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ARTICLE **MEETINGS**

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by Nina A. Bowman

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MINCHU/GETTY IMAGES

In a work culture with too many meetings, we often look for tactics to [get out of meetings](#). But sometimes you need to get *into* a meeting, perhaps because the decisions made there will have implications for you or your team, or maybe because you feel you've been left out of important discussions. Whether you haven't been invited because of an oversight or an intentional decision by the meeting organizer, you can take action to secure your seat at the table.

But First, Pause

We often talk about the need to [decrease the number of meetings we attend](#) and about the [importance of having only the key people in the room](#), but let's face it, there are times that being left off the invitation list can sting. Intellectually, you may understand the logic, but that's little consolation when you want to be included. It may hurt even more when you realize that an invitation snub sends signals to your team and colleagues, who may wonder, "Why isn't our boss in that meeting? Is there a shift of power happening in the organization?" Before making any moves, think objectively about whether you *really* need to be in that meeting. Ask yourself:

- Are you a decision maker on the topic?
- Will you or your team be significantly affected by the outcome?
- Do you bring knowledge or information that others don't have?
- Do you bring a unique perspective that isn't already represented?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, then start the process of understanding why you don't have an invitation.

Assess Your Value

The real currency of a consistent seat at the table is value. If the meeting organizer has left you out, they may not understand what value you bring to the meeting. Ask yourself what unique contribution you can make to the discussion. How will you advance the goal of the meeting?

Take one of my clients, whom I'll call Mark, as an example. He is the assistant director of a contract research organization. Mark's boss was leading meetings to discuss restructuring the research business, and hadn't been including Mark on the invites. Mark felt that he not only should be invited but should be leading the meetings. He wondered whether his voice was appreciated. When Mark finally mustered the courage to inquire about the situation, he learned that his boss felt frustrated that he had to lead the meetings, which he was doing only because he felt Mark wasn't stepping up with ideas and a process for moving the restructuring forward.

Mark was surprised. He saw himself as a key decision maker, but he hadn't been acting like one. In an effort to not step on toes, he had been deferring to his boss on the restructuring — but his passive approach was undermining him. If he wanted to regain his boss's trust, he would need to prove his value. Only then would he be able to get a seat at the table, and even take over leadership of the meetings.

Assess Your Style

You may have been left out of a meeting because of the way others perceive your behavior.

Take another client of mine, whom I'll call Karen. She was on the legal compliance team at a fast-growing biotechnology company. Her role was to work with marketing to ensure that promotional campaigns and materials were in line with government guidelines. Karen had always been invited to

key marketing meetings, but she noticed that more and more meetings were happening without her. In fact, she was not brought into the discussion until campaigns were far along in their development and it was too late for her to influence the marketing team's decisions. The pattern was starting to create big blow-ups between the legal compliance team and the marketing team since Karen was forced to unravel significant marketing campaigns late in the game.

When I spoke with Karen's marketing colleagues, they told me that they found her presence in meetings frustrating. They respected that her role was to help manage the company's legal risk, but she had a tendency to shoot down ideas and take a conservative stance on gray areas, leaving the marketing group feeling demoralized. The team wanted Karen to listen openly, brainstorm along with them, and focus on solutions instead of problems. When Karen heard this feedback, she realized that while she brought unique knowledge and information to the meetings, her style was preventing others from seeing that value.

If you've been left out of a meeting, consider asking your peers for feedback on your style and making the necessary shifts so that others can appreciate what you bring. Karen worked on listening actively and made a point of proposing a solution — not just naming the problem — whenever she identified a compliance issue. These changes made her a better business partner to her marketing peers and helped her get back on the invite list for those meetings.

Use the Right Strategy for the Situation

Securing an invitation to an important meeting will likely require different tactics depending on the situation. Here are tips for some of the common situations I've seen my coaching clients face.

Your boss goes to all the meetings and leaves you out.

- Set aside time to talk with your boss about your goals and interests.
- Directly state your interest in attending specific meetings, and ask what you can do to demonstrate your value.
- Ask your boss if there are projects you can work on that would help you be included in those meetings.
- If your boss agrees that you should be included in future meetings, don't be bashful about reminding them about that commitment. For example, you might ask, "Would the upcoming strategy meeting be an appropriate time for me to share the new competitive analysis research I've been working on?"

You have a peer who is intentionally excluding you.

- Set up a time to have a conversation with your peer about the pattern you're observing.
- When you explain why you should be in those meetings, focus on the business reasons, not your personal interest or feelings.

- If you continue to be left out, ask someone who is invited (and whom you trust) to send an email to the organizer, ideally cc'ing the other participants encouraging your attendance. Your colleague might say something like, “Juan, I think Katie’s perspective in this meeting will be helpful to the group. We should consider adding her to the meeting.” That way the decision isn’t left up to the peer who has been leaving you out.

You just aren’t on the organizer’s radar screen.

- Start by asking yourself whether you are spending enough time developing strong relationships with your coworkers. Getting to know your colleagues increases the chances that they’ll be more aware of your work and the value you might bring to their meetings.
- If there’s a specific meeting you’re targeting, make clear to your manager that you’re interested in joining and ask for advice on what you can do to be included.
- Proactively share with the organizer how your work aligns with the goal of the meeting.
- Make yourself useful. Share relevant information with the meeting organizer and offer your assistance. For example, you can say, “Céline, I know that you have an upcoming meeting to discuss the new account strategy. I thought you’d find this information useful. If it would be helpful, I’d be happy to come to the meeting to discuss the implications with the group.”

In any of these situations, it may be that you weren’t left out of the meeting intentionally. Making clear that you’re interested in attending and explaining what value you can bring can often remedy an oversight.

When you’re not invited to a meeting, it’s easy to point the finger and blame others for leaving you out, but that typically won’t get you the invitation. Ultimately the responsibility is yours to prove why you should be in the room.

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