Title:
Drive a tight agenda, don't let it drive you

Word Count:
829

Summary:
An effective agenda goes beyond start time, location, topics, and durations. Effective agendas do the following: support the meeting purpose, set the expectations of attendees as to what will be discussed, inform attendees of any preparation that will be required prior to the meeting, give the meeting leader a roadmap for driving the agenda, permit adequate time to cover each item, and allow the meeting leader to adjust the agenda easily if the meeting gets behind schedule. The meeting owner drives the agenda, not the other way around. There are times where you may have a concise meeting purpose and specific agenda items to address the meeting purpose, but the actual meeting deviates from the agenda.

Keywords:
Meeting management, Leadership, Team management

Article Body:
Excerpted from The Truth About Getting your Point Across...And Nothing But the Truth

A colleague of mine was responsible for running a bi-weekly two-hour team meeting. He took great care to develop a very full, detailed agenda. As we would get into the meeting, it would only take us getting to agenda item one before the meeting was behind schedule. During the entire time that my colleague ran these meetings, we never got more than halfway through the agenda before adjourning. The team got so used to not making it through the agenda that there wasn't even an attempt to try to stay on schedule. The agenda and associated times were completely unrealistic and were worthless as a meeting management tool.

An effective agenda goes beyond start time, location, topics, and durations. Effective agendas do the following:

* Support the meeting purpose

* Set the expectations of attendees as to what will be discussed

* Inform attendees of any preparation that will be required prior to the meeting

* Give the meeting leader a roadmap for driving the agenda

* Permit adequate time to cover each item

* Allow the meeting leader to adjust the agenda easily if the meeting gets behind schedule

Having said all this, there is a guiding principle the meeting owner needs to follow: The meeting owner drives the agenda, not the other way around. There are times where you may have a concise meeting purpose and specific agenda items to address the meeting purpose, but the actual meeting deviates from the agenda. Be open to the agenda change; just make sure the meeting purpose is still being met. Doing this requires the meeting owner be very in-tune to what is going on in the meeting and footing it back to what is happening on the agenda. If the actual meeting is deviating from the agenda, the meeting owner needs to consciously decide if the deviation is appropriate or if it needs to be nipped in the bud. There's no secret sauce on this; it means keeping the original meeting's purpose in mind, observing what is actually happening in the meeting, and continually assessing whether the meeting's purpose is being met.

So, what are some good tips to developing effective agenda? Consider these next time you have to plan a meeting:

* Have a tight, focused meeting purpose - You've called the meeting for a reason; make sure that the purpose is explicit and achievable. A good sanity check on this is that you should be able to complete this sentence: "At the end of this meeting we should be able to _____."

* Cross-foot your agenda items with the meeting purpose - As you're crafting your agenda items, make sure that each item is doing something to support the meeting purpose. If the items don't support the meeting purpose either change the agenda item or change the purpose. Don't confuse the attendees by having agenda items that don't support the meeting purpose

* Be realistic with allocated agenda item times - Don't put overly aggressive times on the agenda that you in your heart know you're not going to achieve. Planning 90 minutes worth of meeting in 60 minutes means you'll only get through 2/3 of the meeting or the meeting will run over by at least 30 minutes. Don't wish for best case; put reality down.

* Distribute the agenda at least one day before the meeting - Meeting attendees want to know what is going to be discussed and if there is preparation that is

needed prior to the meeting. Give them a day if possible to review the agenda and get mentally prepared for the meeting.

* Put the most important agenda items at the front of the meeting - Cover your top items first. There are two reasons for this: first, you'll ensure that the most important items get covered. Second, you'll keep attendee attention better by covering the most important items earlier. If they are put later in the agenda then you'll see some chomping at the bit as you go through lesser important agenda items first.

* Have as your last agenda item an "action items review" section - I've seen way too many meetings happen in my career where the end of the meeting comes, everyone leaves, but there is no agreement on what actions need to be taken out of the meeting. In your action items review, indicate what the action items are, who is responsible for each action item, and when the action item needs to be completed by.

* Have a contingency plan in place for when agenda items run over - Even with the best-planned meetings, sometimes agenda items take longer than expected. Have a plan for how you are going to accommodate the change, which could mean shortening some other agenda items or eliminating an agenda item completely

Build tight, realistic, achievable agendas. You'll get more done, reduce attendee frustration, and make the best use of everyone's time. Just don't be a slave to the agenda if you see the agenda won't accomplish the meeting's purpose.