

Making the Most of Meetings: *How to turn talk into action*

by Kevin A. Miller

How many times have you been in a committee meeting that went well, but in the weeks that followed, little or nothing happened? People either didn't remember or didn't act on what was said. So much talk, so little action.

Having endured that many times, I finally abandoned the traditional minutes of the meeting. Instead, I record a short, simple list of action steps. The only written record of the meeting lists what action will be taken, by whom, and when. Then I email (or mail) this list to each person immediately after the meeting. For example:

Who	Action Step	When
Jack	Check availability and prices for 3 retreat centers	by next meeting
Cindy	Invite speaker	by Feb. 15
Cheryl	Check calendar to make sure date is open	by next meeting

This approach takes much less time than writing full minutes, and it focuses people's attention on what matters. The important part of the meeting is not so much what was discussed (yes, we'll have a retreat) but acting on what was discussed (doing the work necessary to actually hold a retreat).

Let me summarize, then, the Miller Method for Meetings: Attach action steps to every project and every item for discussion. Don't move on until you know, "Who's responsible for this? Who will do what by when?" In fact, at the end of almost every meeting I lead, I say, "Okay, here are the actions steps we've listed." Then I read each one out loud to make sure it's accurate and someone is committed to do it.

A friend kids me that when I'm in a meeting at work, before long, "The jaws snap shut." Go ahead: call me Jaws. But the only way I can handle so many words at meetings—the only way I can convert discussion into results—is to make sure a decision is made and action is taken. I've tasted results-oriented meetings, and I'll never go back to the other kind.

This raises a question: Why do so many meetings not reach this goal of clear, simple action steps? Usually because one of the following questions hasn't been answered:

- Do we really need this meeting? Peter Drucker cautions, "Meetings are by definition a concession to deficient organization, for one either meets or one works." And Richard Saul Wurman promises, "The quality of meetings in your life would improve if there were fewer of them, with fewer people."
- Who's in charge? In a church, meetings bring together people from various backgrounds and ministries, many of whom are peers, so it's not always clear who's leading. We actually ask out loud, "Whose meeting is this, anyway?"
- What led up to this meeting? Most of the time, this group hasn't met for two weeks, one month, or even two months. People can't remember what was discussed last time; it's not fresh in their minds. So I've learned to quickly summarize what led up to this meeting and where the project stands. I used to think *People will get bored by hearing all this again*, but I was wrong. People need and want the quick refresher course of what happened so far and where we stand now.
- How much time do we have to make a decision? Some items can be decided quickly. But if the issue is controversial or packed with emotion, I won't call for a decision in one meeting. Instead, I'll say, "We're not going to make a final decision today. We're just going to talk it through, raise as many questions as we can, and see what we still need to learn. Then at our next meeting or the one after, we'll make a final decision." That calms people and keeps them from feeling rushed to judgment. Yes, I'm highly committed to taking action, but I won't do that until the group is ready. It's okay occasionally for your action step to be, "Decide at our next meeting."
- Do you care about me? Most meetings involve people who see each other only rarely. They don't know each other well, and that hampers the group. So it pays to hang around afterward, building relationships. I might also bring a snack, schedule a fun-only social time, or move the meeting from a stuffy conference room to a more comfortable location. When people know they're cared for, they work with, rather than against, the group.

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