



## RUNNING AND CONTROLLING MEETINGS

There are good meetings and there are bad meetings. Bad meetings drone on forever, you never seem to get to the point, and you leave wondering why you were even present. Effective ones leave you energised and feeling that you've really accomplished something. So what makes a meeting effective?

Effective meetings really boil down to three things:

- They achieve the meeting's objective.
- They take up a minimum amount of time.
- They leave participants feeling that a sensible process has been followed.

If you structure your meeting planning, preparation, execution, and follow up around these three basic criteria, the result will be an effective meeting.

### 1. The Meeting's Objective

An effective meeting serves a useful purpose. This means that in it, you achieve a desired outcome. For a meeting to meet this outcome, or objective, you have to be clear about what it is. Too often, people call a meeting to discuss something without really considering what a good outcome would be.

- Do you want a decision?
- Do you want to generate ideas?
- Are you getting status reports?
- Are you communicating something?
- Are you making plans?

Any of these, and a myriad of others, is an example of a meeting objective. Before you do any meeting planning, you need to focus your objective. To help you determine what your meeting objective is, complete this sentence:

At the close of the meeting, I want the group to ...

With the end result clearly defined, you can then plan the contents of the meeting, and determine who needs to be present.



## 2. Use Time Wisely

Time is a precious resource, and no one wants their time wasted. With the amount of time we all spend in meetings, you owe it to yourself and your team to streamline the meeting as much as possible. What's more, time wasted in a meeting is time wasted for everybody attending. For example, if a critical person is 15 minutes late in an eight person meeting, that person has cost the organisation two hours of lost activity.

Starting with your meeting objective, everything that happens in the meeting itself should further that objective. If it doesn't, it's superfluous and should not be included.

To ensure you cover only what needs to be covered and you stick to relevant activities, you need to create an agenda. The agenda is what you will refer to in order to keep the meeting running on target and on time. To prepare an agenda, consider the following factors:

- Priorities – what absolutely must be covered?
- Results – what do need to accomplish at the meeting?
- Participants – who needs to attend the meeting for it to be successful?
- Sequence – in what order will you cover the topics?
- Timing – how much time will spend on each topic?
- Date and Time – when will the meeting take place?
- Place – where will the meeting take place?

With an idea of what needs to be covered and for how long, you can then look at the information that should be prepared beforehand. What do the participants need to know in order to make the most of the meeting time? And, what role are they expected to perform in the meeting, so that they can do the right preparation?

If it's a meeting to solve a problem, ask the participants to come prepared with a viable solution. If you are discussing an ongoing project, have each participant summarise his or her progress to date and circulate the reports amongst members. Assigning a particular topic of discussion to various people is another great way to increase involvement and interest. On the agenda, indicate who will lead the discussion or presentation of each item. Use your agenda as your time guide.

When you notice that time is running out for a particular item, consider hurrying the discussion, pushing to a decision, deferring discussion until another time, or assigning it for discussion by a subcommittee.



An important aspect of running effective meetings is insisting that everyone respects the time allotted. Start the meeting on time, do not spend time recapping for latecomers, and, when you can, finish on time. Whatever can be done outside the meeting time should be. This includes circulating reports for people to read beforehand, and assigning smaller group meetings to discuss issues relevant to only certain people.

### **3. Satisfying Participants that a Sensible Process Has Been Followed**

Once you have an agenda prepared, you need to circulate it to the participants and get their feedback and input. Running a meeting is not a dictatorial role: You have to be participative right from the start. Perhaps there is something important that a team member has to add. Maybe you have allotted too much, or too little, time for a particular item. There may even be some points you've included that have been settled already and can be taken off the list for discussion. Whatever the reason, it is important you get feedback from the meeting participants about your proposed agenda. Once in the meeting, to ensure maximum satisfaction for everyone, there are several things you should keep in mind:

- If certain people are dominating the conversation, make a point of asking others for their ideas.
- At the end of each agenda item, quickly summarise what was said, and ask people to confirm that that's a fair summary. Then make notes regarding follow-up.
- Note items that require further discussion.
- Watch body language and make adjustments as necessary. Maybe you need a break, or you need to stop someone from speaking too much.
- Ensure the meeting stays on topic.
- List all tasks that are generated at the meeting. Make a note of who is assigned to do what, and by when.
- At the close of the meeting, quickly summarise next steps and inform everyone that you will be sending out a meeting summary.

After the meeting is over, take some time to debrief, and determine what went well and what could have been done better. Evaluate the meeting's effectiveness based on how well you met the objective. This will help you continue to improve your process of running effective meetings.

You may even want to get the participants' feedback as well. Depending on the time frame, this debriefing can be done within the meeting itself or afterward.

Finally, prepare the meeting summary. This will be forwarded to all participants and other stakeholders. It is a record of what was accomplished and who is responsible for what as the team moves forward. This is a very crucial part of effective meetings that often gets overlooked. You need a written record of what transpired, along with a list of actions that named individuals have agreed to perform. Make sure someone is assigned to take notes during the meeting if you think you will be too busy to do so yourself.



## Key Points:

Running an effective meeting is more than sending out a notice that your team is to meet at a particular time and place. Effective meetings need structure and order. Without these elements they can go on forever and not accomplish a thing. With a solid objective in mind, a tight agenda, and a commitment to involving the meeting participants in the planning, preparation, and execution of the meeting, you are well on your way to chairing great meetings. Given the frustration most people feel when their time is wasted, gaining a reputation for running efficient and successful meetings is good for you and your career.

## Ways to Get Control of Your Meetings

- Meetings, when done properly, should be to the point, smooth, and only as long as they have to be. Having a good and efficient meeting takes planning and firm execution. While there are not too many ways to have a great meeting, there are plenty of ways to have a bad one. Some potential pitfalls are inflated agendas, having a meeting when an email would suffice, and inviting the wrong people. If you have a necessary, well-planned meeting with the right people and it's going well, what do you do when it gets derailed? How can you prevent that from happening?
- Preventing a meeting from being side-tracked actually begins well before start time. By using an agenda, you provide the structure upon which the meeting is built. The more detailed and planned the agenda, the smoother the meeting. Another way to use the agenda is while passing it out. When you communicate with each participant about the meeting, make sure to tell them that it will begin and end exactly as scheduled. Once you have set the stage, however, you have to follow the agenda exactly. If you don't respect the schedule, no one else will.
- At the beginning of the meeting, clearly state that your time – and everyone else's – is valuable and that you only have enough time for the meeting as scheduled. If the meeting runs over, you will have to leave. This subtly leads your fellow participants to stick to the schedule.
- Often when beginning meetings, we pass out materials that will help to guide our participants and re-emphasize certain points. The tendency is to simply hand over everything so as not to disrupt the flow later. However, people's instincts in these situations dictate that they rifle through the handouts, pulling their attention away from your opening remarks. The best course is to hand out materials as needed.
- A major potential derailment of your meeting comes from your speakers. They can ramble on and on, they can get bogged down in questions, or they could simply go off topic for who knows how long. There are several ways you can combat errant speakers. First, make sure they know how long they have to speak and have them submit their notes ahead of time. If you see any potential split-away points, bring them to their attention so they can avoid going off-topic in the meeting. If they do split anyway, a gentle reminder of their previous or next point can set them aright.
- If your speaker knows their specific time to speak, they are less prone to go over. However, unless you provide a clock or timer of some kind, their best intentions will be for naught. If a timer isn't feasible, work out a system of cues ahead of time. For example, you could put a blue pen in front of you for the "five minutes left" signal and a red pen for "one minute left."
- You can help your speaker with Q&A by stepping in as their personal moderator. If you are the one to pick who is to ask a question, then you can easily step in after questions have gone on too long. Simply say "that's enough questions for now," instead of picking the next person. Also, you can suggest that the speakers will be able to personally answer questions after the meeting.
- Another big detractor from an efficient meeting is excellent, important discussion topics... that are not on the agenda. These topics can derail a meeting faster than anything else. The difficult part is that usually these discussions need to happen, but you don't have to let them ruin your meeting. First, acknowledge that the topic is a good one. Then you can derail the derailment in several ways. You could tell the major players in the discussion to table it for now and meet amongst themselves after your meeting. You could announce that your meeting will go on, but there will be another meeting after this one to discuss the new topic.
- If the off-topic point is a good one, but not worthy enough for the solutions above, create a "bin list." This list holds all points that need to be discussed, but not right then. You can schedule meetings for each one, or all at once. You can also take the two most invested people in the discussion and assign them to work out the details and take care of it personally. The point is that you don't have it interfering with your meeting.



- There are times that a meeting gets off track, but not for a good reason like an important off-topic point. Often, the problem is simply rude participants that slow down a meeting. Taking care of these situations falls almost completely on you, but it doesn't have to be too big a chore. Start at the beginning of the meeting with confidence. Keep your posture straight throughout the meeting. Monitor your body language and make sure your voice is solid and carrying. Make them want to listen to you. Watch your participants' body language as well. If you see slumping or boredom, jump in with a request for their opinion to get them mentally back into the meeting. If the distracted are wide spread, call for a quick five minute break. Your participants will return refreshed and rejuvenated. If you have people talking amongst themselves instead of listening, simply smile politely and wait until they are done or have noticed that the entire meeting is waiting on them. They will quickly come to task.
- A good strategy for keeping your meetings on track is to schedule them to end right before lunch or quitting time. However, these particular end times can cause hazardous derailments, because your participants are beginning to think about what they will be doing after the meeting. This is the point in the agenda where you should place all of the controversial topics. Not only will it liven up the meeting and banish daydreaming, it will prevent the subjects from being discussed too long as lunch is just over the horizon.
- If you craft a good plan and tight agenda you are prepared to have an efficient meeting. All it takes after that is to have a firm hand, stick to the schedule, and take care of your participants.