How to Fix Meetings

What’s in it for me? Learn how to design efficient and effective meetings!

The average worker spends almost 23 whole days a year in meetings. Isn’t that nuts? What’s even worse, according to employees, half of these meetings are a waste of time. It doesn’t have to be this way – meetings are great opportunities to engage on important issues and make an impact. The problem is, most of us – and this likely includes you – are pretty poor at planning and executing meetings. Fortunately, these blinks are here to help, sharing practical and easy-to-follow steps for designing meetings that matter. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why you should treat your meeting like a story; what to do with the hippo in your meetings; and how ancient Chinese philosophy can affect meetings.

To design a productive meeting, first define its purpose.

Here’s a scenario: Gavin has to organize a team meeting. So, he finds a convenient time and venue, and sends out invitations. Then he simply waits for the meeting to take place. But when the day finally rolls around, no one finds the meeting useful or productive. So what happened? Well, like many people, Gavin focused solely on the meeting itself. What he should have done is pay attention to what happened outside the meeting room. According to the authors’ 40-20-40 Continuum, both organizers and attendees should spend 40 percent of their meeting-related time and energy preparing for the meeting and 20 percent in the meeting itself. The remaining 40 percent is for productive follow-through. That initial 40 percent lays the foundation for productivity. And the first brick in the foundation? Purpose. The key message here is: To design a productive meeting, first define its purpose. A purpose clarifies a meeting’s goal, and establishes not just who should attend, but also what’s expected of them. It also makes it easy to steer the conversation in the right direction. Even regular meetings, like weekly team gatherings, should have a different purpose each time. To determine a meeting’s purpose, speak to potential attendees about the issues that need to be discussed. Then use this information to write a purpose statement – one or two sentences explaining what the meeting should accomplish. For example, “By the end of this meeting, we will have decided on key priorities for next month’s campaign.” Share the purpose statement ahead of time so that people understand what the meeting is about and can decide whether or not to attend. Next, plan the meeting so that it actually fulfills its purpose. To do this, draft an agenda that includes the topics to be discussed, the time allocated for each one, and the person responsible. The more detail you provide, the easier it will be for people to come prepared. If you’re unsure what the agenda should include, there are a few approaches you can try. One is to imagine the agenda is a story with a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning, explore the issues at hand and their context. Then, in the middle, move on to solutions or paths forward. The end is for determining next steps. Another approach is to structure the agenda around the questions what, why, when, how, where, and who. Then spend the meeting answering each question as it relates to the purpose statement. Like the purpose statement, the agenda should be sent out before the meeting, along with any relevant information that will help attendees prepare.

Protocols help meetings run smoothly and effectively.

Imagine going for a drive one day and discovering that suddenly, there are no traffic laws. There are no rules and there's not a traffic light or road sign in sight. Chances are, you're picturing a very chaotic scene, with lots of honking horns and multiple accidents at any given moment. Fortunately, most roads do have rules and signs, and when people follow them, traffic flows smoothly. Like roads, meetings can also be chaotic, or at the very least unproductive, if you don't establish how they're supposed to run. This is why part of designing a meeting involves thinking about the protocols. The key message here is: Protocols help meetings run smoothly and effectively. In meetings, protocols set expectations and guide the way participants behave and interact with each other. They include ground rules about asking questions, sharing opinions, and getting the attention of the person running the meeting. Well before the meeting, you should be thinking about these protocols. Then, when attendees arrive, be sure to communicate them clearly. One of the key protocols to consider involves the use of mobile devices during the meeting. Mobile devices are addictive by design. The notifications that people hear or see when new messages come in trigger the release of dopamine, a pleasure-inducing brain chemical. This encourages people to check their phones constantly, and in meetings, it distracts them and prevents them from participating fully. There are several ways to keep phones from disrupting meetings. One is asking all attendees to put their phones away until a break or the end of the meeting. You may wish to have a small box on hand specifically for this purpose. If the meeting is online, ask people to leave their phones in another room. There are also apps that help people stay away from their phones, like the Forest app. You can encourage people to download one of these at the beginning of the meeting. And since more and more meetings take place online, it's important to think about protocols around technology issues. These include keeping cameras on for better engagement, and what people can do to tackle any glitches. If external people are handling tech issues, your protocols should include knowing who they are and the process for contacting them.

To fulfill a meeting's purpose, invite the right people and get them in the right roles.

Have you ever found yourself sitting in a meeting and wondering why you were asked to attend? Maybe the discussion was important, but had nothing to do with your area – so you had nothing to contribute. Inviting the wrong people to meetings happens more often than it should. And it doesn't just waste people's time; it also makes for an unproductive meeting. Think about it: you can have a great purpose statement, but if the right people aren't in the meeting, you won't be able to fulfill it. The key message here is: Make sure you invite the right people to your meetings and get them into the right roles. A good selection method is to consider those with different experiences of or perspectives on the issue in question. For each person you choose, be clear on why you've done so. When you invite them, explain why their contribution is needed.

Thinking carefully about participants also helps reduce numbers in a meeting. If too many people attend, it's difficult to hold a productive conversation. This is because channels of communication increase exponentially the more people you include. For example, when two people meet, they only have to communicate their ideas to each other, creating a single communication channel. When more than two people meet, communication channels multiply. So the fewer attendees a meeting has, the easier it will be to communicate. Now, thinking about who attends a meeting isn't only about what individuals bring to the table or how easily they communicate. It also involves assigning certain roles to help the meeting run smoothly. The most significant role is that of chair. This person keeps the conversation in line with the purpose statement and agenda, and ensures that everyone's thoughts are heard. If you're requesting the meeting, it might feel natural to chair it, but this isn't always the best option. You might want to actively engage in the discussion, in which case, ask someone else to chair. Whoever you select must understand the meeting's purpose and have good listening and facilitation skills. Other important roles are those of timekeeper and minute-taker. The timekeeper limits the discussion to the allocated time by, for instance, giving five-minute warnings when it's time to conclude an agenda point. The minute-taker writes down a summary of the discussion or the details of each attendee's contribution and notes action points from the meeting. For each role, approach people beforehand and let them know what you'd like them to do.

"It's about getting the right people there. This is a delicate balance of quality over quantity."

During meetings, implement pauses when necessary and manage any dominant participants.

So you've thought about the purpose statement. You've planned the agenda, created protocols, and carefully chosen the attendees. Now it's time for the meeting! But before it starts, think back to the 40-20-40 Continuum. At this stage, you should apply 20 percent of the attention you put into the meeting overall. When the meeting starts, remind everyone of its purpose and share the protocols. Follow this with a round of introductions, during which participants explain who they are and their reasons for attending. Asking people also to share something positive – even if it's unrelated – can help set the tone for the meeting. And as you dive into the meeting itself, keeping a few things in mind will ensure it goes smoothly. The key message here is: During meetings, implement pauses when necessary and manage any dominant participants. Meetings are for talking about issues or brainstorming ideas. However, pausing the conversation can be just as helpful as keeping it flowing. There are three kinds of pauses that can be used in meetings. Practical pauses give attendees a chance to reenergize or use the bathroom. A long meeting like a strategy day should include practical pauses every hour. If there's a lot of information being shared, implementing a reflective pause allows people to make notes, think, or simply rest their minds. Lastly, strategic pauses are great for helping people calm down in tense situations, or getting participants into smaller group discussions. They can also be used for meditation. At times, people will need a break from other attendees. When one person dominates the conversation, it becomes difficult for the rest to share their thoughts. Luckily, there are ways to address this. You can work your way around the room and ask people to contribute in turns. Or people can write their ideas on a flip chart and have everyone else add comments. Another option is to pair attendees up and ask them to discuss specific issues. But what if a participant is more influential than dominating? This can happen when someone has a lot of status or experience, and, as a result, others simply agree with their ideas. There's even a term for it, coined by entrepreneur Avinash Kaushik. It's the Highest Paid Person's Opinion effect – that is, the HiPPO effect. To combat the HiPPO effect, ask the person in question to speak last. This lowers the chance of him influencing other participants. If the HiPPO in the room is you, try to spend more time asking questions than you do giving answers.

Productive follow-through is what makes a meeting worthwhile.

Every now and again, global leaders come together to discuss an important issue – climate change, for example. They spend days listening to experts, sharing opinions, and discussing possible solutions. Ideally, leaders leave armed with a plan of action that they can then implement. But what if, after the summit, the leaders simply go home and do nothing to tackle what they'd been discussing? All the effort involved in planning and attending the summit would be pointless. But this isn't only true when it comes to huge, globally important issues. In fact, the same principle applies to any meeting: If it's not followed by action, then it's a waste of time. The key message here is: Productive follow-through makes meetings worthwhile. Productive follow-through is the final 40 percent of the 40-20-40 continuum. And making it a reality starts with ensuring that the meeting minutes indicate exactly what needs to happen next and who is responsible. Follow-through tasks after a meeting come in two forms – next physical actions and delegated outcomes. Next physical actions are clear and specific tasks with outlined expectations, like finding out how much money is left in the company budget and sharing that information with colleagues via email. Delegated outcomes are results for which specific people are responsible – and those people are free to decide how best to achieve those results. For instance, if a manager has to create a marketing strategy for a product, defining the actions involved is left completely up to her. There are a number of ways to make it easier for people to complete their next physical actions and delegated outcomes. One is to give them a head start during the actual meeting. You can dedicate the last ten minutes of the meeting to kicking off various tasks, whether that means making a phone call or clarifying how to proceed. Another tactic is organizing a Power Hour. This is a session specifically for working on action items from meetings. Here's how it works: the group spends a few minutes checking in and they all state what they plan to work on. This is followed by an hour of intense individual work. And the great part is that participants don't have to work on action items from the same meetings. The Power Hour can be a regular gathering to help everyone gain momentum on tasks from their various meetings. Facilitating productive follow-throughs like this means your meetings won't just be planned and executed well, but they'll have an impact, too.

Establishing good meeting habits requires a balance of yin and yang behaviors.

Have you ever heard of the concept of yin and yang? It comes from ancient Chinese philosophy and teaches that the universe is made up of two opposing energies. Yin is the soft, receptive, and more passive energy, while yang is aggressive and action-oriented. Both yin and yang energies exist in work environments. What's interesting about them is that, although they're opposites, they complement each other. So wherever there is yin energy, a bit of yang should be introduced, and vice versa. This also applies to how you approach and run meetings. The key message here is: Establishing good meeting habits requires a balance of yin and yang. Let's start with yin energy. Bringing this into meetings means listening to colleagues, exploring new ideas, and working harmoniously. And there are a few practices that can help you do this. The first is being as calm as possible. This allows you to be fully present in meetings so that you can participate and listen to the opinions and contributions of others. The next practice is mindfulness, which means being aware of your emotions so that you don't get carried away by them, potentially derailing conversations. The last practice that fosters yin energy is valuing the people in your meetings. And you do this by paying attention to them and showing appreciation for their input. Now, if you only bring yin energy to meetings, they'll be pleasant and collaborative, but not very productive. That's why you also need a healthy dose of yang energy. Yang energy enables you to set your sights on a goal and focus aggressively on the actions required to achieve it. To invoke it, start by attending fewer meetings in order to conserve your time, energy, and attention. Instead of going to every meeting you're invited to, try attending only one in three, or sending a colleague when possible. You can also create personal policies like a set number of meeting hours a week, or no meetings on certain days. In the meetings that you choose to attend, introduce yang energy by focusing on productivity. One way to do this is by encouraging shorter meetings. Instead of meeting for a full hour, suggest aiming to conclude the discussion in about 40 minutes. And at the end of each meeting, always ask what actions are required to move forward, and determine who will be responsible for completing them.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Effective meetings require thoughtful planning beforehand and focused actions afterward. Start by establishing a clear purpose for the meeting and creating an agenda geared toward achieving that purpose. With these in hand, invite the people who will make the most valuable contributions. Allow everyone a fair chance to share their thoughts during the meeting, and capture detailed action items. And to ensure that these action items are completed, organize Power Hours that allow people to work on their individual tasks. And here's some more actionable advice: Improve your experience in mandatory meetings. When you find yourself on the other side of a meeting request, there are still ways to make it a valuable use of time. If the agenda seems unclear, ask the organizer for more details so that you can prepare beforehand and contribute as best as you can. Clarifying the agenda might even help you identify someone better suited to attend. And if you're obliged to go to a meeting that feels irrelevant, spend a few minutes beforehand clearing your thoughts and preparing to focus as best you can. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with How to Fix Meetings as the subject line, and share your thoughts!