

14. Effective Meetings

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Introduction

Meetings are essential. There is no alternative for meeting face-to-face in certain situations, and interpersonal contacts can add a whole new dimension to working relationships. But many meetings waste a large amount of management and staff time. Some managers report that about 50% of their working time is spent in meetings. Additional time is involved preparing for meetings and minute writing.

The main aim for meetings should be to keep them brief, focus on the issue(s) at hand, only include necessary participants, and concentrate on reaching a workable conclusion.

Where possible meetings should be avoided, unless alternatives take more time. Similarly, agenda items that could be dealt with in another way, or that are non-productive, should be taken out.

There are some tips for making meetings more effective below. Preparation and discipline are vital. It also helps to make meetings practical and 'task-centred' i.e. meet around work, not waffle (practical focus, not theory).

Analysing Meetings

Re-read the minutes of your regular, and recent, meetings. Highlight any key decisions and action points. Assess their relative value against time spent. Then consider whether the outcome could have been achieved without a meeting, or in a shorter, more effective meeting.

In the future, after applying some of the tips given below, record the time each meeting takes, and periodically review the situation.

Is a Meeting Necessary?

Evaluate the need for each and every meeting – both regular and ad hoc. What are the

aims/needs, and is a meeting the best way to achieve these?

Who to Invite?

Only invite those with a real interest, and when in doubt ask the potential participant whether he/she feels attendance would be worthwhile, or whether they would like to contribute written views and/or learn about the outcome instead.

Where members of staff are only interested in certain agenda items, make sure they are able to only attend for relevant parts. This may involve amendments to the agenda to stagger or group their items.

Timing

Meetings must start on time - otherwise valuable collective staff time is lost. Get everyone to agree that meetings will start on time from henceforth – then start exactly on time, and expect an apology from anyone arriving late.

Schedule meetings to end at lunchtime or at the end of the day, providing a motivation to end on time. Avoid holding meetings first thing in the morning, as people prefer to arrange their work before attending, or straight after lunch, where concentration is low.

Prepare a timed agenda indicating which items should be dealt with quickly.

Planning

If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other, i.e., a circle or semi-circle. For large groups, try U-shaped rows. Choose a location suitable to your group's size. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression – but not too large as this creates an impersonal atmosphere.

Use visual aids for interest (e.g., posters, diagrams, etc.). Post a large agenda up front to which members can refer. You can also use aids such as flipcharts and 'post-it' notes for collecting and analysing key points (or brainstorming and subsequent analysis).

Agenda

- Write or approve the agenda personally, and reject any items that can be dealt with more effectively outside the meeting.
- Prune the agenda so it can be completed on time.
- Place most important items first, so if you run out of time unimportant items can be left.
- Make the first item 'action not completed', so you do not waste time in discussions on action already taken.
- Do not waste time approving previous minutes, unless this is necessary in an official board meeting.
- Make the agenda items sufficiently specific so people are able to prepare.
- Use accompanying papers/briefing to cover any information points – so the meeting can be restricted to clarification and discussion, not recapping.

- Make sure all papers are sent out in good time, to enable staff to prepare – and make it known that staff should be well-prepared, and concise.

Your agenda needs to include a brief description of the meeting objectives, a list of the topics to be covered and a list stating who will address each topic and for how long. It also helps to include an ‘expected outcome’ column, so participants can consider in advance. This also helps participants to know whether a decision will be needed immediately, or further consideration etc. When you send the agenda, you should include the time, date and location of the meeting and any background information participants will need to know to hold an informed discussion on the meeting topic. A suggested agenda format is given below.

Meeting Description			
Purpose of Meeting:			
Date/Time:			
Location:			
Chair:			
Aim of meeting			
Agenda Item	Timing	Who to Address	Expected Outcome
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

Opening Meetings

- Always start on time; this respects those who showed up on time and reminds latecomers that the scheduling is serious.
- Welcome attendees and thank them for their time.
- Examine the aims of the meeting.
- Review the agenda at the beginning of each meeting, giving participants a chance to understand all proposed major topics, change them and accept them.
- Note that a meeting recorder if used will take minutes/action points and provide them back to each participant shortly after the meeting.
- Clarify your role(s) in the meeting.
- Stress the need for conciseness (higher-level discussion).

Establishing Ground Rules for Meetings

You don't need to develop new ground rules each time you have a meeting. However, it pays to have a few basic ground rules that can be used for most of your meetings. These ground rules cultivate the basic ingredients needed for a successful meeting. Four powerful ground rules are: participate, get focus, maintain momentum and reach closure. (You may also want a ground rule about confidentiality.).

List your primary ground rules on the agenda. If you have new attendees who are not used to your meetings, you might review *each* ground rule at the meeting.

Time Management

- One of the most difficult facilitation tasks is time management - time seems to run out before tasks are completed. Therefore, the biggest challenge is keeping momentum to keep the process moving.
- You might ask attendees to help you keep track of the time.
- If the planned time on the agenda is getting out of hand, present it to the group and ask for their input as to a resolution.

Meeting Evaluation

At the end of each meeting, review how well the meeting aims were met and meeting performance.

Closing Meetings

Always end meetings on time and attempt to end on a positive note. At the end of a meeting, review actions and assignments, and set the time for the next meeting and ask each person if they can make it or not (to get their commitment) Clarify that meeting minutes and/or actions will be reported back to members in at most a week (this helps to keep momentum going).

Chairing Meetings

The chair needs to maintain order during the meeting, and to ensure that the agenda is dealt with quickly and efficiently. Key duties of the chair include: -

- Ensure agendas and backing papers are sent out in good time
- Making ground rules clear
- Keeping timing
- Ensuring physical arrangements (including need for breaks, drinks/food etc.) and any equipment work well
- Making clear the timing and nature of each agenda item
- Ensuring that all remarks are directed through the chair, allowing only one speaker at a time
- Keeping contributions to the point, and working through the agenda systematically
- Watching behaviour around the table to bring any dissatisfaction into the open, and to judge when more time is needed
- Ensure that everybody who wants to has an opportunity to input
- Ensure that any necessary decisions are taken at the meeting
- Sum up each item (and action needed) clearly – both for the minutes secretary and to ensure agreement
- Thank members for their participation and minutes secretary

Minutes

Where possible, reduce minutes to a set of agreed action points. These can be agreed at the end of each topic, and written up by a personal assistant. Often, laptop computers are now used in meetings, to make an instant record.

Other important points of agreement may also need to be recorded – but these should be rare e.g. changes to policy, strategy or organisational plans. These should be recorded and explained to all relevant staff, as well as amendments made to original plans and policies.

The time taken for the meeting should also be recorded, so a future meeting assessment can be carried out.

Other tips for minute writing are: -

- Ensure that all of the essential elements are noted, such as type of meeting, name of the organization, date and time, venue, name of the chair or facilitator, main topics and the time of adjournment. For formal and corporate meetings only include approval of previous minutes, and all resolutions.
- Prepare an outline based on the agenda ahead of time, and leave plenty of white space for notes. By having the topics already written down, you can jump right on to a new topic without pause.
- Prepare a list of expected attendees and check off the names as people enter the room. Or, you can pass around an attendance sheet for everyone to sign as the meeting starts.
- To be sure about who said what, make a map of the seating arrangement, and make sure to ask for introductions of unfamiliar people.
- Don't make the mistake of recording every single comment.

Example of Minutes Format: -

Name of Organization:				
Purpose of Meeting:				
Date/Time:				
Chair:				
Agenda Item	Points of Agreement	Action	Person Responsible	Deadline
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

Informal Meetings

A disciplined approach should also be taken at informal meetings. If you are asked to attend an informal meeting, let others know the maximum time you have available/are willing to spend at the outset.

If you are approached for an informal meeting, or visit another office for an informal meeting, and have little time, stand up and remain standing as a signal that this is to be a short meeting.

Management By Walking Around (MBWA)

Some managers walk around and have a brief word with staff on a regular basis (e.g. each morning). This is a good way to keep up-to-date with what is happening and to give all staff an opportunity to air any problems. It can also prevent numerous interruptions throughout the day.

Further Resources

🌐 Web Sites

Effective Meetings Resource Centre

<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/>

Meeting Wizard

<http://www.meetingwizard.org/meetings/effective-meetings.cfm>

Basic Guide to Conducting Effective Meetings

<http://www.mapnp.org/library/misc/mtgmgmnt.htm>

How do we have effective meetings (staff or board)?

<http://www.nonprofits.org/npofaq/17/70.html>

Books

The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

By: Barbara J. Streibel

Publisher: McGraw-Hill Trade

ISBN: 0071391347

The Easy Step by Step Guide to Fewer, Shorter, Better Meetings: How to Make Meetings More Effective

Lomas Brian

Publisher: Rowmark Ltd

ISBN: 0953985687

Better Meetings

Publisher: The Open University

ISBN: 0 7 492 4336 8

Conducting Effective Meetings - Strategies, Tactics for Successful Meetings

[DOWNLOAD: PDF]

By: Gerald L. Pepper

Publisher: BrownHerron

ISBN: B00005RYZT