Let's Have Great Meetings!
Deb Nicholson

>> Thank you, Christopher. So the next talk here is Deb Nicholson.

>> Hi, it's Deb.

>> Oh, Hi.

>> I'm just in there as Freedeb. Are you headed for a second -- oh, there we go. I think. Okay.

>> All right. I think this is working.

>> Yes, everything is working good so far.

>> Okay. Everyone, next talk is let's have great meetings by Deb Nicholson. Welcome.

>> Thank you so much. It's really great to be here. Everyone can hear me all right?

>> Yes.

>> Okay. Cool. So running effective meetings. Unfortunately we're probably not going to be able to totally get rid of meetings. So instead of trying to get rid of them let's have great ones. I work at the Software Freedom Conservancy and we work on protecting the licensees. So maybe more spreadsheets and contracts. And I'm happy to answer more questions about the conservancy leader. So let's get into meetings. We can't get rid of them.

I think if you look at the way that people talk about computers or e-mails early on they got this sense that we were going to share this big mine well and we would never have paperwork and get rid of meetings. So it didn't happen. Therefore, we're going to have good ones. So why do we have meetings? There are a couple of different reasons. One of figuring ones is to give context to work. So if you're doing a little bit of a large project, like GNOME, right, you have your little piece. It helps you to have some context for that work with regards to cost and accuracy for your piece. Are there deadlines in other departments that make a big difference. So one of the reasons that we have meetings is like, hey, I'm working on this and they're like, uh, that sounds like it'll be ready for 2022.

Another -- and then the opposite is true. Sometimes there's work that nobody needs to do. So you might be looking at stuff that I'm creating all this work and keeping them organized and someone may be, oh, we're phasing that thing out. So one of the best things that can happen in a meeting is you find there's work you don't have to do. You can stop doing it and get rid of it. Yay. So another thing that might happen if one project is going to finish something really soon and then pass it to another department or project they might like to have heads up on that so they can plan especially if you thought they were going to turn it around. So when your work is about to become someone else's work it's really helpful to know that that's going to happen. But it's also helpful to know what format it's going to happen in. So like having a sense of when something is coming to you can help you plan for it and help you design and deal with it.

So these are all of the reasons we have meetings and you may be like why couldn't it just be e-mail? Sometimes it can but if you have a different process or deadlines suddenly sounds

ridiculous or something like that. So telling like part B of the project, hey, here's what we found out during part A and what we're going to hand off for you is way different. So these are all ways that you help a big group project work, less surprises, no one wants surprises in the work.

So setting the stage for running a good meeting. There's a couple of different things that you can do. So, first of all, I know especially in pandemic times it's sort of tempting to call a meeting when you're lonely, but don't do that. Call a virtual happy hour. You can't -- a meeting is not going to be the right answer for that. So why are you having a meeting? Sometimes you're having a big meeting and everyone is invited and those can be okay if it's going to be in a large environment maybe once a year or something like that but usually you want to have a tighter invite list and a tighter agenda. So when you have those big meetings you're going to have a lot of Q and A. But when you're a small meeting you want to have people know what's going to be discussed and what's going to be decided. So the better of the job you can do of that the better your meetings is going to be.

So let's get into at the specific. If no one is in charge it's going to be a terrible meeting. Kind of what happens is the person who is most talkative or opinionated or more caffeinated is going to be the most talker. If it feels to hierarchical, it can feel less like oh, this is Paul's meeting. So you can change up who the Chair is. So if you're having a regular meeting it can be regular. So you don't want to be XYZ project meets approximately once every month. And this meeting is in three days. But if you set a regular time that people can put in their calendar you can have better attendance.

If you're trying to do different times for different time zones you have to put it way in advance. So the first and third Thursday it's going to be really good for Eastern Time and second and fourth meetings is going to be British Times. And then you give people the times so they can put it in their calendar and there's no surprises. So thinking about like giving people as much as notice as possible and making it regular to make it easy so when they're thinking, they're like, huh, Tuesdays at 4:00 p.m. is always for this meeting or the second Tuesday. It helps people keep conflicts off.

Another thing is you want to think about who is attending the meeting. You want to be inclusive but you don't want to be timely. And this comes from, you know, thinking about what kind of decisions want to be made. And then of course there's other meetings where you're talking about personnel and HR issues. So thinking who really needs to be at the meeting is going to help you get some of that not paying attention out of the meeting.

And so it can't be like, oh, let's chat every Wednesday. There should be some scope and some sense on what's on topic and what's off topic. Even if the agenda says update on committee A, committee B, committee C. That's still as an agenda. So you can write the script for your meeting. An opening act and a closing, you know, where you finish having your meeting.

And so some things, like, that you can do is think a little bit more specifically about your agenda. So updates from every one in no particular order is not a very good agenda. You would have notes from last week's meetings like committee A will let us know what they need from committee B the upcoming week. So this is going to help you stay on topic and focus.

People really like organized meetings. It sounds a little micro but if you've ever been in a meeting that's kind of all over the place. You'll notice like everyone is typing in the background or chatting. These days is probably petting their cat. So if the meeting is organized and folks know

what's going to happen next they know what's on topic and they feel good. So we're going to address the different topics in a specific order that makes sense.

So you don't really keep the same agenda forever. Say you have a standing meeting and someone from committee C is just going to be part of the meeting today. Put them at the very beginning for five minutes and then let them go. You don't want people sitting around for a whole meeting that are not really interested on the entire meeting. So if someone comes by and says here's a update from the big head honcho and then let them go. You can also rearrange especially with volunteers, you can ask if there's anybody that needs to leave early today.

So one of the ways you make sure that you are getting of things that you need get to is you take notes. So you look at your notes from the past week. And you can look at did we get this done, did we find an answer to that, and you have kind of like where the conversation left off last time so you can pick up right where you left off. I highly recommend rotating who takes notes for the meeting. And I think it should not be the only woman. There's no one that leaves the womb knowing how to take notes. So when you say, like, oh, I'm not going to take notes what I think here is that you don't like to do it. No one likes to do it but it's one thing that needs to be done to make sure the meeting is good. It can be one main person by using a tool like Etherpad. If you have that everyone can take notes collaboratively.

So your meeting is going to be great, right? Once you have all of these things in place like what can go wrong? Well, let's talk about that. So some times there are things that what if someone brings up a topic and no one knows the answer. Nothing good comes out of I think I remember reading in something like last year. You put a committee and let them investigate. When nobody follows the agenda. So what do you do? You took all this time. Once a person goes through the agenda they make sure to follow through with it. So when you're chairing a meeting that has an agenda let's start with whatever agenda number one is called. So you help remind people constantly that you're following the agenda. People are going to chitchat at the beginning of meetings and it's nice. But you have to make a separate place for team building and socialization outside of your meeting. So some of the things you can say is we have a lot to get through today or if folks want to stick around and chitchat I think that's pretty cool. Let's look at agenda item number one.

So if you have to be funny or firm you have to get everybody back to the agenda even if it seems like not fun. Okay. And then another thing that can happen in your meeting is that people -- so the person who is associated with agenda number two is talking and somebody else is interrupting. And it's really -- it's not good. So one of the things you can start doing you can apologize. So as soon as you interrupt somebody you can say, oh, I'm sorry, go ahead and finish. So if you're doing all video call people can do this, if you're doing a text base you can do a little circle and a forward slash that looks like a hand with a raised arm. And then you can go back to the person who is talking.

Sometimes you get people that are just bad. Not bad people but they're bad in meetings and they interrupt a lot. So some of the things that you might say is, like, oh, hang on I wanted to hear the rest of Julie's point or I don't this Juan was finished, Juan, do you want to finish. Or let Mike finish and then you can talk next. But you have to say something and keep saying something. So it's hard. And if you're not used to interrupting yourself then it can feel weird to interrupt the interrupter. You'll get over it but it's okay.

And then this is kind of like a very specific kind of interrupting, like, when you're in a meeting and someone keeps wanting to revisit decisions from last week. It's not fair to everyone who has in good faith and participated the process. So we have course of action and everyone discussed it, discussed it, discussed it, the group decided the course of action number one. So the people are eventually fine, you win. So once you let this happen you open this like Ground Hog's Day where everything comes back like over and over and over again. So you cannot let this person change the decision. So you can say, like, I know you had reservations for plan X and the group is not going to discuss it again until three events from now.

You can say it isn't fair for you to keep questioning the group's decision. Sometimes people just get excited and --

>> We've got five more minutes.

>> Perfect. I'm almost done. So when people don't know what topic is going to be discussed you can't be prepared. So this kind of models that says we can't put this on the agenda or why don't you research that and get it back to you this week. So notes, moderation and, an advanced agenda and you're meetings are going to be awesome.

So I'll take questions for the last couple of meetings and hopefully you will take my advice and have great meetings.

>> I can read them if you want.

>> Yeah. Go ahead.

>> So the first question is I usually set regular meetings with enough time but I make changes yearly as per time zone changes, is that considered a good practice?

>> Yes, as long as you give people lots of notice. What you don't want to do is have a meeting happening less than a week and people is not going to know what time. Give them like here are the meetings for the next six months or I am part of some groups that set their meetings a year in a advance. So, yes, as long as you give people notice.

>> Great. The second one is what do you do when all items have a greater one than you?

>> Oh, yes. I see what you mean. So the box keeps saying that -- yeah, I think, so that one like the first time that happens you might have to suck it up. The second time you suspect that's going to happen is you kind of push to set the parameters and set like, oh, do we want the fastest solution or the most accurate or most compassionate or whatever it is. Let's lock at the data or we might say let's ask all of the committees and let each committee vote and we all will agree to abide by the decision. So you just add language and say, you know, put it all on the language and put it where this is what our process will be. So then later if it happens the second time, which it might, you can say, so if you remember we agreed that we would look at this kind of cost benefit and then we'll abide by the decision that was made.

And then I guess the second thing you could do is appeal to someone that's in a similar position and say -- I mean, you can either approach the person and say when you overturn the group decisions and the meetings it's really undermining. So when you do that in a meeting is really unhelpful and kind of demoralizing. I hope that helps.

>> The second one how do you accept yourself but still not feel anxious?

>> Yeah. So you could try, if you're comfortable with it, using a little bit of humor or sometimes it can be easier to stand up for someone else than for yourself. So if there's someone who constantly interrupts you in meetings, like, I notice I may say, oh, I really wanted to hear Margaret's point. Almost verbatim. Once you accept that then it becomes that meeting's culture. So if it helps you to interrupt it might be good and it might be easier. You can kind of jump start it by asking your friend, hey, let's make sure that we really let people finish. So I hope that helps. And I will be in the chat for a little bit. Are we at the end here?

>> Yes. And also make sure to read the comments in this presentation.

>> Okay.

>> Thank you very much.

>> Yes, thank you, Manuel. Bye.