

Ten Quick Tips for Running a Less Painful Meeting

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Abstract

Researchers complain that meetings are a waste of time, but that is partly because most have never learned how to run one or participate in one efficiently. The ten quick tips below will make meetings less frequent, shorter, and more effective.

Author Summary

Knowing how to run a meeting efficiently is a core skill for anyone who wants to get things done, as is knowing how to participate in someone else's meeting. This article gives ten quick tips for doing both.

Introduction

Most people are really bad at meetings: they don't have an agenda going in, they don't take minutes, they wander off into irrelevancies, they repeat what others have said or recite banalities simply so that they'll have said something, and they devote half of their attention to their email or to side conversations. Knowing how to run a meeting efficiently is a core skill for anyone who wants to get things done. Knowing how to take part in someone else's meeting is just as important, but gets far less attention. The most important rules for making meetings efficient are not secret, but are rarely followed; this article gives ten quick tips that will make meetings less frequent, shorter, and more effective.

1 Decide if there actually needs to be a meeting.

If the only purpose is to share information, have everyone send a brief email instead, or better yet, add notes to a shared document so that people can find the information later. Remember, you can read faster than anyone can speak: if someone has facts for the rest of the team to absorb, the most polite way to communicate them is to type them in. And if people don't read what you collate and send out, you can always offer them the option of having a meeting instead. In almost thirty years, I've never had anyone take me up on this. . .

2 Create an agenda.

If nobody cares enough about the meeting to make a point-form list of what's supposed to be discussed, or if that list isn't circulated at least a day in advance, the meeting

probably doesn't need to happen. ("The agenda is everything we've talked about recently on Slack" doesn't count.)

Include timings in the agenda. Timings help you keep the meeting moving, as in, "That's very interesting, but we have five other topics to get through in the next fifteen minutes, so could you please make your point?". Your first estimates with any new group will be wildly optimistic, so revise them upward for subsequent meetings.

Prioritize. Every meeting is a micro-project, so work should be prioritized in the same way that it is for other projects: things that will have high impact but take little time should be done first, and things that will take lots of time but have little impact should be skipped entirely.

Plan to end early. If your meeting is scheduled for 10:00-11:00, you should aim to end at 10:50 to give people time to get where they need to go next.

Don't include a quiz. There is a growing tendency in tech companies to have people answer a question at the end of the agenda to prove that they've read it. Don't do this: one of the first people to look at the agenda will warn everyone else, so all you'll do is make people feel that you're treating them like children.

3 Have clear rules for making decisions.

If your meeting includes more than a couple of dozen people, or if you think you need Robert's Rules of Order for any other reason, you should probably get some training in how to run and participate in meetings. For any smaller group, or for groups in which people mostly agree with each other, use Martha's Rules instead [1].

1. Before each meeting, anyone who wishes may sponsor a proposal. Proposals must be circulated at least 24 hours before a meeting in order to be considered at that meeting, and must include:
 - a one-line summary (the subject line of the issue);
 - the full text of the proposal;
 - any required background information;
 - pros and cons; and
 - possible alternatives.
2. A quorum is established in a meeting if half or more of voting members are present.
3. Once a person has sponsored a proposal, they are responsible for it. The group may not discuss or vote on the issue unless the sponsor or their delegate is present. The sponsor is also responsible for presenting the item to the group.
4. After the sponsor presents the proposal, a *sense vote* is cast for the proposal prior to any discussion:
 - Who likes the proposal?
 - Who can live with the proposal?
 - Who is uncomfortable with the proposal?
5. If all or most of the group likes or can live with the proposal, it is immediately moved to a formal vote with no further discussion.
6. If most of the group is uncomfortable with the proposal, it is postponed for further rework by the sponsor.

7. If some members are uncomfortable they can briefly state their objections. A timer is then set for a brief discussion moderated by the facilitator. After 10 minutes or when no one has anything further to add (whichever comes first), the facilitator calls for a yes-or-no vote on the question: “Should we implement this decision over the stated objections?” If a majority votes “yes” the proposal is implemented. Otherwise, the proposal is returned to the sponsor for further work.

4 Put someone in charge.

“In charge” means keeping the meeting moving, glaring at people who are muttering to one another or checking email, and telling people who are talking too much to get to the point. It does *not* mean doing all the talking; in fact, whoever is in charge will usually talk less than anyone else, just as a referee usually kicks the ball less often than the players. One way to ensure this is to give the moderator a stuffed animal or something else to hold up when they’re speaking on their own behalf rather than moderating.

If you are the moderator, **keep a backlog**. If anything comes up that looks like it will take the conversation into the weeds, write it down on a sticky note and put it on the table (or the wall behind the moderator, or wherever else is convenient), and then deal with it at the end of the meeting. This works better than having the moderator take a note, since everyone can see the backlog piling up and compare it against the time remaining.

Also, **call on specific people** to make sure everyone’s ideas are heard. Some people are more introverted than others, or need a little more time to think, or have been trampled so often by fast talkers that they’ve given up trying to speak. Keep a tally of who’s spoken how often and try to draw out those who are falling behind.

5 Require politeness.

No one gets to be rude, no one gets to ramble, and if someone goes off topic, it’s the chair’s job to say, “Let’s discuss that elsewhere.” If your project has a code of conduct (which it should), the moderator should remind people of it at the start of each meeting.

If attendees are co-located, enforce a **no technology** rule: everyone must put their phones, tablets, and laptops into politeness mode (i.e., close them). If this is too stressful, let participants hang on to their electronic pacifiers, but turn off the network so that they really *are* using them just to take notes or check the agenda. Only allow exceptions if people need their devices for accessibility reasons.

No interruptions. Participants should raise a finger or make one of the demure gestures used at high-priced auctions if they want to speak. It is the moderator’s job to keep track of the speaking queue, and to call on people in order.

6 Record minutes.

Someone other than the chair should take point-form notes about the most important pieces of information that were shared, about every decision that was made, and about every task that was assigned to someone. As soon as the meeting is over, the minutes should be circulated (e.g., emailed to everyone or posted to a wiki):

- **People who weren’t at the meeting can keep track of what’s going on.** You and your colleagues all have to juggle multiple tasks. A wiki page, email message, or blog entry is more efficient and more accurate than asking a colleague what you missed.

- **Everyone can check what was actually said or promised.** More than once, I've looked over the minutes of a meeting I was in and thought, "I didn't promise to have it ready then!" Accidentally or not, people will often remember things differently; writing it down gives team members a chance to correct mistaken or malicious interpretations.
- **People can be held accountable at subsequent meetings.** There's no point assigning action items if you don't follow up on them. If you're using a ticketing system such as GitHub Issues, the best thing to do is to create a ticket for each new question or task right after the meeting, and update those that are being carried forward. The set of open issues can then serve as a starting point for the next meeting's agenda.

7 Manage "that guy".

Some people are so used to the sound of their own voice that they will insist on talking half the time no matter how many other people are in the room. One way to combat this is to give everyone three sticky notes at the start of the meeting. Every time they speak, they have to take down one sticky note. When they're out of notes, they aren't allowed to speak until everyone has used at least one, at which point everyone gets all of their sticky notes back. This ensures that nobody talks more than three times as often as the quietest person in the meeting, and completely changes the dynamics of most groups: people who have given up trying to be heard because they always get trampled suddenly have space to contribute, and the overly-frequent speakers quickly realize just how unfair they have been.

Another useful technique is "interruption bingo". Draw a grid and label the rows and columns with the participants' names. Each time someone interrupts someone else, add a tally mark to the appropriate cell. Halfway through the meeting, take a moment to look at the results. In most cases, you will see that one or two people are doing all of the interrupting, often without being aware of it. After that, saying, "All right, I'm adding another tally to the bingo card," is often enough to get them to throttle back.

8 Be an active participant.

Everyone offers leadership training, but nobody offers followership training. The result is that many meetings are full of conductors who have no idea how to actually play in an orchestra. The rules for doing better are natural complements of the ones given above.

Decline invitations. If you have read the agenda and don't think you need to be in a meeting, say so, but only if you are also willing to agree in advance to abide by the decisions made in the meeting.

This rule requires that you **read the agenda and supporting material before the meeting**. If you still don't know after doing this whether you need to attend or not, ask the moderator to clarify the agenda; this will make the meeting more efficient for everyone.

Take your own notes. While other people are talking, take notes of questions you want to ask or points you want to make. You'll be surprised how smart it makes you look when it's your turn to speak.

Use other participants' names. This is particularly important in online meetings, since you can't use body language to indicate who you're addressing.

Pause before speaking. If the moderator is managing the queue of speakers so that you don't lose your chance to speak if you hesitate for a couple of heartbeats, make

it a habit to pause for a moment before speaking. It may not change what you say, but it's almost certain to make you sound more eloquent.

Put down your hand. If someone else has already made the point you were going to make, take yourself out of the speaking queue, or say, "I agree with..." and leave it at that.

9 Modify these rules for online meetings.

Depending on your workplace, many or most of your meetings will take place via video conferencing. Most of the previous rules apply directly to such meetings, but a few modifications are needed.

First, meetings should be **all in person or all online**. If some people are co-located and some are not, the remote participants are at a significant disadvantage. The easiest way to level the playing field is to mandate that if even one person is remote, everyone has to take part via video conferencing.

Second, **do not record the meeting**: doing so can inhibit participation (particularly from anyone who has ever been the victim of online harassment), and people who say they want a recording in order to find out what was said should be reading the minutes instead.

Third, since you've already broken the "no technology" rule, **take minutes in a shared document** so that everyone can see them in real time.

Fourth, remind everyone that audio matters more than video, so they should use a headset microphone rather than their phone or the microphone in their laptop. Mute everyone at the start of the meeting, and re-mute people each time they finish speaking.

Finally, Chelsea Troy's discussion of why online meetings are often frustrating and unproductive makes an important point: in most online meetings, the first person to speak during a pause gets the floor [2]. The result? "If you have something you want to say, you have to stop listening to the person currently speaking and instead focus on when they're gonna pause or finish so you can leap into that nanosecond of silence and be the first to utter something. The format... encourages participants who want to contribute to say more and listen less." The solution is to run a text chat beside the video conference where people can signal that they want to speak. The moderator then selects people from the waiting list.

10 Seek truth, not victory.

The last rule is the hardest for many people, but also the most important. Meetings can all too easily degenerate into struggles for social dominance, and people can all too easily find themselves arguing to win rather than to find solutions. The moderator should keep this under control, but they can't do it without participants' support.

In particular, **don't raise a point you don't actually agree with** just to air it or because you haven't spoken in a while. The devil doesn't actually need more advocates, and even if he did, you don't have to be one.

Conclusion

Different cultures have different conventions, and every group will evolve its own practices for meetings as time goes on [3]. If you would like to accelerate that process, [4] catalogs fifty different ways to get groups talking productively, most of which were new to the author, and only half a dozen of which have ever been supported directly online.

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