Planning and Conducting Effective Meetings

Long, boring meetings can be a big time waster and quickly turn off your teammates. A little advance planning will save a lot of time that is usually wasted in a meeting, and help keep your colleagues active.

Plan, then execute.

Pre-meeting Planning

Ask yourself these simple questions:

WHY? Why am I calling this meeting?

Define and write the meeting objective (a brief statement of what you want to accomplish.) If you can't, don't call a meeting.

When not to call a meeting:
- When other forms of communication will work (telephone, letter, report, e-mail). Much of the business conducted in meetings is better done in writing.
- If one or more the key people cannot attend.
- Just because the meeting is regularly scheduled.
- When gathering a group can be avoided by talking to one or two key people.
- To substitute for your personal action. (Make the decision!)

WHAT? What are we going to discuss? Prepare an agenda.

The properly planned agenda will serve as a control tool for the meeting leader and a preparatory tool for the other participants.

1. Specify the group, title, date, location, starting and ending times.
2. Limit the number of agenda items to assure proper coverage of each item.
3. List the important items first. Separate the "have to" from the "would be nice to" items.
4. Assign a person responsible for each item.
5. Provide sufficient detail about each item to allow participants to prepare, as necessary. But don't include unnecessary documentation.
6. Provide adequate time for feedback and follow-up on each item.
7. Distribute the agenda, in advance, as your meeting notice.

WHEN? Allow an adequate notice period.

WHERE? Select a comfortable, convenient location that is conductive to getting the work done.

WHO? Invite only those necessary to get the job done.
The Meeting

Leader’s Responsibilities

1. Start and finish on time. Starting late penalizes everyone. Late arrivers will soon learn to be on time.
2. Make introductions, as necessary.
3. Restate the purpose of the meeting at the beginning.
4. Assign someone to record the meeting minutes and the follow-up responsibilities.
5. Stick to your agenda.
6. Encourage discussion, but don’t let people ramble on. It is your right and responsibility as meeting leader to steer people back on course when the conversation strays. Remember, it is your meeting.
7. Summarize and integrate the discussion. This is especially helpful when you have people who tend to ramble.
8. Record action items and assign follow-up responsibilities as appropriate.
9. Take a break if the meeting is longer than one and one-half hours.
10. Set the next meeting date and time, if appropriate.
11. When the meeting is over, adjourn it. This seems obvious, but many meetings get drawn out because no one has the responsibility, courage, sense or desire to realize the discussion is complete and declare the meeting closed.

Participant’s Responsibilities

- Prepare before the meeting, as required.
- Be on time.
- Listen to others.
- Contribute to the discussion as appropriate.
- Listen to others.
- Stick to the subject. Don't get off on tangents.
- Listen to others.
- Accept your share of the delegated work.
- Follow-up on your responsibilities in a timely fashion.

Post-meeting Follow-Up

- Clean up
- Distribute minutes, with follow-up responsibilities, immediately after the meeting.
- Follow-up on responsibilities and assignments.
- Evaluate the meeting: did we accomplish the objective? What would you change next time?
Give Your Meetings New Meaning

Some people hate meetings because they're a waste of time. Others love meetings because they're a waste of time.

The truth is, wasting time is a waster of time - your meetings don't have to be categorized as such!

Meetings are often called too frequently, involve too many people, include the wrong people, and are scheduled in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Meetings don't have much going for them! But that doesn't have to be the case.

Meetings don't have to be long, drawn-out affairs. They shouldn't include everyone and their mothers. To make meetings more productive, you'll have to discipline yourselves: start by meeting only when necessary, and only when there is a formal agenda. An agenda doesn't have to be elaborate or detailed, only focused. Meeting topics shouldn't be a surprise to those who attend. Advance notice of the topic increases the chance of good ideas being brought to the meeting. Remember, a meeting is not an ambush!

When the reason for the meeting has been presented, discussed, analyzed and questioned, it's time to create a plan of action. Assign duties to those in attendance and assign deadlines at the same time. If necessary, schedule another meeting at this time and include only those who really need to be involved.

When the meeting is over, adjourn it. This point appears obvious, but many meetings get drawn out because no one has the responsibility, courage, sense or desire to realize the discussion is complete and declare the meeting closed.

A good meeting will have its direction set up front. It will deal with the topics on the agenda - and nothing more. The leader will encourage and promote discussion among the attendees, but not let them stray from the topic at hand.

Elapsed time? There is no rule on how long a meeting should last but chances are most last longer than they should. While some meetings will be day-long affairs, some topics can be handled in five minutes.