

What Makes Meetings Productive?

Steps to Use Time Wisely

Effective meetings become the catalyst for results. Ineffective meetings may eventually produce results, but with dissatisfied participants and a tremendous loss of time. Show your respect for participants' time and their involvement by planning ahead for effective meetings.

Start with specific objectives that focus the meeting, setting limits on what will and won't be covered. Make it clear who should attend and what they should accomplish. Write all of this out in a meeting notice or reminder, sent either by e-mail or mail—even a post card will work just fine. Include the objectives with the agenda as well.

A variety of tools and techniques (plus a healthy dose of common sense) can make meetings less painful, more productive and maybe even fun.



Objectives should:

- Be specific
- Avoid words such as discuss or talk
- Use words such as assign, decide, complete, create, produce

Prepare the Agenda

If an objective is a destination, the agenda is how to get there. A written agenda keeps the group focused on the meeting's objectives. Think of it as a promise from the leader that the meeting will reach the desired outcome. For most groups, the agenda helps to manage both the process and the participants by avoiding sidetrack discussion. It can be helpful to assign a specific time to each agenda item to manage the flow of your meeting. Often, attachments further explain the agenda items.

There are several ways to structure an agenda. Every group must decide what format will best meet its needs. One technique is to divide agenda items into three categories, including (1) Action Needed, (2) For Discussion, and (3) Information Only.

Another effective framework is the following:

1. Examine and approve brief, relevant minutes from the last meeting.
2. Add special agenda items.
3. Work on less controversial, easier items.
4. Work on difficult items.
5. Break. (Optional)
6. Work on for-discussion-only items.
7. Distribute information and announcements.
8. Consider any special agenda items if there is sufficient time.
9. Summarize.
10. Adjourn.

Try to send the agenda with its attachments to all group members several days before a meeting. This gives everyone time to become familiar with the business that will be discussed during a meeting.

“Productivity, creativity, efficiency, participation and commitment are results. If you want these results from your meetings, you have to understand the process that produces them. You don't get better at doing something unless you stop to think about what you've been doing—to analyze your process.”

“How to Make your Meetings Work”
Michael Doyle and
David Straus

Group Facilitation Suggestions

1. Distribute tasks among group members for a higher level of participation (e.g. recorder, timekeeper).
2. Call on group members by name when the group is non-participatory.
3. Ask open-ended questions to the group as a whole or to individuals.
4. Act as a referee when group members interrupt or begin to critique ideas.
5. Offer ideas of your own to get the ball rolling.
6. Make eye contact with non-participating individuals.
7. Give praise frequently for all kinds of ideas.

Assign Roles

For most byway meetings, you'll need to determine which roles will make your meetings most effective, such as a Facilitator, Recorder and Timekeeper. You'll need to define the responsibilities of these roles. You'll also need to agree on how and when the roles will be passed on to other members. Will the roles be filled by appointed individuals or volunteers? Will the roles rotate? If so, when?

• Facilitator (Chair)

At the beginning of a meeting, the facilitator is responsible for several tasks. The facilitator begins by calling the meeting to order, welcoming any new members and introducing them to the group, and distributing any handouts and information that were not included in the mailing. The facilitator should then ask for additions and changes to the agenda.

During the meeting, the facilitator's job is to help the group follow its agenda. The facilitator should introduce each agenda item and note points of decision for the group. The facilitator should also make sure that all important information and perspectives are addressed. By encouraging everyone to participate, asking for minority opinions and expressing appreciation for sincere contributions, the facilitator sets a positive example for all group members.

If the discussion wanders too far from the subject at hand, the facilitator might suggest forming subcommittees or moving the discussion to another time. The facilitator should try to deal with any threats to the effective working of the group. This might mean mediating disagreements or referring to group rules. If the facilitator is not comfortable with these situations, he or she can look to other members of the group for assistance.

Before adjourning, the facilitator should summarize the meeting's accomplishments and the tasks that members agreed to accomplish before the next meeting. This avoids confusion, clarifies responsibilities and reduces the possibility that members might forget assignments. The facilitator should ask for issues and agenda items for the next meeting. The facilitator concludes the meeting by checking calendars and setting the next meeting date.

- **Recorder (Secretary)**

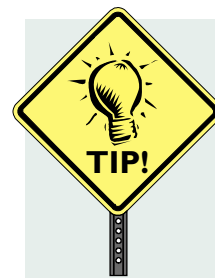
The recorder is responsible for taking notes at a group meeting and typing those notes for the group members. The final format should follow that of the agenda, with topic headings identified. Topics of discussion, decisions made, action items, responsible parties and timelines should all be recorded.

- **Timekeeper**

The timekeeper makes sure that there is enough time to accomplish the items listed in the agenda. The group shouldn't rush through important decisions at the end of a meeting, which frustrates everyone (especially those who planned presentations or discussions).

At the beginning of the meeting, the timekeeper should make sure that appropriate time periods are set for each agenda item. Plan some extra time into the agenda, just in case. The timekeeper should check that the number of agenda items is manageable. If too many agenda items have been submitted, the timekeeper should ask the group to prioritize the items. Items that are assigned a low priority should move to a later meeting.

During the meeting, the timekeeper should assist the facilitator in keeping the discussion on track and indicate when to finish a discussion. If an issue requires further discussion, the group should decide whether to postpone a decision and move on, or spend extra time at that meeting.



Doughnuts and Coffee

Professional meeting planners know that attention to detail is the key to successful events. The smallest details can make or break a meeting. Factors such as the right lighting, food, room arrangement and seating can contribute greatly to the success of your meeting. Create an environment that encourages networking and participation.

Flip Chart Pointers

When groups are brainstorming, it's helpful to capture the concepts and key points on a flip chart. This way everyone has a visual reminder of the ideas that develop. This can help spur additional discussion.

- Use the participants' words whenever possible; avoid summarizing
- If you must summarize, check with the speaker for accuracy
- Prompt participants to complete or clarify their thoughts
- Write large enough for people to read from a distance
- Write down everything but don't put too many words on a page
- Title and/or number each sheet
- Tear off sheets and post sheets on a wall as they are used
- Use marker colors that are easy to see (red, black, green, purple)
- After the meeting, collect the flip charts and type up the notes to send with the meeting notes

Developed through the Nor'easter Project, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission

Brainstorming

Often meetings will involve brainstorming as a way to generate new ideas to address a problem or solution.

Since brainstorming may be a departure from the group's usual discussion format, it may be helpful to review the process. Some strategies for successful brainstorming are:

1. Put aside all judgments and evaluations.
Clarifying questions are okay.
2. The wilder the ideas, the better. Be creative.
3. Think aloud.
4. Build on someone else's idea; make it bigger and better.
5. Do not critique ideas or suggestions.
6. Do not play "devil's advocate" yet.
7. Record all suggestions and ideas on flip chart, so everyone can see them.
8. Generate as many ideas as possible. Go for quantity!

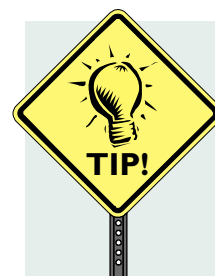
With these tips in mind, participation increases and the meeting is more likely to yield positive results.

The group should agree on brainstorming guidelines before the discussion begins so the facilitator feels free to remind people when they have gotten off track.

Evaluate Your Meetings

At the end of meetings, take the opportunity to reflect on what the group has learned, what is working well and what could be improved. Pay attention to people that seemed frustrated with certain aspects of the meeting. Meeting evaluations can be verbal or written.

1. Set aside a few minutes at the end of meetings for de-briefing.
2. Ask what was useful and how meetings could be improved.
3. Give everyone the opportunity to comment.
4. Write down anything the group would like to change for the next meeting.
5. Incorporate the agreed upon changes in subsequent meetings. ★



Move Ahead after Meetings

Groups sometimes struggle with action following meetings. Good ideas may be left hanging if follow-up assignments are not clear. To ensure results:

- The facilitator should summarize assignments and due dates at the end of the meeting.
- Meeting minutes should list action items and be distributed in a timely manner.
- Before the next meeting, the byway leader or committee chair should check on the progress of assignments and offer assistance, if needed.
- At the next meeting, provide time for updates on tasks and assignments.

Even though flip charts are low tech, they are reliable and don't require any special skills for use. Flip charts are a quick way to capture meeting decisions, action items and ideas during a brainstorming session. Some groups use a separate flip chart as a "Parking Lot" to record side issues or items that fall outside of the current meeting's agenda.

Behaviors in a team that:



Help

- Being on time and prepared
- Sticking to the agenda
- Listening to understand, speaking to be understood
- Speaking clearly about what you think and feel
- Building on ideas from others
- Criticizing ideas, but not people
- Providing leadership (if needed) without threatening the facilitator
- Following through on agreements
- Paying attention
- Volunteering, not waiting to be asked
- Being open and flexible
- Maintaining a sense of humor
- Honoring the confidentiality of the group process
- Supporting group decisions
- Taking responsibility to voice concerns and ideas



Hinder

- Missing meetings or showing up late
- Engaging in side conversations
- Complaining with no solutions offered
- Talking too much
- Using humor to avoid honest discussion
- Interrupting
- Not participating in discussions and decisions
- Talking off topic