

How to Run an Effective Meeting

Most people don't like meetings. They say they are boring, go on too long, and don't get anything done. And often that's the truth. So to have a good meeting, you need to make it interesting, keep it on track, and make sure something gets done. Here are eight steps toward making your next meeting a success.



1. Make sure you need to have a meeting. Meetings are needed when a group of people must be involved in an action or a decision. Don't schedule a meeting just because it's time to have one.
2. Set a goal for the meeting. Be very clear about why you're having the meeting, and what needs to get done or be decided. Break that task into steps, or divide the discussion into sections—that's the agenda for your meeting. At the start of the meeting say, this is our goal, and if we can get this done, the meeting will be a success. At the end of the meeting remind them that you achieved your goal. This lets everyone leave feeling successful, and they'll be glad to come to your next meeting.
3. Put decisions to the group. The participants own the meeting. Let them set the agenda before the meeting, or at least add to it when you begin. If decisions need to be made about the process (whether to end a discussion that's going too long, for example) then ask that question to the group.



4. Stay on schedule. Remember that every minute a person spends in your meeting; they could be doing other things. They're with you because they've decided your meeting is important, so treat them like their time is important. Start on time and end on time!
5. Pay attention to what's important. Set a certain amount of time for each item on the agenda, based on how important it is. If the group starts spending a lot of time on details, ask them "Is this what we want to spend our time talking about?" A lot of details can be worked out by individuals or committees—meetings are for the decisions that need to involve the whole group.
6. Keep the meeting on track. Your agenda is the tool you use to make sure you're on time and on the right topic. When side issues come up, help the group get back on track. If the issue sounds important, check with the group. "We're talking about a new issue — is this something important that we should take time to discuss?"
7. Make sure people participate. People think a meeting is useful based on one simple thing: whether or not they talked. So everybody should have a chance to share their ideas. It's

okay to ask specific people what they think! You should also be prepared to gently remind people when they're talking too much.

8. Have good facilitation. The facilitator is the person who runs the meeting and acts on all the steps listed above. It's a big job, and it usually doesn't fit well with participating in the discussion. So if you need to have your views heard, let someone else run the meeting! Good facilitation doesn't just happen—it's a skill that comes with training and practice.

Facilitator's Role

Running a successful meeting will help your group operate efficiently, and provide a worthy experience for all members. As facilitator, you are the key to ensuring that success. Here are some tips:

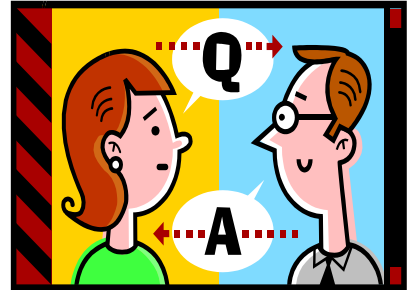
- One of your most important roles is to create a warm and friendly atmosphere so members feel free to express themselves.
- Be interested and enthusiastic--enthusiasm can be contagious. Have a positive attitude!
- Your job as facilitator will take all your attention. You are not a participant as much as you are the "conductor" of the meeting--directing the flow and energy of that meeting. You will be looking at participants' body language, listening carefully to what they say, drawing out those members who are not speaking, and gently moving the meeting along when a member monopolizes conversations. You will not have time to take minutes (and we know how minutes are essential in recording meeting developments and also in reminding you and group members of follow-up actions that are needed). So, be sure to appoint another person to take minutes.



- Set out ground rules for the meeting, including, for example, the expectation that everyone participate, no judgment statements during brainstorming sessions, and that there will be an ending time, and state that time.
 - Keep the discussion on track. The agenda will drive these discussions.
- Pace the meeting and observe specified time limits for agenda items--this will allow everyone a chance to speak and helps insure that all issues on the agenda are covered. However, be sensitive to the need for discussion. Allow the group to talk things through.

If they want more time to discuss an issue, adjust the agenda. Recognize when there is consensus and move on. Be gentle but firm with people who speak too long or get off the subject--a simple "let's move on" or "thanks, now let's hear from someone else" can be very effective.

- Call group members by name. This personalizes the discussion and also assists the recorder in accurately noting who shared their opinions.
- Avoid stating that a person is wrong for any idea or opinion that is expressed; rather ask for other comments and ideas on the subject. Remain open-minded and democratic. Allowing the free flow of expression allows for creative thinking.



- Ask open-ended questions--why and how--to stimulate discussion. Ex. "How to do you think that will impact the project?" instead of, "do you think that will impact the project?" --which dead ends with a "no" or "yes" response.
- Listen carefully to each person. Make sure you understand what the speaker is saying. If you're unsure, try restating it or ask the person to clarify.
- Be certain that the entire group is involved in the discussion. Encourage everyone to speak by simply asking those who haven't spoken for their opinion on the issue at hand.



- Be aware of people who look confused or lost, and restate questions or ideas. Summarize key points when necessary.
- If problems arise, remain neutral and calm. Call on members for assistance and resolution--it shouldn't all be on your shoulders.
- Use appropriate humor--it can release tension and get people talking.
- Summarize conclusions or decisions at the end of the meeting.
- Leave time for questions. Otherwise, your meetings will seem like one-sided dialogues.
- Recognize achievements, big and small. We all want to feel valued.



As the meeting winds down to the end:

- Tie up loose ends. Avoid hasty decisions simply because time has expired.
- Table unresolved issues until the next meeting.
- Plan the next meeting. Set the date, select the place, and develop a preliminary agenda, which should include any unresolved issues from this meeting.

- End the meeting on a positive note. This will also encourage members to follow-up on any actions they've agreed to do.
- An important note: After the meeting ends, review the minutes of the meeting. You are responsible to see that all follow-up plans are put into action-another reason why complete and reliable minutes are so vital.