Some people want to play hardball with latecomers—embarrass them, lock them out, etc. Nothing is gained except bad feelings by this approach.

When you are in a meeting, the most important consideration in keeping a meeting on track is to discuss only one question at a time. This is much easier if there is a clear agenda. If not, it becomes difficult for the leader to keep people on task, as everyone will pursue his or her own agenda.

As the meeting is progressing, one thing is sure: there will be interruptions. Not necessarily from the outside, but some people will interrupt others as they are speaking. Learning how to deal with interruptions—and to effectively interrupt others—can be a key factor in what happens in the meeting.

Interrupting is a gentle art unto itself. We do it and have it done every day and take it as a matter of course. It isn't. It is a technique and is used consciously or unconsciously to achieve a purpose. It is a method of taking the floor and gaining control.

What are some of the methods of interrupting? One is to raise your hand and say, "Just a second, may I..." and continue speaking. Another way is to stand. The person speaking will usually pause, and calling that person by name you can say, "John, there's something else," and continue speaking. Be sure, however, that when you ask permission to interrupt you don't wait for permission to be granted but continue directly to your message.

Interruptions can lead to digressions, which prolong meetings. But a polite interruption that *cuts off* a digression is an excellent way to save time.

It is crucial in a meeting to be able to prevent someone from interrupting you. If you are interrupted you lose control and the opportunity to present your point. You do not have to accept interruptions. When someone says, "May I..." and starts to talk, just say, "Please hold your thought" and continue; or say, "Please let me finish..." and continue. Don't stop talking! Another effective method when you are interrupted is just to hold up your hand, palm out, and continue speaking.

Some people interrupt, ask adversary questions, and just plain disrupt meetings in order to show how much they know or to gain authority. Larry Kitchen, the retired chairman of Lockheed, has a technique that has worked well in those situations:

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“Several of the staff members had developed the time-consuming habit of cross-examining their colleagues after each presentation, regardless of how well it was done. Although it was always done under the guise of wanting more information, it was often hostile or counterproductive.

After enduring this for awhile, I remembered a sign in a curio shop that read “You break it, you buy it.” I decided to apply this rule at my next staff meeting. Following a particularly derisive exchange, I addressed the harshest critic and said, “Steve, you seem to have serious concerns about this issue. At our next meeting I’d like you to present a thorough analysis of this proposal—along with three or four workable alternatives...” It took exactly two applications of this technique to cure people of their negative conduct. We ended up saving a lot of time and increased our productivity.

Another thing that can prolong a meeting, often by resisting logic, is emotion. Sometimes people will have emotional reasons for their positions, and those will almost never yield to logic. It can be quite frustrating to present compelling logical reasons and still have them resisted! When you recognize that someone is resisting for emotional reasons, the best thing you can do is try to draw him or her out and let them explain what the real issue is. Don’t criticize them for it! As the person becomes aware of their feelings, often they will be able to change their position on their own. At the very least it will relieve the pressure that everyone is feeling.

When do you end a meeting? When the objective has been accomplished, conclude. If you want to hang around and socialize to cement relationships, by all means do so. But you should recognize that such socializing serves a different purpose.

### **The End of Meetings and the Aftermath**

What is the difference between stimulating discussions and a productive meeting? In a word—*results*. If there are no results, you may need to rethink your approach or change your tactics.

At the end of every meeting the objective should be restated and the results of the meeting summarized. Also restate any assignments that have been made and any follow-up actions that are required.

### **If All Else Fails...**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an edict was passed in England by Oliver Cromwell, that in order to curtail the savage practices of some of his troops (ranging from rape to pillage to murder) a new procedure would be initiated. The offending soldier and his entire company would assemble underneath the local gallows and hold a meeting. The meeting basically consisted of the rolling of dice. Everyone would participate. The man who lost would be hanged. Not necessarily the instigator of the crime, but simply the man who lost. The results were fewer crimes, fewer hangings—and fewer meetings.