



Graphic created by the NCO Journal.

How to Conduct a Dysfunctional Meeting for Dummies

By Sgt. Maj. Robert A. Nelson & Command Sgt. Maj. (R) Gabriel Arnold

U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

Are you tired of attending completely productive meetings? Are you fed up with getting the most out of your Soldiers or staff's time? Are you sick of people walking away from your meetings satisfied, motivated, and informed? If this sounds like you, we know how you feel, and have compiled a proven list of solutions to fix your useful meeting problems. If you read this article today, we guarantee that you too can learn how to hold a dysfunctional meeting

Get Rid of Your Agenda

The first thing you can do to end senseless meeting productivity is to make sure no one creates an agenda. If you wish to ensure a high level of dysfunctionality, ensure there is no predictability with what you plan to discuss. We highly suggest "winging it" from memory.

This approach will guarantee you can talk about what you want without your attendees knowing you are off script and ensures they have no way to prepare for what you might talk about. This tactic can allow you to ramble about a few poorly organized notes and then "go around the room" to ensure everyone can talk about what they want as well.

In contrast, Army leadership doctrine provides leaders with guidance on how to best plan and prepare to address an audience. *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22* recommends constructing an agenda beforehand to better focus the presenter and the participants involved (Department of the Army, 2019). That said, we suggest you ignore this productive suggestion completely. Removing agendas from meetings almost guarantees that you will reduce your productivity by half within your organization.

Use the Filibuster

The second method of ensuring a dysfunctional meeting is to use the filibuster. According to Senate.gov (n.d.), a filibuster is an approach used to ensure the senate is not allowed to vote on a bill by enacting a prolonged debate. While this is typically a tool of political dysfunction, you too can take advantage of the filibuster in your organization. To do this, take up as much meeting-time as possible to talk about your thoughts on an issue. This will serve two purposes. One, you can ensure your point of view is understood by your audience (repeat your same points at least four times to accomplish this). And two, if you use all the available time, you can ensure your audience's minds are not polluted by alternate points of view. However, if you are not comfortable taking up all the time yourself, you can defer this act to another person and let them hog the microphone for most of the meeting. This approach will ensure even your most staunch adversaries (or inquisitive supporters) will eventually get tired and give up.

That said, Army leadership doctrine requires leaders to think critically and defines critical thinking as examining a problem, situation, or task in-depth from numerous points of view. Furthermore, *ADP 6-22* suggests that to create a positive learning environment, one must stimulate innovation and critical thinking in others (Department of the Army, 2019). Again, this is just doctrine and of course, doctrine is just a guide you can ignore. Besides, if you're leading a meeting, there is a good chance you know more than everyone else.

Allow Unproductive Behaviors

According to McGraw (2010), another great way to decrease a meeting's usefulness is to allow attendees to practice unproductive behaviors. The first behavior that McGraw (2010) identifies is known as the "hostage." Hostages believe they have more important things to do than attend your meetings and aren't afraid to let everyone know it. In addition, hostages often pay little attention to the topics of discussion and conduct frequent side-bar conversations. Side-bar conversations will help ensure all attendees walk out with different interpretations of the information presented.

ADP 6-22 requires leaders exercise humility in executing their duties, which means being unselfish, and committing to working towards something bigger than themselves. *ADP 6-22* also requires discipline from its leaders, "discipline is the means by which leaders advance the standards that are the hallmark of good Army units and organizations" (Department of the Army, 2019, p.5-7). But hey, who needs humility and discipline?

The second behavior to encourage is "devil's advocate." McGraw (2010), suggests devil's advocates thrive on controversy and take pleasure in stirring the pot.



Staff Sgt. Charles Bush of the 11th Engineer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division/ROK-US Combined Division, ensures Soldiers are engaged during a brief before stepping off on the Camp Casey land navigation course, August 23rd, 2022. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Seth Aaron)

They frequently question everyone else in the room and often point out why new ideas will not work.

The third behavior is the "vacationer." This is a person who attends the meeting to escape work and doesn't contribute or pay attention to any of the discussions. Vacationers may not make a meeting dysfunctional by themselves, but they do not make it more productive, they just take up space.

The last behavior that McGraw identifies is the "grandstander." Grandstanders are the people you want to employ the filibuster because they will not let a topic go, and regularly enjoy showing how smart they are. Another grandstander benefit is they can make others feel unimportant while ensuring unwanted alternate ideas are never brought to light because they do not allow others to talk.

According to *ADP 6-22*, a critical part of effective two-way communication is active listening. Active listening means one must abstain from interrupting, take mental or written notes, maintain eye contact, and repeat the message back to the sender to ensure correct interpretation. Active listening involves meaningful communication to inquire, acknowledge, and advocate among all parties involved. If you follow these recommendations, you will eliminate the McGraw's (2010) four unproductive behaviors and increase meeting productivity.

But we're here to reduce productivity, right? If you have people in your organization who frequently display these behaviors (hostage, devil's advocate, vacationer and grandstander), ensure you bring them to your meetings to help you stomp out all that pesky productivity.

Don't Value your Attendees Time

One of the most overlooked, and simplest approaches to end unwanted productivity is to simply be late to the meeting, especially if it's yours. If you organize a meeting, you're obviously the most important person in the

room, and should make this known by arriving as late as possible, as famous musicians often do. Like the filibuster, you will waste potential time for productive behavior and send a message that your time is more important than everyone else's. Whillans, Feldman, and Wisniewski (2021) coined this behavior as "selfish urgency" and believe it is a key factor in adding to the meeting attendee frustration.

Another common version of selfish urgency takes place when leaders schedule meetings at times convenient only for them without consideration of the other attendees. "We need to meet now" no notice meetings are a sure way to increase frustration and decrease productivity within a meeting.

In contrast, the Army Value of Respect requires Soldiers to treat people as they should be treated. In addition, *ADP 6-22* requires leaders to "foster a climate that treats everyone with dignity and respect" and a positive climate begins with a leader's personal example (Department of the Army, 2019, p.2-3). Nevertheless, respect for others only adds productivity, and as a leader who values dysfunction, you should not respect others' time.

Keep Decision-Makers Away from Meetings

A time proven tactic to ensure nothing gets done in a meeting is to arrange that those with the ability to decide are not present. We realize many staff meetings will happen without decision-makers present as part of the normal staff process, but to add to meeting dysfunction, you should actively and intentionally keep decision-makers away from all meetings. This way, you will have the ability to schedule additional meetings to rediscuss what you already discussed and take advantage of the redundancy.

In contrast, Army planning and orders production suggests "leaders prepare the required products (verbal, written, or both) needed to present the recommendation to the decision-maker," and "a good solution can be lost if the leader cannot persuade the audience and decision-maker that it is correct" (Department of the Army, 2022, p.3-8). Be sure to ignore this advice from the Army in both theory and practice, as having a meeting without someone who can decide is an extremely practical way to keep it dysfunctional.

Don't Assign Responsibilities for Work

Yet another tactic to increase meeting dysfunction is to have the meeting, make decisions, and then assume everyone will automatically know what to do. In this way, even if your meeting is accidentally productive (shame on you), you can still make certain no real work comes of it. By not assigning tasks to specific teams or individuals, you can also spread the blame to others if something goes wrong.

Army leadership doctrine outlines the required competency of "achieves" as leading to accomplish tasks on time and to standard. The Army suggests leaders do this successfully by providing direction, guidance, priorities, assessing and adjusting as necessary (Department of the Army, 2019). This is obviously more doctrine that must be ignored. Do subordinates really need priorities, guidance, and direction to accomplish tasks and missions?

No, they do not. Failing to assign responsibilities for work is useful in the creation of dysfunction because people are usually not great at knowing what their bosses really want them to do.

Don't Have a Clear Purpose

All productive meetings should have a clear purpose. Thus, to increase dysfunction, make sure no one knows why organized your meeting. Just have it. And tell your staff or subordinates to come because you are in charge. This ensures everyone knows who's the boss, and no one can prepare any sort of valuable product or information for the meeting.

As usual, the Army has alternate and very ignorable suggestions. Army Mission Command doctrine "refers to influencing people by providing purpose (why), direction and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization" (Department of the Army, 2019, p.1-17). Soldiers must understand why they do something before they do it. However, you can create excessive chaos if you do not give them a purpose. And as a plus, if you really want to be dysfunctional, combine the tactics of having no purpose and no agenda. After all, everyone knows two useless behaviors are better than just one.



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, receive a briefing with a planned agenda, a clear purpose, and post-briefing directions prior to their redeployment ceremony at Fort Stewart, Georgia, Aug. 18, 2022. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Dustin Stark)

Be Unpredictable

Cancel battle rhythm meetings as much as possible. While this may not make a particular meeting less productive than others, it adds to the organization's overall frustration and is a surefire way to increase dysfunction. When people plan and prepare for frequently cancelled meetings or meetings that never happen, they eventually quit putting in strong efforts to prepare. If you cancel enough meetings, you can have an effect like that of the *Boy who Cried Wolf*, and ensure people quit trying to be ready for a wolf... or a meeting that hardly ever comes, but sometimes does.

However, the Army has a recommendation here as well; the leadership competency "develops leaders," sub-competency "stewards the profession" requires leaders to "maintain professional standards and effective capabilities for the future" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 6-1). Additionally, Army leaders also make decisions to take action to improve the organization beyond their tenure, which means they should be predictable and establish useful battle rhythm events. You should ignore this too, as unpredictability adds to chaos, and chaos creates dysfunction, which is our goal.

Embarrass People Publicly

If none of the previous suggestions appear palatable, but you still want to ensure you conduct a dysfunctional meeting, publicly ridicule meeting participants any time they make suggestions. By doing this, you not only

demonstrate your superiority to your attendees, but you also ensure no one will publicly question you in the future. Of course, Army leadership doctrine suggests all Soldiers should be treated with dignity and respect (Department of the Army, 2019), but as with all Army suggestions, the dedicated meeting anarchists should ignore this rule as much as possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, employing any of the above strategies or approaches can lead to a dysfunctional meeting and ensure you are reducing productivity as much as possible. If you enact two or more within the same meeting, you can guarantee both frustration and dysfunction. However, be warned, if you engage in the above-mentioned unproductive tips, be sure to have plenty of MRE spoons available so your attendees will have something with which to gouge their eyes out as you continue to waste their precious time. We say this because, while you may value dysfunction within your meetings, your attendees most certainly do not. ■

Author Note: *This article was written tongue-in-cheek, based on a myriad of meeting behaviors we have experienced (or perpetrated) within our careers. Our hope is that people will read it, identify unproductive behaviors, and seek to eliminate them. We do not actually endorse unproductive behaviors.*

References

- Department of the Army. (2015). *Leader development* (Field Manual 6-22). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm6_22.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2019). *Army leadership* (Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20039-ADP_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2022). *Planning and orders production* (Field Manual 5-0). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN35403-FM_5-0-000-WEB-1.pdf
- McGraw, M. (2010). *Identifying nonproductive behaviors in meetings*. Management and Leadership. <https://www.salesengine.sandler.com/blog/identifying-nonproductive-behaviors-in-meetings>
- Senate.gov (n.d). *About filibusters and cloture*. <https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/filibusters-cloture.htm>
- Whillans, A., Feldman, D., & Wisniewski, D. (2021). *The psychology behind meeting overload*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/11/the-psychology-behind-meeting-overload>

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel S. Arnold is the chair for the Department of Army Operations, SGM-A, Fort Bliss, Texas. His previous assignments include command sergeant major for U.S. Army Cadet Command and Fort Knox and regimental command sergeant major for the U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School. Arnold deployed to Operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. He holds a master's degree in adult education and lifelong learning from Pennsylvania State University and is working towards his graduate-level certification in instructional design from Western Kentucky University

Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson is the senior instructor and vice-chair of the Department of Army Operations, SGM-A, Fort Bliss, Texas. He has served in a variety of leadership assignments and positions over the last 29 years ranging from squad leader to command sergeant major. Nelson is a Class 63 Sergeants Major Course graduate and a fellow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Seminar XXI Fellowship. He holds a

bachelor's degree in social science from Washington State University; a Master of Health Science and a Master of Business Administration from Touro University International; a Master of Education from Pennsylvania State University; and a Doctorate of Education from Vanderbilt University.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

