

Soft Skills at Work: You can make meetings more efficient

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For most businesspeople, attending meetings is a weekly if not daily activity. The Wharton Center for Applied Research found that "the average chief executive officer spends about 17 hours each week in meetings and senior executives an average of 23 hours a week in meetings."

With so much of the week tied up this way, I wondered how a person learns to become an effective meeting participant. As I thought about people who have mastered the necessary skills, two Baltimore Washington Corridor Chamber members came to mind immediately.

Kathea Smith of Pasadena is the director, Dorsey Station at University of Maryland, University College. Leonard Raley of Odenton is the president and CEO of the University System of Maryland Foundation Inc. and vice chancellor for advancement.

It seemed logical to begin our conversations by talking about the most obvious trait a person needs to be a successful participant, and that is making sure you are present when the meeting is scheduled to start. When I go to chamber committee meetings, Kathea and Leonard are always ready to go at the appointed hour. I asked why it is important to them to be on time and even early.

"It shows respect for colleagues that you've made it a priority," Kathea said. "And that you've devoted energy, thought and time to the meeting."

Leonard agreed that it is an issue of respect for others.

"It shows how you value their time," he said. "It sends a message that what we have to discuss is important."

Kathea talked about how she learned to be on time.

"It was my parents," she said. "My dad had a motto. 'If you are early, you're on time. If you are on time, you're late. If you're late, you might as well not go.' "

Kathea told me her parents continually demonstrated this skill. She learned she needed to leave early to factor in weather or other delays. Kathea even did test runs to a job site before interviews and found alternate routes.

"I am 15 minutes early for everything," she said.

In addition to being on time, what else can make a person effective?

"Participants should listen carefully," Leonard said. "They need to practice civility, recognizing that various viewpoints need to be heard, and not talking over people."

For Kathea, being prepared for a meeting was one of the most important as well as respectful actions a person can take.

"If it is a regular meeting, bring your notes from all previous meetings," she said. "I have them in front of me. I look at agenda beforehand to see what I should do and anticipate what might happen so I can bring pertinent information."

Leonard and Kathea also spoke about behaviors that are detrimental.

"Interpersonal habits play out in the worst possible ways," Leonard said. "People use nonverbals, such as rolling of the eyes and other body language. It is apparent to everyone in room."

Kathea gave an example of people who go off on tangents at meetings.

"One person went 45 minutes off the subject," she said. "We were working on a deadline and had to compile information. We lost 45 minutes."

I asked both if they had any other advice to become a more effective meeting participant.

"Ask thoughtful questions," Leonard said. "And disagree agreeably. Bring potential solutions and not just problems."

Coming back to the important skill of being on time, Kathea recommended, "Set your clocks ahead. Tell yourself the meeting starts 30 minutes earlier."

As Kathea and Leonard demonstrate, being an effective participant means arriving on time, being prepared, listening well and asking thoughtful questions. These skills are excellent reputation builders, and valuable to businesses and organizations as well.

CONNECT! Coalition

Students at South River High School have created an impressive video and fashion show about the do's and don'ts of interviewing.

Signature Program Facilitator Linda Lamon explained that all juniors have seen the video as part of the Career Advisory, where 26 business partners came in to teach interviewing techniques.

Senior Ky Wildermuth, who filmed the video, said that students created the content as part of a leadership course. Student actors, such as Andrew Webber, demonstrated appropriate and inappropriate business attire and what to do and avoid doing at the interview.

In the live fashion show, tank tops, short shorts and denim cutoffs were examples of what not to wear to an interview.

Participants included Ashley Jager, LeAnna Ward, Camille Vendemia, Dan Glennon and Katharine Scruggs.

I asked the students what they learned by being involved in these projects.

"Have some idea of questions you have to ask," LeAnna said.

Ashley added, "Be respectful."

Camille said, "Don't be generic!"

All good advice for anyone looking for a job.

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