

MEETINGS

Some stuff on
meetings

“MEETINGS” THE PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE TO WORK.

- Are you lonely?
 - Hate having to make decisions?
 - Rather talk about it than do it?
 - Then why not HOLD A MEETING?
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- Feel important
 - Sleep in peace
 - Offload decisions
 - Get to see other people
 - Impress or bore your colleagues
 - Learn to write volumes of meaningless notes
 - And all in work time



FACTORS AFFECTING HOW BEST TO RUN MEETINGS



Your choice of structure and style in running an effective meeting is hugely dependent on several factors:

- the situation (circumstances, mood, atmosphere, background, etc)
- the organisational context (the implications and needs of the business or project or organisation)
- the team, or the meeting delegates (the needs and interests of those attending)
- you yourself (your own role, confidence, experience, your personal aims, etc)
- your position and relationship with the team
- and of course the aims of the meeting.

MEETINGS - BASIC RULES

1. Plan - use the agenda as a planning tool
2. Circulate the meeting agenda in advance where possible
3. Run the meeting - keep control, agree outcomes, actions and responsibilities, take notes
4. Write and circulate notes - especially actions and accountabilities
5. Follow up agreed actions and responsibilities

MEETING PURPOSES INCLUDE:

- Disseminating information
- Discussions
- Generating ideas (brain storming)
- Planning
- Consultation and feedback
- Problem solving
- Crisis management
- Performance reporting/assessment
- Setting targets and objectives
- Setting tasks and delegating
- Making decisions
- Conveying /clarifying policy issues
- Team building
- Motivation

PRIORITIES

What is the meeting's purpose, or purposes?

- Always have a clear purpose; otherwise don't have a meeting.
- Decide the issues for inclusion in the meeting and their relative priority: importance and urgency - they are quite different and need treating in different ways.
- Important matters do not necessarily need to be resolved quickly.
- Urgent matters generally do not warrant a lot of discussion.
- Matters that are both urgent and important are clearly serious priorities that need careful planning and management.

OUTCOMES

Decide the type of outcome (i.e., what is the purpose) for each issue, and put this on the agenda alongside the item heading. This is important as people need to know what is expected of them, and each item will be more productive with a clear aim at the outset. Typical types of outcomes are:

- Decision making
- Discussion
- Information dissemination
- Planning (e.g. workshop session)
- Generating ideas (brainstorming)
- Getting feedback
- Finding solutions
- Agreeing (targets, budgets, aims, etc)
- Policy statement
- Team-building/motivation

MEETING ORDER

1. Put the less important issues at the top of the agenda, not the bottom. If you put them on the bottom you may never get to them because you'll tend to spend all the time on the big issues.
2. Ensure any urgent issues are placed up the agenda. Non-urgent items place down the agenda - if you are going to miss any you can more easily afford to miss these.
3. Try to achieve a varied mix through the running order - if possible avoid putting heavy controversial items together - vary the agenda to create changes in pace and intensity.
4. Be aware of the tendency for people to be at their most sensitive at the beginning of meetings, especially if there are attendees who are keen to stamp their presence on proceedings. For this reason it can be helpful to schedule a particularly controversial issue later in the sequence, which gives people a chance to settle down and relax first, and maybe get some of the sparring out of their systems over less significant items.

MEETING TIMINGS

- Consider the time required for the various items rather than habitually or arbitrarily decide the length of the meeting. Allocate a realistic time slot for each item. Keep the timings realistic - usually things take longer than you think.
- Put plenty of breaks into long meetings. Unless people are participating and fully involved, their concentration begins to drop after just 45 minutes. Breaks don't all need to be 20 minutes for coffee and cigarettes. Five minutes every 45-60 minutes for a quick breath of fresh air and leg-stretch will help keep people attentive.

MEETING DATE

- For meetings that repeat on a regular basis the easiest way to set dates is to agree them in advance at the first meeting when everyone can commit there and then. Try to schedule a year's worth of meetings if possible, then you can circulate and publish the dates, which helps greatly to ensure people keep to them and that no other priorities encroach.
- Pre-planning meeting dates is one of the keys to achieving control and well-organised meetings. Conversely, leaving it late to agree dates for meetings will almost certainly inconvenience people, which is a major source of upset.
- Generally try to consult to get agreement of best meeting dates for everyone, but ultimately you will often need to be firm. Use the 'inertia method', i.e., suggest a date and invite alternative suggestions, rather than initially asking for suggestions, which rarely achieves a quick agreement.

VENUE

Venue choice is critical for certain sensitive meetings, but far less so for routine, in-house gatherings. You must ensure the room is right - mainly, that it is big enough with all relevant equipment and services. It's too late to start hunting for a 20ft power extension lead five minutes before the meeting starts. Other aspects that you need to check or even set up personally are:

- table and seating layout
- tables for demonstration items, paperwork, hand-outs, etc
- electricity power points and extensions
- projection and flip chart equipment positioning and correct operation
- confirm reception and catering arrangements
- back-up equipment contingency

MEETING LAYOUT

Positioning of seating and tables is important, and for certain types of meetings it's crucial. Ensure the layout is appropriate for the occasion:

- Formal presentations to large groups - theatre-style - the audience in rows, preferably with tables, facing the chairman.
- Medium-sized participative meetings - horse-shoe (U) table layout with the open part of the U facing the chairman's table, or delegates' tables arranged 'cabaret' style.
- Small meetings for debate and discussion - board-room style - one rectangular table with chairman at one end.
- Relaxed team meetings for planning and creative sessions - lounge style, with easy chairs and coffee tables.

MEETING AGENDA

- Produce the meeting agenda. This is the tool with which you control the meeting. Include all the relevant information and circulate it in advance.
- Formal agenda for board meetings and committees will normally have an established fixed format, which applies for every meeting. This type of formal agenda normally begins with:
 - apologies for absence
 - approval of previous meeting's minutes (notes)
 - matters arising (from last meeting)
 - and then the main agenda, finishing with 'any other business'.

RUNNING THE MEETING

The key to success is keeping control. You do this by sticking to the agenda, managing the relationships and personalities, and concentrating on outcomes. Meetings must have a purpose. Every item must have a purpose. Remind yourself and the group of the required outcomes and steer the proceedings towards making progress, not hot air.

- Politely suppress the over-zealous, and encourage the nervous. Take notes as you go, recording the salient points and the agreed actions, with names, measurable outcomes and deadlines. Do not record everything word-for-word, and if you find yourself taking over the chairmanship of a particularly stuffy group which produces reams of notes and very little else, then change things. Concentrate on achieving the outcomes you set the meeting when you drew up the agenda. Avoid racing away with decisions if your aim was simply discussion and involving people. Avoid hours of discussion if you simply need a decision. Avoid debate if you simply need to convey a policy issue. Policy is policy and that is that.

RUNNING THE MEETING CONT.

- Defer new issues to another time. Practice and use the phrase 'You may have a point, but it's not for this meeting - we'll discuss it another time.' (And then remember to do it.)
- If you don't know the answer say so - be honest - don't waffle - say that you'll get back to everyone with the answer, or append it to the meeting notes.
- If someone persistently moans on about a specific issue that is not on the agenda, quickly translate it into a simple exploratory or investigative project, and bounce it back to them, with a deadline to report back their findings and recommendations to you.
- Always look at how people are behaving in meetings - look for signs of tiredness, exasperation, and confusion, and take necessary action.
- As a general rule, don't deviate from the agenda, but if things get very heavy, and the next item is very heavy too, swap it around for something participative coming later on the agenda

MEETING NOTES OR MEETING MINUTES

- Here is a simple structure for formal meeting notes involving a group of people within an organisation:
 - Heading: for example - Notes of Management Meeting (if a one-off meeting to consider a specific issue then include purpose in the heading as appropriate)
 - Date and Time:
 - Venue:
 - Present:
 - Apologies for absence:
 - In attendance: (if appropriate - guests not normally present at regular meetings, for instance speakers or non-board-members at board meetings)

MEETING NOTES OR MEETING MINUTES CONT.

- Importantly, all actions agreed in the meeting need to be allocated to persons present at the meeting. It is not normally appropriate or good practice to allocate an action to someone who is not present at the meeting. Actions that are agreed but not allocated to anyone will rarely be implemented. Responsibility for actions can be identified with a person's name or initials as appropriate.
- Action points and persons responsible should be highlighted or detailed in a right-margin column if helpful.
- Meeting notes should ideally concentrate on actions and agreements, not act as a verbatim report of the meeting.
- Reports should if possible be circulated in advance of meetings giving delegates adequate time to read and formulate reactions and answers to any queries raised. It is not good practice to table a report at a meeting if opportunity exists to circulate the report beforehand.
- Reports can be appended to the meeting notes or minutes to which they relate.

EVERYONE IS PARTICIPATING

- The best meetings allow everyone to have a say and allocate the resultant work among the team members. If this does not seem to be happening, you can encourage the chair of the meeting with timely interventions along these lines: *"I think that Jane would like to make a point", "I'd be interested to know what John thinks", and "Does everyone have something to do?"*
- The conclusion of a meeting is important. The chair should summarize what has been achieved or agreed, thank everyone for their contributions and support, and try to ensure that people leave the room feeling good about the time they have devoted to the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting, you should be clear what you need to do as a result of the meeting and quickly carry out your action points or allocate them to a colleague. Delay will tend to lead to you overlooking your action points or postponing them to the last moment.