

Business Meetings

What is a Business Meeting?

A **business meeting** is a gathering of two or more people for the purpose of making decisions or discussing **company** objectives and operations. **Business meetings** are generally conducted in person in an office, however with the rise of video conferencing technologies, participants can join a **business meeting** from anywhere.

Before we talk about the kinds of meetings, let's start with some general vocabulary for meetings. Usually a meeting has an agenda. This is the plan for the order of things to talk about at that meeting. Each part of the agenda is called an item. If someone needs to do something after the meeting it's often called an action item. The person who is in charge of a meeting is called the Leader, the Lead or sometimes the Chair. The Leader runs or leads the meeting. We can also use chair like this, as a verb, and say someone chairs a meeting. In most meetings someone will write down a summary of what was discussed and what was decided. These notes are called minutes. We use the verb phrase take minutes to describe writing these notes. After the meeting this person will distribute the minutes to the other participants or attendees. In more formal situations the participants will approve the minutes at their next meeting. That means they say that the summary was correct. So now we know some basic meeting vocabulary, let's think about different types of meetings.

Types of Meetings

In business there are many kinds of meetings, for example, social get-togethers networking meetings, and negotiations with people from different companies. In this course however, will be mainly talking about internal meetings, meetings with people you work with. Even so there are still several types of internal meetings. So let's talk briefly about what they are. Basically the type of meeting often depends on what the purpose of the meeting is. Look at this list of different meetings that might happen in a company. How many have you participated in? Let's talk about each of these different meetings.

The purpose of an information meeting is to explain something. In an information meeting there might be just one or two speakers and an audience. Participants usually listen and may sometimes ask questions. A team meeting is when members of a particular team meet, for example a management team or a finance team. Usually these meetings are scheduled regularly, weekly, or monthly. At these meetings people usually share information and give updates. They may also make announcements and make decisions. If people from different departments are working on a specific project, there will usually be a kick off meeting. When the project begins and then regular progress report meetings take place afterwards where people working on the project give updates. At the end there may be a debrief meeting where participants can discuss what was successful or not so successful about the project. At decision-making meetings, the purpose is to reach agreement on one or more issues. Attendees are expected to participate fully,

giving their opinions and coming to agreement. Often the leader will ask for a vote. At brainstorming meetings, the purpose is to think of and share new ideas about a topic or try to solve a problem. These meetings are often informal and participants are expected to be creative.

Usually we think meetings are where people are together discussing things. But we can also describe a training and a team-building as types of meetings. The goal in these kinds of meetings is to improve the work situation. For example, by helping employees use the new software program or by encouraging employees to work together as a team. We also usually think of meetings as a group of people sitting around a table in a meeting room. However, these days there are also meetings where some or all of the participants are in different locations. These kinds of meetings, teleconferences or video conferences can have the same purposes that we've just talked about but they also have their own special guidelines and you'll learn about these guidelines later in the course. To review the general kinds of meeting there are let's look at a few examples and decide what kind of meeting would be appropriate.

You work for a small coffee shop company with a few coffee shops in town. You would like to add some food. You want to get some ideas from your team. That's right, you would want to hold a brainstorming meeting. You've just reorganized the management team in your organization and you want to explain it to your department. That's right. You would want to hold an information meeting. How about this situation? You want to select a new software program for your design team. Because you need to make a decision, this would be a decision-making meeting. Finally, your international sales team needs to have its monthly meeting. Many of the team members are out of the office. Because they are in different places, a teleconference would be the best way to hold the meeting. Now that we know about the different kinds of meetings we can think about what makes a successful meeting. If participants understand what the purpose of a meeting is and what is expected of them then it's more likely to be successful, right?

Essentials of a Successful Meeting

These are the answers of some professionals about one of the meetings they attended:

>> We didn't start for 20 minutes because people were just chatting and then the meeting went on for an extra hour. One of the participants wouldn't shut up. No-one else was able to speak. I didn't really know what we were supposed to be talking about, and at the end I didn't know what we had decided. I felt it was a complete waste of time. I came prepared because I had read the documents that we were supposed to discuss, but it was really clear that a lot of other people at the meeting hadn't read them. Some of them didn't even bring the documents at the meeting. I felt so frustrated. >>I wanted to contribute because I thought I had a few good ideas, but I didn't feel comfortable giving my opinion, so I just kept quiet. The meeting room was small so we were all sitting really close together. There was also construction work going on outside so it was hard to hear.>>

Were any of those comments familiar? They probably were because those are very typical complaints about meetings. However, if we think about it we can solve most of those problems fairly easily. By following a few basic guidelines, we can make sure most of the meetings we

attend are successful. Perhaps the most important guideline is to be prepared. Make sure that there is an agenda and that everyone receives the agenda at least 24 hours before the meeting. If you are a participant in the meeting, make sure that you read the agenda and prepare any documents that are necessary. It's a good idea to print out the agenda or at least have an electronic copy available. If you are running the meeting you could also print out an agenda for people in case, they don't have one. If you want to save paper, project it on a screen if one is available. To help participants be prepared for a meeting, it should be clear what each item on the agenda means. For example, an item with just the phrase Next Year's Budget, doesn't give you a lot of information about what you'll be required to do. For example, Vote on Approval of Next Year's Budget tells you that you will decide what will be in the budget. This means you should know what is in the budget before coming to the meeting, that you should be prepared to ask questions and give your opinion. And that you will be asked to vote.

The second most important guideline is that the meeting should be well run, and often that is the responsibility of the chair, or leader, or team leader. The meeting should start on time. It's okay to have a little small talk before starting. But the chair should make sure that it doesn't go on for more than just a few minutes. The meeting should also finish on time or better several minutes before. The chair might postpone the discussion of any remaining items to the next meeting if you run out of time. In fact, when planning a meeting, it is better to ask ourselves the question, how much time will we need to reach the objective, instead of, how many things can we discuss in the time that we have?

Another important role of the chair or leader is to make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak. That one person doesn't talk all the time and that the discussion stays on topic, meaning people don't start talking about things not related to the topic of the meeting. This can be a little difficult and you'll find out more about this when we focus on leading meetings in week two.

Another important guideline is to think about when and where a meeting will be held. For example, scheduling a meeting late on a Friday afternoon is maybe not the best idea in the US. A cold or noisy meeting room would make it uncomfortable or difficult for people to participate successfully. Deciding to have a brain storming meeting at a local restaurant wouldn't be a good idea either because ordering food and eating could be distracting.

Meetings are so common and frankly, many people find them so boring that some organizations are trying to be more creative about the location of meetings. A recent interesting idea is to hold meetings outside while walking. Even in Seattle it might catch on despite the rain.

When the meeting is over, a summary or the minutes of the discussion, including any decisions that were made and any action items, should be sent to all participants as soon as possible. This reminds people what the meeting achieved. Finally, when we are meetings with people who are from different cultures and who speak different languages, we should always be considerate of those differences and do our best to make the other participants feel comfortable participating in and speaking in English. So here's what we've done so far.