

# Wow! What a Great Meeting!

by Eddy Hall

When Dennis got home from a ministry team meeting, his wife asked him, “What group were you meeting with tonight?” When Dennis told her, she answered with a touch of sarcasm, “I bet that was a lot of fun!”

A little sheepishly, Dennis admitted, “Well, actually, it *was* fun.” This was early in our church’s transition to a team culture before people had gotten used to our team meetings being exciting. Most of us have learned to dread committee meetings. And the reasons we hear for hating them are the same in almost every church.

- There are too many meetings.
- The meetings are boring.
- They are too long.
- We talk a lot but have trouble making decisions.
- There is poor follow through on decisions.

We no longer hear these complaints at Hilltop. Occasionally we have a dud meeting, but nine times out of ten, after a meeting we hear people saying some version of, “Wow! That was a great meeting!” What has made the difference?

## Great team meetings made simple

A couple of years ago, one of our team leaders wasn’t holding regular team meetings, and the work of the whole team was falling on her. When I asked about it, she explained that she had so little confidence in her ability to lead meetings that she was afraid of wasting her team members’ time. That conversation inspired us to develop a simple meeting format that we now use for almost all our meetings including staff meetings, board meetings, and coaching sessions. With this simple yet powerful tool, even brand new team leaders can lead focused, productive meetings their very first try.

### Job 1: Build trust

As Patrick Lencioni shows in his wonderful book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, the first dysfunction of a team is the absence of trust. Stated positively, the foundation for strong teamwork is trust, so creating an environment where strong trust can grow is the team leader’s first job. When team members don’t trust one another, they find it hard to work through their

differences to come to united decisions, and they lack the shared commitment to their decisions needed for follow through. Teams where trust is high are fun and they can accomplish amazing things.

At Hilltop, most of our ministry team meetings begin with a shared meal. Why? Because eating together is a great way to build relationship. We prefer to eat and meet in homes. As we eat share in response to two simple questions. “What happened this week that you felt happy about?” and “What happened this week that you felt sad about?” We call this “happy/sad.” These nonthreatening questions invite people to share at whatever level they are comfortable with. Among people who know each other well, the sharing usually goes quickly to the deepest, most important things going on in their lives.

Once the meal is over and a recorder is chosen for the meeting, the next activity is to pray for one another. This is not your typical time for prayer requests. The sharing is focused and personal. The question each person answers is, “What do you need Jesus to do for you today?” The first hour or more of our time together is spent building relationship--eating together in a home, sharing happy/sad together, and praying for one another. The bonds built and deepened during these times are precious, and they lay the foundation for amazing teamwork.

## **Job 2: Skip the boring stuff**

The second secret to great meetings is knowing what to leave out. What makes meetings boring? Discussing things you're not passionate about. Reports that don't help the team do its job. Unfocused conversation that doesn't lead to action.

One of the six characteristics of a healthy ministry team is focus--the team is formed around a single ministry, not a cluster of ministries. When a team handles multiple ministries, most team members will not be called to all those ministries and they will usually be bored whenever the team is discussing the ministries they are not called to. The solution is straightforward--all the team members need to be called to the same ministry.

Board meetings and congregational meetings are famous for boring reports. While it seems like we should know what has been happening, feeling like we ought to care about the reports doesn't make them less boring. What if there was a way to zero in those parts of the reports we really need to know and that help the team do its job and skip the rest? Actually, it's not that hard. The following meeting format makes this simple. Plus, it makes it easy to move toward action steps rather than getting bogged down in endless talk.

## **Ministry team meeting format**

After the meal (if you choose to eat together) copies of the agenda are passed out. (More later on preparing the agenda.) A recorder for the meeting is named to take notes. These are not detailed minutes, but the key points made during the ministry review, action steps decided upon, and calendar items.

1. **Pray for each other:** “What do you need Jesus to do for you today?”

Starting the meeting with praying for each other is huge. It is hard to fight with someone you have just prayed for. And the personal nature of the sharing question leads, over time, to deep life sharing within the team. Team members are not requesting prayer for others they know, but for themselves. They are identifying their own needs and struggles. As trust grows in the group, sharing becomes more and more transparent. The team becomes a close-knit community.

If you can afford to take 30 minutes for prayer, you can do this activity as an entire team. Each person shares a need, and then you pray. If you can only take 10 minutes for prayer, have people share in groups of three. After each one shares a need, another person prays for that need. If you only have 5 minutes for prayer, pray in twos.

We now open almost every board meeting and ministry team meeting this way. It is amazing what it does to the level of loving relationships in your church you open 90% of your meetings with this kind of prayer for one another.

2. **Review the group’s ministry since the last team meeting.**

Too many reports simply report activity. It sometimes feels like the people reporting just want everyone to know how much they’ve gotten done, but that doesn’t help the team do its job. It is important to review, but in a strategic way. The three review questions provide help you do that.

a. *What has worked?*

b. *What didn’t work wekk?*

c. *What will we do differently?*

This is the *evaluation* step of the meeting, something many teams do only on a hit and miss basis. Starting by asking what has worked since the team’s last meeting gives the team a chance to celebrate victories, how God has been working.

“What didn’t work?” gives the team a safe space to talk about frustrations and problems. Then out of that discussion comes the application, “What will we do differently?” Team members, guided by these three simple questions, have an amazing ability to do highly creative problem solving.

3. **Report progress on Action Steps from last meeting.**

During the meeting the recorder jots down Action Steps the group decides on (Item 6 in the format). Each Action Step is assigned to a team member with a deadline. This reporting step is when the team members go over the list of assigned Action Steps from the last meeting to

check progress. This practice goes a long way toward solving the problem of poor follow through. Everyone knows who has agreed to do what and by when, and team members know they will be reporting to each other at every meeting on their progress or lack of it.

This meeting format doesn't do away with reporting, but focuses it. Reporting takes two forms: (1) Reviewing (evaluating) the ministry since the last meeting and (2) reporting progress on Action Steps. Both kinds of reports move the team toward accomplishing team goals, and so they are energizing, not boring.

#### 4. *Learn (optional training time).*

If you are going to include a training component in your meeting, it will go here. In most of our regular team meetings, we don't include a training time. However, when our teams do their annual retreat for planning and training, we invest several hours in the training time.

#### 5. *Discuss decisions to be made*

Before the meeting the leader will prepare an agenda of decisions that need to be discussed. These can be typed onto the meeting agenda form under Item 5 so that when the agenda is passed out at the meeting everyone has the list. The leader can also ask if team members are aware of other decisions that need to be discussed and can add those to the agenda. If you don't have time to work your way through all the decisions, prioritize and leave some for the next meeting.

An inexperienced leader may not be confident preparing an agenda. The leader's coach (see chapter 8) can help the leader prepare an agenda the first few times until the leader gains confidence.

#### 6. *Assign action steps.*

It is not enough to decide what will be done; you must also decide who will do it and by when. Rather than the leader delegating these tasks, it is far more effective for team members to volunteer either to do them or to contact a person whom they think would be willing to do them. This approach to assigning work brings team leadership within reach even for people who are not good delegators. The team divides the work; it's not up to the leader to recruit workers.

As these decisions are made, the recorder writes down for each project who is taking responsibility for each aspect of the project and when they will do it. Of course, team members will report on their progress on these assignments at the next meeting.

## 7. *Schedule upcoming events.*

Record calendar decisions and assign someone to communicate them to the person who keeps the official church calendar.

When there is not time to cover the whole agenda, the leader decides what to tackle and what to leave for the next meeting. After the meeting, the recorder is responsible to get copies of notes to all the team members and anyone else who needs to see them.

### **Cut out unneeded meetings**

What, though, about the too-many-meetings complaint?

The problem often actually isn't too many meetings. A team-based church has lots of meetings--great, highly productive meetings. The problem is too many unnecessary meetings.

#### *Let unneeded groups die*

Most churches have at least a couple of committees that need to die. When First Baptist was small, the facility committee showed up with hammers and paint brushes and kept the building looking loved. As the church grew, they hired a maintenance man who made repairs, and the committee authorized the repairs and oversaw his work. Then the church hired a business administrator who supervised the maintenance man's work. The facility committee would then meet to approve retroactively the work the maintenance man had already done. Meetings were pointless. Committee members were relieved when they were told the committee could disband.

#### *Meet only if you really need to*

Many committees meet too often. For example, a team may meet monthly because, well, they always have. In our church we have found that most teams can be highly effectively meeting every two months with more frequent meetings during especially intense times. If, as occasionally happens, a meeting is scheduled but there is no important or urgent agenda, the leader cancels the meeting. The principle is simple: *Only meet when you need to meet.* Of course, some teams--such as the office staff--need to meet weekly, and a team formed to deal with a crisis or urgent decision needs to meet often until the situation is dealt with. When teams meet only when they need to, members know their time is valued and that they won't be wasting their time by meeting.

## **Meetings you don't want to miss**

Recently I went to a team meeting dog tired. In fact, during the prayer time, almost everyone in the room had the same prayer request: "I'm just so tired." I can't remember the last time I was in a room when the energy was so low. I confess, my mind was more on getting to bed than it was on our meeting.

Two hours later, after the meal, after the meeting, I was feeling great. The energy level in the room was high. In fact, we were all so energized by working together that it was another 45 minutes before anyone left. That kind of teamwork is just plain fun.

With this simple meeting format, meetings like that don't need to be a rarity. A novice can lead a meeting like a pro. Chances are good that after your next meeting, somebody is going to say, "Wow! What a great meeting!"

*To download the form described here, return to [More-with-Less Ministry resources](#), and click on [Team Meeting Format](#).*