

# Running Effective Meetings

(Reference <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkil/RunningMeetings.htm>)

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 energized and feeling that you've really accomplished something.

So what makes a meeting effective?

Effective meetings really boil down to three things:

1. They achieve the meeting's objective.
2. They take up a minimum amount of time.
3. 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 organization 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 summarize 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 summarize 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 summarize 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.