

Effective Meeting Management

A Brief Guide for Facilitators, Presenters & Participants



“I meet, you meet – we all meet”

Remember...

No one ever complained about

- Not going to meetings
- Short meetings
- Well-organized meetings
- Well-led meetings
- Meetings that resulted in action



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What's Wrong with Meetings

If you want to hear business people whine and complain, ask them about meetings. Depending on whom you speak with, there is almost universal agreement that many, most, or all meetings are a huge waste of time.

The research about meetings tends to confirm the anecdotal evidence. Some researchers suggest that over 50% of the time spent in meetings is unproductive. Furthermore, we all spend a lot of our time in meetings. Mid-level business people spend in excess of 25% of their working hours in meetings. For senior executives it's even worse—they spend in excess of 50% of their time in meetings. Another researcher found that, on average, the equivalent of 7 to 15% of personnel budgets are spent on person/time in meetings.

Among the common complaints about meetings are:

- **There are simply too many meetings.** Although it may be unacceptably extreme, calling a moratorium on all meetings for one or two weeks may be one way to separate the necessary from the unnecessary meetings.
- **Meetings go on too long.** Meetings start late and then drag on and on. In order to shorten meetings, one high-technology firm took all of the chairs and tables out of its meeting rooms. (Although this is an often used anecdote, it is unclear whether this approach made for shorter meetings or just stronger leg muscles.)
- **People aren't ready for the meeting.** If the chairperson or the attendees of the meeting haven't done their homework it is extremely unlikely that the meeting will be productive. Meetings are often treated as passive events in which the act of being in the room is viewed as enough—it isn't.
- **People go off on a tangent.** This may be the single most irritating and productivity-sapping killer of meetings. It's even more of a problem if the person going off is the chairperson or a senior executive.
- **Impolite behavior.** Side conversations, reading something unrelated while someone is presenting, communicating a complete lack of interest or, in the extreme, falling asleep during a meeting are all expressions of rude behavior. Compounding the problem is the fact that someone who is rude will seldom acknowledge that his or her behavior is anything but polite.

After specifying the preceding problems, it must also be said that meetings are an indispensable tool of business.

Meetings are the proper venue for sharing information, developing new ideas, and building consensus.



Without meetings we would become isolated and inevitably less creative in developing new ideas and in solving problems.

On the pages that follow, specific recommendations and strategies are presented that, if followed, will produce a significant improvement in a variety of meeting types.

Core Conditions for Effective Meetings

When the conditions below are present, meetings will tend to be more effective. By contrast, if any of the conditions below are absent, meetings will tend to fail. The core conditions do not come into being by accident. They require active decision-making, management, and compliance.

- **Have fewer meetings.** *Scarcity often indicates higher value.* Fewer meetings will make each meeting more valuable. Before calling a meeting, develop the concrete purpose or goal you hope to achieve. Then, ask yourself, “Is there any other way to achieve the goal?” Among the meeting alternatives are e-mail, phone calls, phone mail, or request for brief written responses to a briefing paper.
- **Keep the meeting on schedule.** Begin your meetings according to schedule. If everyone is not in the room at the scheduled start time, begin just as soon as you have “critical mass.” If the meeting is scheduled for an hour, end it in an hour—even if not everything on the agenda has been covered. No one will complain about a meeting that ends on time or, miracle of miracles, ends early.
- **Be ready for the meeting.** Being ready simply means that you have done the necessary homework. Think of the meeting as a test and the work you do prior to and between meetings as test preparation. If you go to a meeting without being prepared, not only will you fail the “test,” but the meeting will also fail.
- **Distribute a written agenda before the meeting.** The agenda is critical. It helps everyone to prepare, and it keeps everyone moving in the same direction. Having the agenda available well before the meeting is preferable to passing it out as the meeting begins, but passing out the agenda as the meeting begins is infinitely preferable to having no agenda.
- **Control the meeting.** If you are the chairperson of the meeting, it’s up to you to manage the process. This means staying with the agenda, ensuring that everyone who wants to speak has a chance, and managing someone who goes off on a tangent.

- **Keep a good record.** An effective meeting will produce action items, assignments, recommendations, or position papers, etc. Keeping good notes during the meeting is critical to achieving the objectives of the meeting.
- **Ensure that “between-meeting” actions are part of the process.** A significant percent of meetings are regularly scheduled, recurring meetings. In large measure the effectiveness of these meetings will be dictated by the work done—or not done—between meetings. Thus, it is the responsibility of both meeting leaders and participants to ensure that between-meeting commitments are both reasonable and met. It is also important that all meeting participants have a share and a stake in the work being done, rather than letting the same people do the work or escape responsibility on a continuing basis.

For the Chairperson or Facilitator

- **Try doing ½-hour meetings.** We often reflexively schedule a meeting to go for an hour. Meetings tend to fill the time you allow. Give meetings less time; see if the work gets done. If not, add a 10- to 15-minute increment.
- **If people aren't ready for the meeting, cancel it.** People will have a higher likelihood of being ready for your meetings if they know you will hold them accountable. Also note: Don't get carried away. Hold people accountable, but never be impolite.
- **Odd as it sounds,** the chairperson of the meeting may do a better job if he or she is completely disinterested in the outcome of discussion. At a minimum, the chairperson should be focused equally on the meeting process and content.
- **When the meeting is over, end the meeting.** Don't just keep going because more time was scheduled. People appreciate keeping to a schedule.
- **Get a reputation for staying on schedule and staying with the agenda.** You will find more support and compliance than people who always go over time and drift.
- **Fewer agenda items can contribute to shorter meetings.** Cover two topics and end the meeting rather than five topics and go over your time limit.
- **Put the "easy" items first on an agenda.** This establishes a pace for the meeting as well as getting items accomplished.
- **If someone starts going off on a tangent** the chairperson is responsible for reeling that person in. Do it *as soon* as you see the beginning of the tangent. Work on some useful phrases and techniques: "Let me bring us back to the agenda item," or *briefly* reflect the tangent then draw the discussion back to the agenda.
- **If side conversations emerge** and they are distracting, look at the people engaged in the conversation and politely ask to "keep the whole group together."
- **If you need input from the participants of the meeting** and they "clam up," be sure you are physically attentive to the group, ask easier questions, ask questions in an area in which you know there are strong opinions, or ask and answer the question from your own perspective.
- **Although you are running the meeting, don't become dictatorial or overly officious.** Be polite and deferential to the participants of your meeting. Nothing engenders respect more quickly than respect demonstrated by a good leader.

Presenting at a Meeting

- **Consider standing up as you present.** You will tend to get others' attention by doing so. However, consider the setting and associated company "rituals."
- **Your gestures are to the spoken word what punctuation is to the written word.** Use your gestures to add to your content.
- **Use the simplest possible visuals.** A short group presentation is only useful for creating top-level interest—not for presenting details.
- **Speak up.** Make yourself easy to hear. If others are conferenced in, you may feel that you have to yell. Instead, ask if they can hear you, and adjust accordingly.
- If you are video conferencing, **look at the camera**, not the monitor. Move your gaze around the room, and then to the camera—then repeat the movement.
- **No one wants to listen to you read a paper.** Hit the high points. Offer the detail in a one-on-one meeting.
- **If someone asks an unexpected or unwanted question**, don't react too quickly. Take your time. Pause. Reflect the question and answer it directly. If you don't have an answer, say so.
- **If you get stuck or lost in front of the group**, say so, then move on. You will make yourself and others more nervous by trying to pretend everything is going as you planned. Be honest, then get on with it.
- **If you are making a recommendation**, present your recommendation first. Support it with three points. Hit the downside risk. Restate your recommendation. If you feel strongly, say so. A strongly felt emotion can be quite persuasive.
- **Rehearse your presentation.** Rehearsing is like editing a written document. Every time you rehearse, your presentation will get a little better, more concise, and clearer. Even if some or all of your rehearsals go poorly, you will likely find that they help when it's time for the real presentation.

The One-on-One Meeting

- **Avoid surprises.** Check out how much time the other person can give you as the meeting begins. Present accordingly.
- Depending on the knowledge of the other person, you may want to **start with a question about his or her experience** in the content you are addressing. This allows you to find out about feelings of agreement, neutrality, or resistance.
- **Work from areas of agreement into areas of neutrality.** Don't start with areas in which you can anticipate opposition. It's far easier to convert neutrality into agreement than to convert opposition into neutrality, much less agreement.
- Similar to a group presentation, if you are making a recommendation, **present your recommendation first.** Support it with three points. Hit the downside risk. Restate your recommendation. If you feel strongly, say so. A strongly felt emotion can be quite persuasive. Then go into detail, if the other person is amenable.
- **Be unfailingly polite and deferential.** Your demeanor can be persuasive. At the same time be direct. These are complementary, not contradictory, responses.
- **Reflect the perspective of the other person** to show that you have listened and understood their points.
- **Avoid rhetorical arguments and questions.** The other person may feel patronized.
- **Get to know the decision-making style** of the people you work with (their "Cognitive Heuristic" decision-making process). Structure your presentation to address their style.
- **Be honest.** Honesty is an unassailable, persuasive tool.
- **If part of your position rests on intuition, say so.** Don't undermine your position by only presenting facts and data. Your intuition is an intrinsically valid part of your recommendation.
- **Present your perspective clearly and concisely.** Before you present, think about it. Often you will find that the third or fourth thing you say is the clearest statement of your perspective, goal, or purpose.
- **Rehearse your one-on-one meeting presentation** for all of the same reasons you should do so for a group. If you rehearse with a colleague with content expertise, be open to input about both your presenting process and the content of your presentation.

Types of Meetings and Some Success Factors

Problem-Solving Meetings

GOAL

Change. Change can mean to do something different, to stop doing something, or to respond to a problematic situation or event.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Clear and compelling evidence that a problem exists.
- Meeting participants all have a stake in problem solving.
- Meeting participants have the skills, experience, and responsibility for finding a solution.
- Meeting facilitator has the skills to involve the group and to handle extreme bias.

Decision-Making Meetings

GOAL

Make a decision from among alternatives or make a decision to initiate action.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Information and data about each alternative based on a common set of values.
- Information and data sent to participants before the meeting stating their responsibility.
- Meeting participants all have a stake in the decision.
- Meeting participants have the skills, experience, and responsibility to make a decision.
- Meeting facilitator has the skills to involve the group, a proven technique to develop group decision making, and the ability to handle extreme bias.

Planning Meetings

GOAL

Development of the steps and logistics to achieve a predetermined/desirable outcome.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- The explicit willingness of participants to work on the plan before and after meetings.
- Information and data sent to participants before the meeting stating their responsibility.
- Meeting participants all have a stake in the plan.
- Meeting participants have the skills, experience, and responsibility to develop the plan.
- Meeting facilitator has the skills to involve the group, a proven technique to conduct the group planning process, and the ability to handle extreme bias.

Reporting/Presenting and Reacting Meetings

GOAL

To present, receive, and discuss information and ideas of relevance to the group (e.g., staff meetings, regular meetings organized around a general topic or initiative).

SUCCESS FACTORS

- An agenda and action items from the previous meeting are sent to all meeting participants.
- Regular participants have a track record of meeting commitments.
- Meetings are interactive – meeting cannot be effectively replaced by sending out written material.
- Meeting participants all have a stake in the meeting.
- Meeting participants have the skills, experience, and responsibility to act effectively when given or taking a task from the meeting.
- Meeting facilitator has the skills to involve the group, a proven technique for consensus building and group planning, and the ability to handle extreme bias.

For more information, please contact:

*David Driskill
NQR Institute
(978) 774-8598
DD@daviddriskill.com*

Or

*Catherine Coyne
NQR Institute
617-426-0616
ccoyn@nqrinc.com*