

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR MEETINGS

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Most of us have to attend frequent meetings. Whether for work, school, church, social groups, or some other aspect of our lives, almost all of us attend meetings at one time or another. Unfortunately, many of us also participate in ineffective and unproductive meetings—meetings that waste our time and energy. When properly facilitated, meetings can be extremely productive and can benefit participants in a variety of ways, but to obtain the benefits of an effective meeting, we must take specific actions. This guide describes six steps to ensure that our meetings are both efficient and effective.

SIX STEPS TO EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

There are six steps to make meetings efficient and effective:

1. Identify the purpose of the meeting.
2. Determine whether a meeting is needed to accomplish the purpose.

3. Select the appropriate type of meeting.
4. Prepare for the meeting.
5. Facilitate the meeting.
6. Follow up on the meeting.

1. Identify the Purpose of the Meeting

What is the purpose of the meeting? One of the biggest mistakes made by meeting planners is the failure to define the purpose of the meeting narrowly. This means two things: First, identify what you hope to accomplish during the meeting. Whether the goal is to disseminate information, to resolve a problem, or to make a decision, be clear about what you want to accomplish during the meeting. Second, make sure that you do not attempt to accomplish too much in one meeting. Another common mistake made by meeting planners is the inclusion of too many agenda items. For an hour-long meeting, accomplishing one or two tasks is sufficient. Anything beyond that will make the meeting run long or require a superficial discussion of the issues. Meeting participants respond better to getting one thing done well than to doing five things poorly!

2. Determine Whether a Meeting Is Needed

Another mistake made by meeting planners is having unnecessary meetings. Meetings should be a last resort. Schedule a meeting only when there is no other way to accomplish the identified task. One of the reasons that people respond negatively to a meeting is that they find it to be unnecessary. Most of us have been in a meeting at one time or another when we felt the task could have been accomplished by phone or email. To keep this from happening, think about alternate ways to accomplish the identified tasks. For example, if the main purpose of the proposed meeting is to disseminate information, think about other ways to deliver it. Schedule the meeting only if you determine it is an absolute requirement to accomplish the identified tasks effectively.

3. Select the Appropriate Type of Meeting

Once you have determined that a meeting is an absolute necessity, select the appropriate type. This is important because different types of meetings require different facilitation tactics. Generally speaking, there are four types of meetings:

1. *Working session:* A working session provides an opportunity for participants to work together toward the completion of a specific job task. In other words, the participants come together because a specific work task requires their talents, insights, and skills. For example, a group might meet so that they can identify and develop the three phases of a one-day training program on effective communication to be facilitated by the training specialist during next month's

employee education session. The primary purpose of such a meeting is to create an educational program to facilitate employee development. The group is meeting to ensure that specific areas of expertise are included in the development process, and their task is to create the three modules needed to facilitate the full-day program.

2. *Problem-solving session:* In problem-solving meetings, group members apply a variety of processes and/or tools to define problems or conflicts, identify potential solutions, and make effective decisions. This type of meeting is similar to a working session, but the primary task is to manage a specific work problem or conflict effectively. For example, if an organizational process is not operating efficiently or effectively, a select group of individuals can come together to define the causes of the problem and to identify potential solutions. Once again, the group is meeting to ensure that specific areas of expertise are brought together to facilitate the problem resolution process.
3. *Informational session:* Informational sessions are among the most common of meetings. They facilitate the exchange of information concerning a specific topic or matter of relevance to the participants. For example, to maximize the quality of organizational communication, a CEO might meet with various employee groups on a quarterly basis to tell them what is going on and to respond to employee concerns. Informational meetings can be extremely powerful communication tools because they provide a consistent channel for information dissemination. However, they are often the most poorly utilized type of meetings for two reasons. First, many informational sessions are unnecessary because they provide information that can be readily obtained by other means. Second, a common mistake is to incorporate informational sessions into other types of meetings. For example, meeting planners often use working sessions to disseminate information because they have a captive audience. This use of the meeting can create problems if the information is not related to the group's current work task.
4. *Training session:* A training session is typically the longest of all the meeting formats. It includes sessions in which group members focus on learning and self-development. Such development is typically geared toward affective, behavioral, and/or cognitive skills. For example, an organization might implement a training program on effective meetings so that managers and supervisors can learn how to effectively facilitate a task-oriented meeting.

4. Prepare for the Meeting

Once you have identified the type of meeting, prepare for it. Meeting preparation is a relatively simple process. You should answer five basic questions before implementing any meeting:

1. *What* data, materials, and tools are needed for this meeting?

2. *Who* should attend this meeting? You must be specific, and include only individuals who add value to the meeting and who help to accomplish the meeting's tasks.
3. *When* should the meeting take place? Make sure the meeting is timely, based on the issues that must be discussed.
4. *Where* should the meeting take place? Make sure the meeting room is appropriate given the type of meeting, the number of participants, and the activities to take place during the meeting.
5. *How* will the meeting be facilitated? For example, what will be included in the agenda, who will prepare the agenda, how will the meeting materials be disseminated, what are the roles of the various participants, how will the room be set up, and who will facilitate the meeting?

5. Facilitate the Meeting

If you have successfully prepared for the meeting, facilitation is relatively easy. To maximize the effectiveness of the meeting, keep these six guidelines in mind:

1. *Start on time:* Some organizations have many late arriving participants because “the meetings never start on time anyway.” People know they can come late. Start the meetings on time and people will start arriving on time.
2. *Follow a specific agenda with time frames:* Keep the agenda short and well focused. Stick to the time frame laid out by the agenda. A frequent complaint of meeting participants is about meetings that run overtime.
3. *Utilize a facilitator and establish ground rules:* Even if you are the manager or person who planned the meeting, you do not have to facilitate it. Utilize someone with strong facilitation skills to run the session. Or, if you are the group leader, have your team members take turns at facilitating the meetings. Facilitating is a very empowering experience for them and will likely increase the quality of the meetings in the long run.
4. *Involve all the participants:* Use meeting techniques, such as brainstorming or the nominal group technique, to get everyone involved.
5. *Summarize key points and all action items:* At the end of the meeting, summarize the key points, and specify the action steps to be taken as a result of the meeting, including who carries out each step.
6. *Keep a written record of the meeting:* Make sure you take meeting notes that can be provided to the participants at the end of the meeting. These notes do not have to be detailed. They should simply cover any decisions made and the actions that will result from the meeting.

6. Follow Up on the Meeting

Once the meeting has concluded, you need to do three things. Keep in mind that failure to take these steps can greatly reduce the effectiveness of your meeting:

1. *Distribute meeting minutes as soon as possible:* Generally speaking, meeting participants should receive this information within 48 hours of the meeting, especially if items must be acted on in a timely fashion. The easiest way to distribute meeting minutes is via email (assuming everyone has access).
2. *Follow up with meeting participants regarding the status of action items:* Check back with people regarding their progress on accomplishing a specific action item.
3. *Evaluate the meeting's effectiveness:* Whether you do this formally or informally, you should identify the strengths and weaknesses of your meetings, and make adjustments as needed.