Planning and Leading Effective Meetings

Introduction

Welcome to your *Tes* Professional Studies course on 'Planning and Leading Effective Meetings'.

This course is aimed at heads of subject, phase, and department, as well as at new leaders and those with middle or senior leadership aspirations in primary or secondary school settings.

Leading and contributing to meetings is a vital part of middle and senior leadership in schools. This course will advise on good practice for how to prepare and run meetings that are engaging, purposeful, and set clear objectives for attendees. It will also explore the reasons why meetings can be ineffective and looks at ways to overcome these issues, both prior to and during meetings.

In this course, we will cover:

- ineffective meeting styles
- planning and agenda-setting
- leading effective meetings.

On completion of this course, learners will:

- recognise the signs of unproductive meetings and have strategies to improve them
- understand the importance of planning meetings, including creating and sharing an agenda prior to meetings
- understand the importance of having a clear purpose and objective for meetings
- feel equipped to run meetings that are engaging and purposeful for staff
- reflect on their own practice and recognise areas where they can develop their skills.

What makes meetings ineffective?

Schools are busy and constantly changing environments, and there are circumstances in which meetings need to be more casual, open-ended, or curtailed, to accommodate for other issues. However, there are certain practices that, when repeated, can lead to a string of unproductive staff meetings. Being mindful of some poor habits will help you to maintain a better meeting record.

The following are four of the key mistakes that often lead to poor meeting outcomes in schools.

1. **Poor planning**

    This could look like:

- not sharing the meeting agenda or preparatory tasks ahead of time or in enough time, resulting in a derailed meeting and a lack of informed discussion
- not dividing up time effectively for all staff to have space to talk
- relying on 'ad hoc' agendas for one-off problems or tasks, rather than creating long-term agendas set and refined on a regular basis.

2. Lack of purpose and structure

This could look like:

- unclear purpose for the meeting, or topics that only involve a minority of attendees so may waste staff time
- time for matters arising is not divided up properly and issues are rushed
- staff leaving a meeting and feeling uncertain about what is expected of them.

3. Unengaging and 'boring' meeting material and structure

This could look like:

- focusing on light, mundane, or highly administrative topics that could have been outlined and resolved in an email
- an unengaging atmosphere where participants are only asked to sit and listen
- no moments to relax, be at ease, and celebrate shared successes.

4. Poor facilitation and weak conflict management

This could look like:

- allowing certain staff to dominate meeting discussions
- not mitigating conflict or trying to talk over conflict
- no demonstration of leadership attributes (i.e., patience, fairness, and authoritativeness).

Scenarios

Now that you've understood some key areas that relate to unproductive meetings, you will review two ineffective meeting scenarios that involve two of the four issues from the categories (poor planning and conflict management).

Later, you will review two good meeting scenarios that manage to avoid the remaining two issues from the categories (boring meetings and lack of purpose).

In this ineffective scenario section, after you've reviewed the situation, you will write a course of action to resolve the issue and create an environment for an effective meeting to take place.

Scenario: Poor planning

The Deputy Head, Mr Benjamin, often emails staff late at night about impromptu, unscheduled meetings, usually for the following day. The issues discussed are not an emergency and staff have commented that these additional meetings are disruptive to their schedules as they are often forced to rearrange or delay their other commitments.

Model solutions

- You could advise that the meetings should be scheduled with more notice and greater flexibility, to allow for others to reschedule their tasks or to excuse themselves.
- Non-emergency material can be emailed to staff so that they are informed but are not disrupted by additional meetings.

Scenario: Conflict management

Miss Elliot and Mr Sanchez often argue in the staff room and during meetings. Usually, these are professional disagreements. Their head of subject, Mr Whitman, thinks that their arguments aren't significant enough to affect things. During a key meeting about a curriculum change, Miss Elliot muttered and commented inappropriately on Mr Sanchez's contributions, which disrupted the flow of discussions as he had to pause and restart several times. Mr Whitman likes both members of staff a great deal, so he didn't get involved with their dynamic.

Model solutions

- Be assertive when facilitating meetings, especially when conflict arises. The agenda and topics decided upon should be shared within that allotted time.
- It is vital that the meeting is equitable and that other staff members have time to speak. This might mean cutting off arguments and asking disruptive people to stop, outright.
- All staff should have the opportunity to develop their facilitative skills, including taking it in turns to run meetings and speak first.
- The purpose and norms for meetings should be explicit and widely understood.

Reflective questions

How can you spot an ineffective meeting?
Are meetings always necessary? What alternatives could be more efficient?
What are the short-term and long-term consequences of an unproductive or unhelpful meeting?

Planning for meetings

As the adage goes, failure to plan is planning to fail.

Good planning practice includes:

- Timetabling far in advance as a whole team, being conscious of intensive work periods, such as parts of the Spring and Summer examination seasons, and ensuring that difficult, necessary, and highly involved meetings are spread evenly throughout the year.
- Establishing the relevance, purpose, style, and size of a meeting – some events shouldn't be seen as 'meetings', but in more specific terms, such as a discussion forum, a review, or a workshop; this will enable only relevant people to be present, as well as being more purposeful and engaging.
- Preparing personally and defining your own reasons for convening the meeting well ahead of time, as well as getting others to feel involved by encouraging them to share issues or related agenda items.
- Judging when an online meeting may be more appropriate; for example, to reduce time spent on travel and administration, and to accommodate for more voices to be heard, such as for inter-school or MAT meetings.

Creating an agenda

In schools, which are unlike businesses, formal agendas are not always necessary. This guidance on agendas is therefore advisory and can be flexible.

If you are creating an agenda for a staff meeting, it is important to build a clear framework for topics that you want to cover and timings. Agendas should be shared with the attendees in advance and can be formulated by the meeting owner themselves or developed collaboratively, on a shared Google document, for example, which can

encourage a sense of 'buy-in'. There are different kinds of agenda structures, but one of the most memorable is the P.O.O agenda.

P.O.O stands for:

- Purpose (of the meeting, including timings, and why *you* convened it)
- Objectives (SMART objectives)
- Outcomes (the desired result and deliverables)

Example

Mr Jackson emails all school staff with a meeting invite using the P.O.O-style format:

"Good afternoon,

Purpose

To include as many of you as possible, I'm inviting you to join a one-hour Teams meeting next week to begin to address how we can improve the attendance to, and running of, parents' evenings.

Objectives

- To reduce no show/missed appointments by 25% overall.
- To develop a hybrid system to enable parents or carers with mobility issues, or work or caring responsibilities, to have more accessible options.

Outcomes

- To increase attendance at parents' evenings. We should aim for >95% attendance.
- To engage a wider demographic of parents and carers by making meetings more accessible and inclusive.

I'm open to your ideas and have attached a live document for you to add any thoughts or suggestions that can be discussed at the meeting to improve on the current status quo.

Best,
Mr Jackson"

Task

Consider a previous meeting that you've been involved with as a leader or attendee.

Under the headings 'Purpose', 'Objectives', and 'Outcomes', break down the agenda for this meeting.

Reflective questions

What information should be included on an agenda?
Why are agendas useful tools both for the speaker(s) and attendees of a meeting?
How can agendas be used to structure a meeting, both for content and timings?
What effects can sharing an agenda in advance have?

Leading an efficient meeting

If you have decided to create an agenda for your colleagues, your next focus is on leading an efficient and purposeful staff meeting. Engaging leadership is not a skill most people are able to develop overnight and steering a group of people through different topics with purpose is not an easy task.

Condensed down, Kyle Ingham's eight tips are:

1. consider whether the meeting is even necessary or suits the nature of the topic
2. ensure only key people are invited
3. set expectations with attendees
4. start the 'meeting' when the invite is sent out, to discuss and share ideas ahead of the physical event
5. 'prewire' the meeting with important topics, so that nothing is a surprise to the attendees
6. actively manage the meeting during the event itself, steering the discussion and keeping people on track
7. agree on next steps during the meeting
8. bring doughnuts (or whichever sugary treat your colleagues prefer).

Meetings are often unproductive because staff are multi-tasking. To avoid this issue, you can plan meetings as you would a lesson:

- **Make the meetings active and engaging.**
  Consider different ways in which you can get people involved and interested in your meeting topic. Get staff involved in discussions, use activities throughout to break-up the meeting, try out a new piece of technology or simply get out of the usual room.
- **Think about how you are presenting.**
  Present material in a way that is simple, easy to remember and will keep people engaged. If using a slideshow, limit the words on the screen or people are likely to switch off.
- **Don't talk for too long!**
  At the end of the school day, concentration is waning, so be conscious of time. Encourage others to speak as well as you and stick to the necessary facts.
- **Don't repeat information that staff have read or heard elsewhere.**
  Make sure that the purpose of your meeting is meaningful for staff and will give them something to take away from what you have said. Equally, if you have asked staff to read something prior to your meeting, trust that they have done this and don't then waste time by reading it back to them. We have high expectations of the students so we should have equally high expectations of the staff.

Scenarios

Following from the earlier review of two ineffective meeting scenarios, you will now review two well-executed meetings that avoid being ambiguous and boring.

You will select terms that link to their success, and you will then reflect on why these are successful scenarios.

Good scenario: Specific and purposeful meeting (avoiding ambiguity)

The head of the English department has held a staff meeting to suggest a large cross-year group project on Shakespeare, which would involve artwork, a collaboration with a local theatre company, and group work during school hours. Prior to the meeting, she sent out an agenda with a project deadline and timeline, and allotted time for

discussion and preferences for each project role. Given this, all tasks were divided fairly, and during the session the most appropriate member of staff stepped up to or was advised to take on the relevant task.

Good scenario: Engaging meeting (avoiding boredom)

After record exam results and major improvements in closing attainment gaps across the board, staff are exhausted and in need of a celebration. At the final staff meeting of the year, senior leadership congratulate and thank staff, then give each head of year a chance to share their year group's single biggest achievement, with a time limit of five minutes. Each head was given the choice to present in whichever way they felt was appropriate, so long as they didn't use a slideshow.

You have now reviewed four meeting scenarios, two were unsuccessful, two were successful. These are used to show how you would either fix the ineffective meetings, or show why you thought a meeting was successful.

Self-reflection

After holding a meeting, it is important to reflect on what was effective and what needs to be improved on. If you are relatively new to leadership, asking for direct feedback from attendees is a good idea.

Questions you might consider asking your colleagues after you have led or presented at a meeting.

- *Was that all clear or did that make sense?*
- *Did you need more information from me, before or during the meeting?*
- *Is there anything that needs more elaboration?*

Perhaps consider asking three questions after each meeting, and posing them to different colleagues each time.

There are also questions you should ask yourself such as:

- *Were people distracted or conducting side conversations?*
- *Who was doing most of the talking?*
- *Did the discussion stray to irrelevant topics?*
- *Did everyone get the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas?*

Tasks

Consider the following questions.

- Have you had experience of delivering meetings in the past?
- If so, how do you feel they went?
- What could you have done better? If not, what have you seen from other colleagues and were their meetings efficient?
- Are you going to be delivering a meeting soon?
- What is the purpose of your meeting?
- Who is required to attend?
- What are the objectives of the meeting?
- What style will your meeting take?
- What outcomes would you like to achieve?

During this course, we looked at key reasons why meetings can be ineffective and explored strategies to improve them. We covered the importance of planning for meetings and the benefits that setting and sharing agendas can have for all staff involved. Finally, we looked at the importance of ensuring that meetings are purposeful and engaging.

You have now completed your course on 'Planning and Leading Effective Meetings' and trust you have found it useful. Go to 'Questionnaire' to complete the accompanying questionnaire.