

Conducting Effective Meetings

by Olivier Serrat

Background

When did you last join a work-related meeting¹ that was productive and fun from beginning to end? That is, a meeting that had lucid objectives² and a well-designed agenda; engaged all participants all the time; made them laugh; reached decisions; clarified follow-up actions; and secured commitment to achieve expected, positive, and constructive outcomes? Can you remember?

Managing Meetings

Meetings are essential in any form of human enterprise.

These days, they are so common that turning the resources they tie up into sustained results is a priority in high-performance organizations. This is because they are potential time wasters: the other persons present may not respect their own time as much as you have come to respect yours, and it is therefore unlikely that they will mind wasting your time.³ Generic actions before, during, and after can make meetings more effective.

Meetings bring people together to discuss a predetermined topic.

However, too many are poorly planned and managed, and therefore fail to satisfy objectives when they do not simply waste time.

The operating expenses of time wasted include related meeting expenditures, salaries, and opportunity costs.



¹ This issue focuses only on programmed meetings of more than two persons.

² Possible aims might be to engage in joint consultation, develop support for action, and resolve problems.

³ Time is a precious asset. (Charles Darwin held that a man who dares to waste 1 hour has not discovered the value of life.) Therefore, it is important to develop a personal sense of time, both to save and spend it wisely. In organizations, the activities that consume time include committees, working groups, and task forces; interviews; discussions; learning and development; telephone conversations; typing; reading; inspecting; traveling; and thinking. It is illuminating to keep a time log and find what a comparatively small percentage of one's time is actually absorbed by the top-priority tasks on one's "to-do" list.

Generic Tips for Meeting Management

Before	During	After
Make sure you need a meeting by asking what would happen if it were not held.	Arrange skilled facilitation to smooth the process of the meeting and deal with conflict, start on schedule, and manage time to keep the meeting focused and moving.	Publish within 24 hours, but preferably on the same working day, concise and definite minutes that record the items discussed, the decisions of the meeting, the actions agreed, and the owners of these. In some cases, the minutes may include the main arguments or steps leading to the decisions.
Develop (and prepublish) a strategic agenda (and related papers) with easily understood objectives listed in order of importance, articulate the process to reach these, and plan the meeting and its ground rules.	Introduce the topics for discussion, use the prework delivered for the meeting, and keep debates relevant to the stated objectives.	Arrange effective meeting follow-up, i.e., who will do what by when.
Ensure appropriate participation at the meeting, with attention to good decision makers and problem solvers, for a maximum of 12 persons but if possible fewer.	Ensure everyone's thoughts and ideas are heard to keep them interested and empowered, use humor to alleviate tension, gain consensus, and involve each participant in actions toward explicit outcomes.	Agree on accountability for preparations toward the next meeting if one is necessary.
Plan, assign, and distribute, prework before the meeting.	Recognize degrees of feelings and changes of opinion, check for quorum, summarize key points of agreement and disagreement, explain rulings, check understanding and acceptance, create an effective follow-up plan, state responsibilities, gain commitment, and close the meeting on time (or even before time) on a positive note and with a sense of gathering.	Evaluate the meeting process for continuous improvement, for example, regarding ground rules, timing and scheduling, agendas, and the drafting of minutes.

Source: Author.

Notes: Before calling a meeting, consider whether the matter might not be dealt better by telephone, electronic mail, or meetings with individuals. Often, 10 minutes spent with six persons individually are more productive than gathering them in a room for 1 hour. If a meeting is to be held, the objectives should be clear, specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound. Preferably, they should also be agreed, challenging, consistent, worthwhile, and participative. Time-honored rules are to raise hands (stay in order) except for points of clarification or process; refrain from interrupting the speaker; keep to the subject; be concise (and avoid repeating others); and be respectful and polite. These days, electronics are to be put on silent mode and no telephone calls are allowed unless one steps out. "Parking lots", i.e., posts on a wall, can be used for issues not on the agenda.

The Chairperson's Role

A good chairperson is essential to the conduct of effective meetings. In any order, expectations are that the chairperson will stimulate and inspire (not dictate), have the right answers, make decisions, and get things done. But what exactly are those skills and qualities that make someone a good chairperson? He or she must be authoritative yet flexible; impartial and impersonal; a quick thinker and an attentive listener; capable of succinct expression; ready to clarify views that have not been well expressed; mature and tolerant; equipped to handle disruption and inappropriate behavior; and courteous, but brisk and business-like. Humor can be a useful tool, if only to calm rising tempers. To manage difficult meetings, an essential characteristic of a good chairperson must surely be “helicopter vision.”⁴

Different Kinds of Meetings

To practice with effect the generic tips for meeting management given above, a chairperson must also act on the knowledge that different kinds of meetings take place in working life. Each has its own nature and challenges (even though any one may have attributes of two or three of these). The kinds of meetings are

- **Briefings.** A briefing is called to direct or instruct. Such meetings are used to give information and instruction to subordinates, clear up misunderstandings, and integrate ideas and views where appropriate.
- **Advisory meetings.** An advisory meeting is called to share information. Such meetings are used to seek advice about a problem, inform participants about ideas, and listen to their views.
- **Committee meetings.** A committee meeting gathers interest groups to decide on matters of common concern. Such meetings are characterized by a sense of authority, compromise, and the resolution of differences by voting.
- **Council meetings.** A council meeting is held by persons of equal status to contribute to a matter at hand. Such meetings are typified by group accountability, the resolution of differences through discussion, and consensual decisions.
- **Negotiations.** A negotiation also sees interest groups gather but decisions are through bargaining, not voting. Such meetings are differentiated by quid pro quo decisions from sides having different but overlapping aims, with each seeking to achieve the best possible terms for itself.

When I give a lecture, I accept that people look at their watches, but what I do not tolerate is when they look at it and raise it to their ear to find out if it stopped.

—Marcel Achard

He who knows most grieves most for wasted time.

—Dante

Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure.

—Confucius

When the outcome of a meeting is to have another meeting, it has been a lousy meeting.

—Herbert Hoover

Time is the scarcest resource; and unless it is managed, nothing else can be managed.

—Peter Drucker

Further Reading

ADB. 2008. *Conducting Successful Retreats*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/conducting-successful-retreats.pdf

———. 2009. *Conducting Effective Presentations*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/conducting-effective-presentations.pdf

John Adair. 1988. *Effective Time Management*. Pan Books.

⁴ “Helicopter vision” is the ability and motivation to examine problems from a different perspective with concurrent attention to their details, place problems within a broader context by detecting relationships with systems of wider scope, and formulate and deliver one’s work accordingly but based on a personal vision.

For further information

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