

Effective Meetings

Properly run meetings can save time, increase motivation, productivity and solve problems. But badly run, they waste time, money, resource and have no value.



I'll bet some of you spend half your working day in meetings. Of those, half are not really worth having and in those that are, half the time is wasted. Not only that, many meetings are a waste of money. Little attention is often paid to the cost in time of those who attend.

Decide what kind of meeting you want

There are four key types of meeting.

- Selling, where someone is pitching something
- Status, where information is being shared
- Problem Solving, where ideas are being brainstormed
- Chit-Chat, where everyone has a good gossip

Often a meeting will comprise more than one of these elements, which is OK as long as they are not confused. For example, don't sell when you're meant to be chatting and don't present information when problem solving.

Let people know what the meeting is about

Good meetings don't just happen; they need to be prepared for. An agenda lets people know what to expect provides an order for dealing with issues and gives people opportunity to consider discussion points and include or exclude themselves. It means you also have to think about the structure of the meeting, which is no bad thing.



Only invite people who need to be there

It's easier to get a positive outcome if the right people attend a meeting. The general rule is that the more people you have in a meeting, the less likely it is to achieve anything. There's also nothing worse than being in a meeting to which you can contribute nothing. Don't go to meetings out of habit, only go if they are really going to be useful to you or you're going to be useful to the other participants.

Scheduling

Try to schedule meetings early in the day or mid-morning or mid-afternoon when people are more likely to be alert. Avoid scheduling first thing in the morning, the first morning or last afternoon of the working week, the last hour of any work-day and particularly, the first hour after lunch (otherwise known as 'the graveyard slot.')

Interacting with others in the real world is a contact sport, turn your PC off, get your jacket on and get out there.

Introduce everybody to everyone else

It's amazing how many meetings you sit through without knowing the person opposite you. Make sure there's an introduction and warm up at the start of the meeting unless everyone really does know everybody else. If this doesn't happen and you don't know someone, ask. A bad meeting can still be a good chance to network with others.

Manage egos and control air-time

Big meetings encourage people with big egos to go into display mode. When there's a need to problem solve, they will still be in information giving mode, often at high volume and great length. These people need to be controlled and the best way of doing so is to state upfront, what the purpose and structure of the meeting will be.

It can also be useful to state the outcome you want to achieve. Stick to the agenda and beware of hijacking. If you've called the meeting, make sure you get what you need from it. If other people want other things, let them call their own meetings.

Interruptions

Some people thrive in situations where everyone talks at once but others find it intimidating and feel unable to contribute. To communicate effectively, try to ensure that everyone has opportunity to speak and if necessary, try to encourage those who don't find it easy in group situations.

On a practical level, divert any office phones, ask attendees to switch off mobiles, pagers or Blackberries.

Starting and finishing

Start and finish on time. Time in meetings is always different from 'real' time. A quick 10 minute catch up can fill a whole morning. One reason for this is that work in meetings doesn't actually start until someone says "I've got another meeting to go to."

People will be more likely to come to your meetings if they know they start and finish on time. Many people have back-to-back meetings and keeping them waiting will disrupt their day.

Agree who does what and when

Never finish a meeting without getting closure on who is going to do what and when they are going to do it by. Circulate some brief minutes with action points and who will be responsible for them.

When this is clear it will get your next meeting off on the right foot.

Follow through

If you prepare well, get participation and your desired outcome but fail to follow through afterwards, you risk not achieving your purpose. Real work continues after a meeting is over. Sometimes people will take responsibility for an action point but then forget about it or demote it down their 'to-do' list. Check with them how they're getting on and offer help if needed.

Conflict can often be resolved by touching base with people after a meeting.



Technology

Meetings are important forums for getting buy-in. When people are engaged, they feel better because they know exactly what's going on rather than getting information by office memos or email. However, we're all trying to reduce our carbon footprint these days and many companies restrict travel budgets within their environmental policies.

Tele conferencing isn't quite adequate anymore. Meeting attendees need to be able to see information and each other – especially if they are remote. Video conferencing has an increasingly important part to play in meetings for people in geographically dispersed companies.

Meetings fail because

- their purpose is unclear
- there's inadequate preparation
- the wrong people are invited
- there's a lack of participation
- there's no follow up

Five steps to successful meetings

- **Objective**
A meeting without a clear objective and an agenda that sets out to accomplish that objective is a waste of time.
- **Preparation**
Read the agenda, any background material and prepare any materials
- **Punctuality**
Arrive on time. Lateness is disruptive and expensive.
- **Focus**
Stay on track in meetings. Cover the action points, clearly state the outcome of the meeting and distribute minutes.
- **Get in and get out**
'Action' happens outside of meetings. Interacting with others in the real world is a contact sport, turn your PC off, get your jacket on and get out there!