

How to Run a Meeting

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There is little that is more frustrating than attending a meeting that has a hidden objective (unintentionally or otherwise), drags on forever, and accomplishes very little. And for good reason. Studies have shown that 75% of the time people spend in meetings is wasted. Many meetings add little value and in addition to wasting time, they often create non-value adding work that requires additional time which further subtracts efficiency from the organization.

There has been much written about improving meetings. Yet meeting best practices are rarely followed. Meetings occur in conference rooms and other venues daily that waste valuable human effort and company resources. Many believe it is a simple matter of bringing people together to sort out an issue or share information. What they don't realize is that with just a little more thought and preparation, the meeting and its outcome can 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 that need to attend the meeting including the person who set the meeting's objective and those who need to be involved in making any decisions to be made. Invite those who are impacted by the decisions, need to be informed about the decisions, and will implement the decisions. Include others depending on the need such as meeting facilitators, scribes, speakers, and guests.
3. **Invitation:** In the meeting invitation, state the specific time, date, location, attire, prerequisites, and other relevant information. Provide links to hotels, maps, and other reference documents so attendees don't have to spend time trying to find them on their own.
4. **Background:** Provide any relevant background information to all attendees prior to the meeting so everyone has the same level of understanding coming into the meeting. Background information could include everyone's biographies, history of the problem being investigated, or the data that led to the discovery of the problem. If appropriate, host a pre-meeting for those that need additional information.
5. **Notice:** Give sufficient notice for any meeting prerequisites such as creating a presentation, analyzing data, reading a report, or taking a survey.
6. **Facilities:** Check out the meeting facilities prior to the meeting. Ensure the venue is free of distractions and has the necessary equipment and supplies needed.
7. **Start:** Start the meeting on time. Don't punish those that arrive on time by waiting for those who don't.
8. **Handout:** Provide everyone with a meeting outline or handout. It should include the agenda, objective, and relevant background information. Leave room for people to take notes. The process of preparing the handout also helps you in structuring your thoughts and converting vague ideas into specific ones.
9. **Agenda:** At the beginning of the meeting, review the agenda and if it's not obvious, gain consensus on the approach you plan to use to reach the meeting objective.
10. **Scope:** Outline any constraints limiting the scope of the meeting, resources to be made available, or other factors that need to be taken into consideration during the meeting.
11. **Climate:** Set the meeting climate. Establish the expected level of collaboration, discussion, urgency, responsibility, transparency, etc.



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- 12. Ground Rules:** Maintain meeting control by establishing, communicating, and enforcing the meeting's ground rules. Quickly deal with grandstanding, topic hopping, and other issues. Create a "parking lot" to keep track of topics to be covered at a later time. Ensure that opinions are not misrepresented as facts.
- 13. Scribe:** Have a scribe assigned to record key points, specific actions, due dates, and owners. Don't leave important details up to unreliable memory recall.
- 14. Introductions:** Introduce guests and ensure everyone in attendance knows the other meeting attendees and their purpose for attending. Have everyone introduce themselves if there are attendees that don't know each other.
- 15. Sponsor:** If a meeting is being held on an executive sponsor's request, ensure the sponsor is in the meeting or available by phone to kick it off. Worst case, have them produce a short video that can be shown at the beginning of the meeting.
- 16. Time:** Put a time limit on discussions and brainstorming exercises. Ask people to be aware of and respect the time. Provide gentle reminders to speakers and facilitators.
- 17. Buy-In:** Gauge buy-in and understanding at each step of the meeting. Don't let unresolved issues build-up and derail subsequent steps.
- 18. Decisions:** When making decisions, look out for typical biases such as the information availability bias, sunk cost bias, status quo bias, own position confirmation bias, primacy effect, and recency effect. Challenge people to keep an open mind. Foster constructive debate.
- 19. Format:** Keep the monologs to a brief minimum. Studies show that people can only hold their attention for a few minutes. Make the material interactive. Use exercises, role plays, questions, and discussion to break up the format and keep people engaged.
- 20. Content:** Use guest speakers, multi-media, pictures, stories, examples, frameworks, games, and visual aides to keep the content engaging.
- 21. Responsibility:** Rotate the hosting of recurring meetings among the regular attendees to maintain diversity and share responsibility. Within defined constraints, allow people to make meetings interesting.
- 22. Summary:** At closing, summarize the agreed upon key points and the specific actions to be taken including due dates, owners, and implementers. Ask if there are any unresolved issues that need to be discussed before adjourning.
- 23. Schedule:** Maintain the agreed upon schedule including breaks. End the meeting on time. People have conference calls and other commitments they've scheduled.
- 24. Notes:** Transcribe the key points from the meeting notes and send them out to all 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.
- 25. 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 to confirm completion and progress.

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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