

## Space Out to Avoid Jamming Up

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*Q. I had back-to-back meetings scheduled today. With 10 minutes left in the first one, it was still going strong. I didn't know what to do, so I sat there and ended up 15 minutes late to the second meeting. That didn't go over well. What should I have done?*

A. You were stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Stay at your first meeting and you risk being late for or missing the second. Leave the first meeting before it is over, and you risk dissing the people there. Just sitting there didn't resolve your situation, as you kept the people in the second meeting hanging and felt your anxiety level rise. What can you do or say to avoid angering either group?

You had two choices. At that 10-minute mark you could have decided to be at your second meeting on time and announced, "I notice it's 10 of the hour, and I'm due at another meeting at 11:00, so could we schedule a follow-up to continue the discussion?" Or, you could have stayed at the first meeting, but explained to the participants, "This discussion is really important, and it looks like it will go past the hour. I need to let the people at my 11:00 meeting know that I'm going to be delayed. I'll be right back."

Which of these options you use depends on the answer to a simple question: Which meeting is more important? For instance, you might be meeting with your chief executive at the first meeting. In that case, it's not likely that you will announce at 10:50 that you're leaving to meet with your team. Conversely, if your second meeting is with your chief executive, you need to wrap up the first meeting to be sure to be on time.

The best way to deal with back-to-back meetings is to avoid them. Keep a 15-minute buffer zone between meetings. And remember to allow for travel time to get from one meeting to the next. At the very least, before the start of your first meeting, talk to the person running it. Let him know you will need to leave when the meeting is scheduled to end. That keeps you on schedule, with no announcement necessary.