

Time Out

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Imagine that you had a way to tell the leader of a meeting that you were bored with the current discussion and wished the conversation could move on to a more helpful topic. Now imagine you could share your thought with others to test if they agreed without getting them or the leader upset with you. If that seems like a utopia, just read on; this article has the solution to many hours of wasted time spent in meetings.

I advocate that each team should have some kind of Charter that allows the participants of team meetings to establish a set of ground rules to be as efficient as possible. At any time in its existence, a team can establish a few rules that will save everyone an amazing amount of frustration.

What is required is that the team be a group of mature individuals who all have their mutual best interest at heart. It helps a lot if there is real trust within the team. Then just a quick brainstorm can generate a few basic rules. For example, here are three rules that can lead to a more effective group process:

1. We will start and end our meetings on time.
2. We will listen to each other's input and not grandstand.
3. We will not make jokes at the expense of any team member.

One incredibly powerful team rule is the use of the "Time Out" signal. The hand signal is the familiar one from football, where the referee puts the tips of the fingers of one hand to the palm of the other hand to form the letter "T." Once a group has established that it is safe to do this, something magic happens.

Each member of the team is now empowered to let his or her thoughts be known when the group appears to be spinning wheels. The time out sign is merely calling the question by letting the leader know that at least one individual thinks the team would be better off moving to a different topic. Because of the agreement that the individual will not be punished for making the gesture, team members are free to use it when the situation arises.

The team leader should now say something like this, "I see Jake is signaling that he wants to move on, are the rest of you in agreement?" If most of the team members show affirmative body language or verbal response, then the subject can immediately be changed to something more valuable. Imagine how refreshing this method would be in those all-day meetings that seem to drag on forever.

Just this one hand signal can save a team hours of tedious repetition or arguments, once a team agrees to use it. I advocate that you encourage your team at work to discuss and approve the use of the "time out" gesture and other basic rules. These rules can significantly improve the productivity and empowerment of any team.



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