

Effective Meetings - 21 Tips for Running More Effective Meetings

Despite modern technology, meetings still represent the core of operating and changing any organisation. And yet, so many organisations experience less than fully productive meetings. If you added up the time wasted in meetings in your organisation, what would the dollar value be? Or to put it in positive terms, what would be the bottom line value of holding far more effective meetings? Here are 21 ideas that have helped other organisations achieve significant productivity benefits through more effective meetings.

1. Cut down your total meeting time – Meetings tend to fall into 2 categories – (1) to share information, and (2) to solve problems or create opportunities.

If it is the first of these, consider whether the same thing can be achieved by other means (eg email or memos). If it is the latter, consider holding less frequent more effective meetings with more people in them.

On this second point, most organisations underestimate what can be achieved in properly facilitated large group multi stakeholder meetings or workshops. In fact, the best way that we know how to simultaneously run and change any organisation is through six monthly meetings with a representation of all relevant stakeholder groups. Run properly, such meetings result in enormously effective outcomes and the need for less meeting time overall.

However, even if you are not willing to go this far, an interim step is to use what we call the '3x3 rule'. At any meeting make sure that staff include 3 different functions and 3 different levels.

If you hold regular staff meetings, ask yourself whether they are as important as you think. The reason "that's the way we have always done it" is a poor excuse for doing anything. If in doubt, stop holding them and see what happens.

2. Create a pithy positive purpose – This is a maximum of 2 lines that will inform your meeting and hopefully generate some passion from attendees.

3. Clarify the outcomes – Document the outcomes that you think would come from an effective meeting.

4. Consider whom to invite – We have already said it but consider inviting more stakeholders than you normally would.

5. Start on time – Many meeting leaders arrive late to their meetings. This is not only a waste of other's productive time but most importantly sends a signal of disrespect. Barring a personal emergency, there is absolutely no reason for being late to your own meeting. This is an incredibly important aspect of holding effective meetings.

6. State the purpose at the outset – This takes literally 10 seconds but will mean that everybody is on the same wavelength.

7. Set enough time – A common mistake that leaders and facilitators alike make is to try to get done more than what is achievable within a given time frame. Don't make this mistake. If you wish for the meeting to be effective, then it is worth giving the right amount of time to it.

8. If needed, appoint a recorder/secretary – Many find that it is sufficient to record any decisions made and action agreed-upon, and that anything above this is often wasted.

9. If needed, appoint a timekeeper – It is often difficult to keep track of both the meeting and the time. Try this and see the difference it makes. The timekeeper needs to be strong enough to come in when people are approaching and/or over their allocated time.

10. Action from previous meeting – If the meeting is part of a regular series of meetings, recount each of the action plans that were agreed on at the previous meeting and have the responsible person or people indicate where they have got to with it. (This makes it clear that people will be held accountable.)

11. End on time – Again this sends a signal of respect to the attendees. The one exception to this is if *all* attendees agree to extend the finish time.

12. Control what you can, let go what you can't – There are only 2 things you can control in a meeting - the meetings structure and your own behaviour. What you CANNOT control is the behaviour of others or when the group is ready to reveal hidden agendas or when attendees are ready to take responsibility. So stop trying.

13. Hear attendee's interest – A really effective way to start non-regular meetings is to quickly hear from each attendee as to their interest in being at the meeting. Set a time limit (e.g. 1 min per person) and stick to it. Invite people to be open about their reason for attending.

14. Use the Go Around – This involves quickly going around the room and giving each person the opportunity to say how they see the situation. It is very simple but very effective. Again set a time limit (e.g. 2-3 mins each) and strictly stick to the time limit. This is one of the best tips for running effective meetings.

15. Find common ground – A group is more likely to take action to effect change where they have come to some agreement as to the desired future. This usually takes the form of agreement around the strategic areas that require focusing on in order to achieve the purpose.

16. Ask attendees how you can improve future meetings – The best way to do this without it becoming a whinge session is to first ask, "What has worked well in our meetings in the past". Once the group has explored that, then ask "What can we do to make them even more effective".

17. Be willing to an experimenter and learner – Leading highly effective meetings is not easy and not natural. Be open to trying different things and learning from them.

18. Work on your own individual development – In some ways this is probably the most important point. Implementing a lot of the above points requires a combination of internal strength, willpower and humility. As just one example, a good meeting leader opens himself or herself up to criticism and must be willing to be disliked. Getting to this point requires working on one's own growth and development.

19. Action planning – The last step of any meeting should be devoted to action planning – who is going to do what by when.

20. Restate the action – Take the final minutes of the meeting to restate the commitments that people have made.

21. Consider investing in an external facilitator – Where the meeting is important enough, consider whether you would get sufficient return for your money by engaging an external expert facilitator. (You may not only benefit directly from a more effective meeting but also through observation of the facilitator).

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10 Simple Ways to Improve Meetings (including meetings for Two)

Beginnings

1. Be clear about why you're there – Decide on the purpose (overall and for this meeting) and set an agenda. Near the end of each meeting agree on the time, purpose and agenda for the next meeting.
2. Build Relationships – Check that everyone knows everyone else. Help people to see the person behind the role. Don't assume that, because people have worked together for years, that they know each other well. If Possible, for the duration of the meeting, abolish rank and status.
3. Agree on the way you'll work together – Agree on two or three things you'll do to make the meeting constructive and enjoyable. Encourage listening, supportive challenge and cooperation.
4. Take into account anyone who isn't there – Identify the stakeholders who aren't there to look after themselves, involve or communicate to them, and try to take their legitimate needs and wishes into account.

Middles

5. Work to whiteboard or butcher paper – For task meetings build public information as the meeting proceeds. Collect information and decisions on whiteboard or butcher paper. In this way, everybody is working from the same set of information. An electric whiteboard works well.
6. Separate information collection from decision-making – First collect information, preferably without discussion. Then analyse it (or critique if that's useful), Then make the necessary decisions. Then agree about who will do what to implement the decisions. Then agree how to monitor progress.
7. Inform rather than persuade – Be willing to learn from one another. When speaking aim to inform rather than persuade. When listening, put aside your own concerns. Try to understand what it's like to be in the speaker's shoes.
8. Manage the process – If there are more than two of you, appoint someone to manage the process. This person can check that the meeting observes the guidelines and the other process suggestions above.

Endings

9. Check action items – near the end of the meeting, check that everyone knows who has actions to take.
10. Review the process – Set aside a brief time at the end of each meeting to review the process. In particular, how well have you followed the guidelines? Change the guidelines if necessary.



Structure for Formal Meetings

