

How to Run an Effective Meeting

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Have you ever sat through a pointless meeting and calculated just how much money was being wasted as a dozen well-paid professionals zoned out around a deathly boring conference table? Horror stories of bad meetings are legion, but the qualities that characterize a good meeting are harder to define. Whether they're team check-ins or department updates, the regular meetings we hold every week or every month are often the hardest to get fired up about. But making them better isn't simply a matter of ordering coffee and bagels (or even pretzels and beer). Productive, valuable, and engaging meetings require a clear goal, an open dialog, and a strong leader. Here's how to make your meetings matter.

Things you will need:

- Free
- A few minutes to a few hours to plan
- **Location:** Lounges and coffee shops have a better ambiance for small groups of three or four. If your meeting is large enough to require a conference room, reserve one ahead of time.
- **Agenda:** Know what you want to cover and how much time you want to devote to each topic. Set a goal for the meeting and stick to it.
- **Visual Aids:** Get the most out of your gathering with a whiteboard or flip pad, and make sure to have a clock or timer visible.
- **Leadership:** It's your meeting, so it's your job to keep people focused. If they're bored, that's your fault.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black.

Make Every Meeting Matter — or Don't Meet at All

Goal: Decide if a meeting is needed and invite only the necessary people.

The vast majority of meetings never need to take place. Massive amounts of valuable time are wasted simply because managers think that face-time is important, or because, like an old milk horse making the rounds, they've become accustomed to a particular routine. "The best way to determine whether a meeting is a good idea is to ask whether the transfer of information is one-way," says J. S. O'Rourke IV, a professor of management at Notre Dame University. If you want to give your team an update or a status report, e-mail will usually suffice.

"A second question to ask is whether you require feedback from all participants," O'Rourke adds. If so, e-mail has limitations: "In a meeting you get different kinds of feedback, with greater detail or texture." Finally, he adds, it's helpful to ask whether the real purpose of the meeting is to build consensus: that's much easier to do face-to-face.

Once you've decided that you absolutely need to hold a meeting, invite only the people who have something to contribute and will get something out of it: team members who work directly on the project in question, decision-makers who have the power to move an idea forward, or specialists who have knowledge and insight that the group needs in order to fully understand an issue. If you want but don't need an invitee's input, and they're overwhelmed with other work, let them know it's okay not to attend but that some decisions may be made without them. If they can live with that outcome, then it's their call how best to use their time.

What Not to Do

Meetings Are NOT Good For:

1. **Updates:** If the flow of information is one way, send an email instead.
2. **Getting slackers on track:** Berating or embarrassing people in front of their peers doesn't improve motivation, and it wastes everyone else's time. Have a one-on-one conversation instead.
3. **Getting everyone on your page:** If there's disagreement about a project, approach team members individually and find out what they need to move forward. In a group setting, they might gang up on you.
4. **Whipping up enthusiasm:** Motivation is a daily management challenge, not a one-time fix. If your team is losing steam, find out why in private conversations and address each person's issues separately.

step 2

Define Goals and Distribute an Agenda

Goal: Create a structure for your meeting.

Productivity expert **David Allen** recommends starting every meeting with a "statement of wild success," a clear definition of the best possible outcome for the meeting. Just stating the ideal result often inspires participants and makes meetings more productive. At the very least, it underscores a feature that every meeting needs: a goal.

Before the meeting even begins, make sure everyone understands the objectives by writing an agenda. If you're a procrastinator, write the agenda before you call the meeting. (This exercise should also help you confirm whether a meeting is necessary and who should attend.) Include everything your group will need to discuss or decide on but keep it brief, using bullet-pointed items instead of full paragraphs. Be clear about who will lead each agenda item and whether it's an update, a discussion, or an action item that requires group decision-making.

Email the agenda to your colleagues a day in advance, so that potential naysayers will have the opportunity to make their objections known privately — rather than during the meeting. (If necessary, you'll then have time to include their suggestions in a revised agenda.) Always paste the agenda into the body of the email; if it's an attachment, no one will bother to open it.

Phrase your agenda in a way that will increase the sense of urgency and importance. An item called "sales challenge for this quarter" is much more captivating than "sales quarter update."

"You want to interest people," says Bert Decker, a communications consultant who has worked with Siemens, Charles Schwab, and Representative Nancy Pelosi. "It gives them a guide to where you're going. It has a point of view and an action step. You're influencing them towards something, not just informing them."

In bigger meetings that require more bodies and more time, give the conversation a clear structure by assigning topics an allotted amount of time. Decker recommends picking odd numbers — 25 minutes instead of 30, for example — to show that you're serious about sticking to a precise schedule.

To increase involvement, consider giving everyone a role or assignment. Team heads or those with specialized knowledge should handle the agenda items that apply to their areas. For longer meetings, if the material covered is not relevant to some people, arrange to have them excused from that portion of the meeting, so they can get back to work rather than waiting through issues that don't concern them.

Essential Ingredients

Jobs for Meeting Attendees

Meetings run more smoothly when the organizer enlists others to help handle the details. It's also a good way to engage coworkers who might otherwise stare out the window or pass the time by twiddling with a Blackberry.

- **Timekeeper:** Makes sure the meeting starts and stops on schedule, reminds facilitator when agenda items are going over their allotted time.
- **Note Taker:** Records what was said and distributes minutes as needed.
- **Whiteboard Wrangler:** Writes ideas on the whiteboard during brainstorming sessions, makes sure every idea is recorded, whether or not it seems promising at first glance

step 3

Own Your Meeting

Goal: Take charge and keep your meeting moving forward.

Good meetings are products of good leadership. Take charge and make it clear that you intend to keep the discussion timely, useful, and relevant. Begin by writing the meeting goal on the whiteboard to remind everyone why they're there. If you've asked people to do some kind of homework and they haven't done it, stop and reschedule the meeting. It won't pay to continue, and meanwhile you'll send a strong message that preparation is not optional.

Show your colleagues that you respect their time by making sure a clock or timer is visible to all. At Google, facilitators project a four-foot-tall timer onto the wall to enforce the idea that meetings should begin and end on time.

Of course the number-one way to get people to show up on time is to start on time. "My calendar is scheduled for the entire day," says Catherine Smith of software company Linden Lab, makers of the online virtual world Second Life. "If someone's not there at 8, then the meeting will go on without them. I'm not going to wait, because I can't."

Hank Lambert, director of business development at Cisco Systems, warns not to take this approach to extremes, however, especially in a meeting with co-workers who outrank you. "I usually wait for higher-ups," he says. "Especially if I'm trying to convince them of something." If you have a senior VP who's habitually late, find out where she'll be before the meeting and escort her to the meeting place yourself.

Staying on topic is also key to maintaining a schedule. If the conversation runs off the rails, refocus the group by saying something like: "Interesting, but I don't think we're advancing our goals here. If I could, I'd like to return to the agenda." This is where an agenda becomes invaluable: Without one, it's far too easy to get sidetracked. When a tangent turns out to be important, don't let the rest of your schedule go out the window. Decide whether it's worth pursuing and direct the conversation accordingly: "We're talking about a new issue — do we want to swap out one of our agenda items to continue discussing it?"

Case Study

Let's Be Careful Out There

Meetings, and the way they're held, can help determine the culture of a business. Since 1924, UPS has held daily Pre-Work Communications Meetings at the beginning of every shift. At these highly structured three-minute meetings — held at all 1,700 UPS centers worldwide — managers deliver important information before their drivers head out for the day: weather and road conditions, reminders about safety and customer service, and announcements like employee anniversaries. Implicitly, the meetings also help instill company values — particularly safety and efficiency — by reinforcing them on a daily basis.

step 4

Make It a Meeting of the Minds

Goal: Get the constructive input you need from everyone present.

Since the point of a meeting is two-way communication, it's crucial to get honest input from everyone. Successful companies know that disagreement and debate are healthy signs of a passionate work force. "We require that people speak up and are challenged," says Gary

Kelly, CEO of Southwest Airlines. No one should feel afraid to say what they really think, and no one person or group should dominate the discussion.

It's the meeting leader's responsibility to make sure everyone is heard. Nudge the quiet types, curb the longwinded, reign in tangents, and control outbursts. To build consensus or come to a group decision, avoid wearing your opinion on your sleeve; it's easy for a leader to stifle a discussion if everyone assumes the outcome is already determined. Avoid the temptation to dismiss ideas immediately — even when they're terrible. For meeting participants, it's embarrassing to be told "no," and over time that kind of discouragement has a corrosive effect on brainstorming efforts. Instead, keep track of every idea, thank people for their input, and praise good ideas in front of the group.

Irv Schenkler, director of management communication at New York University's Stern School of Business, says a good manager should be an active listener who encourages participation by asking "door-opening questions" — inquiries that show you're paying attention and you value your co-workers' input. For example, when attendees are reticent or reluctant to speak, Schenkler advises calling on them: "Sue, you seem to know a good deal about what Beth just said. What are some things you would like to raise at this point?" Likewise, you can divert a conversation dominator with a neutral comment like, "Bob has made his opinion clear. Does anyone else have something they would like to add?"

"The best way I've found to get consensus is to make everyone feel like they had a chance to be heard," Lambert of Cisco says. If people still don't feel like their points of view are being understood or taken seriously, allow them a final opportunity to distill their disagreements down to one or two key points. That way, Lambert explains, a dissenter has a chance to articulate his or her rationale, and the group's decision can be adjusted to address those concerns.

Hot Tip

The Eyes Have It

According to A. Barbour, author of "Louder Than Words: Nonverbal Communication," only 7 percent of communication is what we say — the rest is how we say it. Pitch, volume, and rhythm carry 38 percent of a message, while body language, facial expressions, and eye movement account for a whopping 55 percent.

As a meeting facilitator, you can use non-verbal cues not only to communicate your message but to influence the group dynamic and make all attendees feel included. When people speak during meetings, often they'll look at the facilitator. Avoid their eye contact and look at other members of the group, which will encourage the speaker to do the same.

Close With a Plan of Action

Goal: Make sure everyone leaves knowing the next step.

Close the meeting with a review of what decisions you reached and what the next action will be. Everyone should leave knowing what's expected of them and when — by the end of the week, the end of the cycle, or the next meeting. End by asking everyone whether they thought the meeting was useful and, if not, what could be done better next time.

It's easy to walk out of a meeting room, go back to your desk, and immediately forget every change, decision, and new idea that your group came up with. Make sure that your meeting didn't happen in isolation by letting the right people know what was decided and what will happen next. Sending out complete meeting minutes may not be necessary, but make sure you have a system to keep track of what was decided and what assignments everyone agreed to take on, so you can follow up and keep things moving.

Technically Speaking

The Easy Way to Preserve Whiteboard Ideas

Say you and your colleagues had an intense whiteboard session and came up with a complex diagram that will solve all your problems. But copying it onto a notepad will take hours, and another group is standing outside waiting to use the conference room. What to do? Take a picture of the board with a camera phone and e-mail the photo file to wb@scanR.com. They'll clean up the image, improve the contrast and legibility, turn it into a PDF, and e-mail it back so you can forward it to everyone on your team (all the while securing the confidentiality of your file).