Meetings

The disastrous meeting experience in the chapter opener stemmed from poor communication skills by both the meeting facilitator and the participants. In fact, recent research from the Harvard Business School and the London School of Economics reports that business managers spend more than 18 hours of their workweek in meetings. What is particularly troubling, however, is that they say 25–50% of these meetings are waste of time (Bailey, 2013). To ensure that your meetings are not a waste of time, let’s look at several guidelines for meeting leaders and meeting participants.

Guidelines for Meeting Leaders/Conveners

Most of us will be responsible for convening a group meeting at some point in our lives. Whether you are the designated formal leader for a class project, a task force at work, or substituting for your manager at the monthly department meeting, knowing how to effectively plan for, facilitate, and follow up after meetings are useful skills.

Before the Meeting

**1. Prepare and distribute an agenda.** An **agenda** is an organized outline of the information and decision items to be covered during a meeting. It is a road map that lets the members know the purpose of the meeting and what they are expected to accomplish as a result of attending. Agenda items should move the group toward its goals. You can identify the items for your agenda by:

* reviewing your notes and the formal minutes of the previous meeting;
* clarifying what the group decided to accomplish between meetings; and
* identifying what decisions, the group expected to make in this next session

Then you can structure the agenda into information items and decision items.

In other words, you can have members report on their assignments (information

items), then make decisions and determine next steps.

The agenda should be distributed at least 24 hours before the meeting so members

have time to prepare. You can e-mail the agenda, post it to the group’s Web page, or

hand-deliver it. None of us likes to come to a meeting and be embarrassed because

we forgot to complete an assignment or be called on to make decisions about

something we have not had time to think about. As the meeting leader/convener,

you are responsible for providing the information members need to come prepared.

Figure 10.2 shows an agenda for a group meeting to decide which one of three

courses to offer over the Internet next semester.

**2. Decide who should attend the meeting.** In most cases, all group members will

attend meetings. Today, very often some or all members might meet virtually via

teleconferencing or videoconferencing platforms.

**3. Manage meeting logistics.** You may choose to enact this role or ask another group member to do so. But even if you delegate, it remains your responsibility to confirm that the meeting arrangements are made and appropriate. If the group is meeting face to face, make sure the room is appropriate and any equipment needed is available and operational. The room should be configured to encourage interaction. This usually means sitting around a table with plenty of space for writing and laptops or tablets. If the entire group or some group members are attending the meeting from remote locations, you will need to make sure the technology needed is available and in working order. Because groups become less effective in long meetings, a meeting should last no longer than 90 minutes.

**4. Speak with each participant prior to the meeting.** As the leader, you need to

understand members’ positions and personal goals. Time spent discussing issues in

advance allows you to anticipate conflicts that might emerge during the meeting

and plan how to manage them effectively if they do.

During the Meeting

**1. Review and modify the agenda.** Begin the meeting by reviewing the agenda and modifying it based on members’ suggestions. Reviewing the agenda ensures that the group will be working on items that are still relevant and gives members a chance to provide input into what will be discussed.

**2. Monitor member interaction.** If other group members are assuming the taskrelated, maintenance, and procedural leadership functions, you need do nothing. But when there is a need for a particular role and no one is assuming it, it is the leader’s charge to do so. For example, if you notice that some people are talking more than their fair share and no one is trying to draw out quieter members, you should assume the gatekeeper role and invite reluctant members to comment. Similarly, if a discussion becomes too heated, you may need to take on the role of harmonizer or tension reliever.

**3. Monitor the time.** Although another group member may serve as expediter, it is

ultimately your responsibility to make sure the group stays on schedule.

**4. Praise in public and reprimand in private.** Meetings provide an excellent opportunity to praise individuals or the entire group for jobs well done. Being recognized among one’s peers often boosts self-esteem and group morale. Conversely, criticizing individuals or the entire group during a meeting has the opposite effect. The humiliation of public criticism can deflate self-esteem, group morale, and motivation.

**5. Check periodically to see if the group is ready to make a decision.** You should listen carefully for agreement among members and move the group into its formal decision-making process when the discussion is no longer adding insight.

**6. Implement the group’s decision rules.** You are responsible for executing the

decision-making rule the group has agreed to use. If the group is deciding by

consensus, for example, you must make sure all members feel they can support the

chosen alternative. If the group is deciding by majority rule, you call for the vote

and tally the results.

**7. Summarize decisions and assignments.** You should summarize what has been and is left to accomplish, as well as assignments tasked to various members.

**8. Set the next meeting.** Clarify when future meetings will take place if

necessary.

Following Up

**1. Review the meeting outcomes and process.** A good leader learns how to

be more effective by reflecting on how well the meeting went. Did the meeting

accomplish its goals? Was group cohesion improved or damaged in the

process? What will you do differently next time to improve the experience?

**2. Prepare and distribute a meeting summary or minutes.** Although some

groups have a designated recorder; many groups rely on their leader to do so. If your group has a designated recorder, be sure to review the minutes and

compare them to your notes before they are distributed. Summaries are most

useful when they are distributed within two or three days of the meeting when

everyone’s memories are still fresh.

**3. Repair damaged relationships.** If any heated debate occurred during the meeting, some members may have left angry or hurt. You should help repair relationships by seeking out these participants and talking with them. Through empathic listening, you can soothe hurt feelings and spark a recommitment to the group.

**4. Conduct informal progress reports.** When participants have been assigned specific task responsibilities, you should periodically check to see if they have encountered any problems in completing those tasks and how you might help them.

Guidelines for Meeting Participants

Just as there are guidelines for effective conveners/formal leaders to follow before, during, and after meetings, there are also guidelines for meeting participants.

Before the Meeting

As the chapter opener illustrated, too often people think of group meetings as a “happening” that requires attendance but no preparation. Countless times we have observed people arriving at a meeting unprepared even though they come carrying packets of material, they received in advance (Photo 10.3). Here are some

important preparation guidelines for meeting participants.

**1. Study the agenda.** Consider the meeting’s purpose and determine what you

need to do to be prepared. If you had an assignment, make sure you are ready

to report on it.

**2. Study the minutes.** If this is one in a series of meetings, read the minutes and your own notes from the previous meeting. Doing so should provide the basis for what you need to prepare for the next one.

**3. Do your homework.** Read the material distributed prior to the meeting and do

what is necessary to be informed about each agenda item. Bring with you any materials that may help the group accomplish its objectives.

**4. List questions.** Make a list of questions related to any agenda items that you would like to have answered during the meeting.

**5. Plan to play a leadership role.**

Consider which leadership functions and roles you are best at and decide what you will do to enact them during the meeting.

During the Meeting Go into the meeting planning to be a full participant.

**1. Listen attentively.** Concentrate on what others say so you can make a meaningful contribution to the discussion.

**2. Stay focused.** Keep your comments focused on the specific agenda item under

discussion. If others get off the subject, do what you can to get the discussion

back on track.

**3. Ask questions.** Honest questions, whose answers you do not already know, help

stimulate discussion and build ideas.

**4. Take notes.** Even if someone else is responsible for providing the official minutes, you’ll need notes to remember what occurred and any tasks you agreed to take on after the meeting.

**5. Play devil’s advocate.** When you think an idea has not been fully discussed or

tested, be willing to voice disagreement or encourage further discussion.

**6. Monitor your contributions.** Especially when people are well prepared, they have a tendency to dominate discussion. Make sure that you are neither dominating the discussion nor abdicating your responsibility to share insights and opinions.

Following Up

When meetings end, too often people leave and forget about what took place until they arrive at the next meeting. Instead:

**1. Review and summarize your notes.** Do this soon after the meeting while the discussion is still fresh in your mind. Make sure your notes include what you need to do before the next meeting.

**2. Evaluate your effectiveness.** How effective were you in helping the group move toward achieving its goals? Where were you strong? Where were you weak? What should you do next time to improve and how? For example, if you didn’t speak up as much as you would have liked to, you might write down questions or topics when they come to you and use them as notes to encourage you to speak up next time.

**3. Review decisions.** Make notes about what your role was in making decisions. Did you do all that you could have done? If not, what will you do differently next time, why, and how?

**4. Communicate progress.** Inform others who need to know about information conveyed and decisions made in the meeting.

**5. Complete your tasks.** Make sure you complete all assignments you agreed to take on.

**6. Review minutes.** Compare the official meeting minutes to your own notes and

report any discrepancies to the member who prepared them.

Sometimes the goal of a workplace meeting is to regroup and refocus as we perform

the regular duties assigned to us. Other times, however, we will meet as part of a work group team charged with a specific problem-solving challenge. In these situations, we will be most successful if we work through the problem or issue using a systematic problem-solving process.