

How to Run a Meeting

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There is little that is more frustrating than attending a meeting that has a hidden or unclear objective, drags on forever, and accomplishes very little. Unfortunately this is more the norm than the exception. Studies show that 75 percent of the time people spend in meetings is wasted.

In most organizations there is a lot of discussion about improving meetings, yet meeting best practices are rarely followed. If anything, it seems the frequency of meetings continues to increase, but not their effectiveness. People continue to think its no big deal to bring people together to sort out an issue or share information without any preparation. What they don't realize is that with just a little more thought and planning, the meeting and its outcome could be greatly improved.

Here are twenty-five best practices I've found that make meetings not only more productive, but engaging and likely to produce tangible results:

- 1. Objective:** Develop a clear meeting objective and state it in the meeting invitation. Start with the end in mind and communicate what the successful conclusion will look like and what it will accomplish.
- 2. Attendees:** Identify the people who need to attend the meeting. The most important attendees include the person who set the meeting's objective, those who need to be involved in making any decisions, and those who will ensure the decisions are implemented.
- 3. Invitation:** In the meeting invitation, state the specific meeting time, date, location, attire, prerequisites, and other relevant meeting logistical information.
- 4. Background:** Provide relevant background information to all attendees prior to the meeting so everyone has the same level of understanding. This might include attendee biographies, history of the problem, or the data that led to its discovery. If appropriate, host a pre-meeting for those that need additional information.
- 5. Notice:** Give sufficient notice for any meeting prerequisites. Don't expect someone to come prepared to give a presentation if they were only given an hour's notice.
- 6. Facilities:** Choose a venue that is appropriate for the meeting agenda. Check out the facilities prior to the meeting. Ensure the venue is free of distractions and the necessary equipment is operational.
- 7. Start:** Start the meeting on time. Don't punish those that arrive on time by waiting for those that don't.
- 8. Handout:** Provide the attendees with a meeting outline or handout. Include the agenda, objective, and relevant background information. Leave space for people to take notes.
- 9. Agenda:** At the beginning of the meeting, review the agenda and the approach to be used in reaching the desired meeting outcome. Gain consensus on both before moving forward.
- 10. Scope:** Outline any constraints limiting the scope of the meeting. Let people know about any areas they are not to concern themselves with. Mention any resource limitations or other factors that need to be taken into consideration.
- 11. Climate:** Set the meeting climate. Establish the expected level of cooperation, discussion, urgency, responsibility, and honesty. Help people understand the impact and level of responsibility associated with the outcome.
- 12. Ground Rules:** Maintain meeting focus by establishing, communicating, and enforcing meeting ground rules. Maintain the schedule, time allotments, and topic focus. Create a parking lot to capture topics to be covered at a later time. Ensure that opinions are not misrepresented as facts.
- 13. Scribe:** Assign a meeting scribe to record attendee names, important points, key decisions, specific actions, due dates, and owners. Don't leave important details up to people's inherently unreliable memory.



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- 14. Introductions:** Introduce guests and ensure everyone in attendance knows the other attendees. Have everyone introduce themselves if there are a majority of attendees that don't know each other.
- 15. Sponsor:** Ensure the meeting sponsor is in the meeting or available by phone to kick it off. If unavailable, have the sponsor prepare a short video.
- 16. Time:** Put a time limit on discussions and brainstorming exercises. Ask people to be aware of and respectful of the time. Provide gentle reminders to speakers and facilitators.
- 17. Buy-In:** Gauge buy-in and check for understanding at each step of the meeting. Don't let unresolved issues build-up and impact subsequent steps.
- 18. Decisions:** When making decisions, be on alert for biases that prevent objectivity. Foster constructive challenge and debate to offset them. Challenge people to think with an open mind.
- 19. Format:** Keep any monologs to a brief minimum. Studies show that people can only hold their attention on a topic for a few minutes. Make the meeting content as interactive as possible. Use questions and sub-group discussions to keep people engaged.
- 20. Content:** Utilize guest speakers, multimedia, stories, examples, diagrams, and visual aides to keep the content engaging. Maintain a quick pace and proper balance of detail.
- 21. Summary:** At closing, summarize the decisions made and specific actions to be taken. Include important details such as the due dates and assigned owners. Ask if there are any unresolved issues that need to be discussed before adjourning.
- 22. Schedule:** Be respectful of time commitments. Keep meeting breaks at the agreed upon times and end the meeting on time. People have conference calls, additional meetings, and other commitments they've scheduled that they need to get to.
- 23. Notes:** Transcribe the notes from the meeting and send them out to the meeting participants soon after the meeting is over. Ask people to reply back with any revisions if they find any inaccuracies. If the notes are updated, send out the revised version highlighting the changes that were made.
- 24. Follow-Up:** Track the meeting actions and follow-up as necessary to ensure they are completed. For recurring meetings such as staff meetings and quarterly reviews, review the status of the prior meeting's action items at the beginning of each meeting to confirm completion and progress.
- 25. Ongoing Hosting:** Rotate the responsibility for hosting recurring meetings among the regular attendees to maintain diversity and distribute the workload. Within reasonable limits, allow people to make meetings interesting.

Follow these best practices and make your meetings more meaningful than maddening.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.activatingyourambition.com), and president of Alpine Link Corporation (www.alpinelink.com), a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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