

5.02 Effective meetings

Meetings are an integral part of our working lives. A meeting is arguably the best way to share knowledge and to work together to develop better ideas than what would be possible individually.

What constitutes a "good" meeting?

Some of the usual characteristics are clarity about the purpose of the meeting, a common objective, an effective chairperson, participants well prepared, participation by all attendees, constructive discussion around issues and a clear way forward for everyone leaving the meeting. In addition, some people refer to a structured agenda, clear roles and time slots for each topic.

So, what goes wrong at a lot of meetings?

Why do we leave feeling tired, frustrated, despondent that we have just wasted time when we have so much to do?

Common complaints about meetings are:

- It went on far too long - no effective chairperson in place, someone talked too long
- Uneven attention to issues - too much attention to the first couple of items on the agenda, leaving no time for the final points
- Not controlled - more than one discussion going on in the room at the same time
- People coming unprepared
- No agenda, making it a "free for all"
- No time constraint, so the meeting fills the space until people decide they have to go
- Poor punctuality - meaning that most people wasted time waiting for others...

What we do to make our meetings more productive?

Here are a few of the basics - we all know this stuff - it's more about putting it into practice.

1. Plan

What's the purpose of the meeting?

Who needs to attend?

Where should it be held, given the numbers and the location of the participants?

When should it be held, given the logistics?

2. Inform

Let everyone know when the meeting is, its purpose, who is coming, the agenda, what is expected from whom in terms of progress and materials to share.

3. Prepare

An agenda

Chairperson if it is not the organiser

4. Structure and control

Make sure there is an agenda and a time allocated to the meeting

Nominate a chairperson if this has not been done already

Decide on timings for each item, have someone monitor the time and try to stick to the timings as much as possible

Try not to go back over old ground

5. Summarise and record

Make sure everyone knows what is expected of them before they leave the meeting. If necessary, circulate an action list by e-mail.

If the meeting is more formal, nominate someone to write the minutes. If you are writing the minutes, do it as soon as possible after the meeting, so you can remember the main points (and can still understand your shorthand!)

Some tips for speaking at meetings:

1. Clarify your objective - what is the point you want to make? This makes it easier for the listener to tune in
2. Keep your contributions short - helps to keep people interested and less likely to interrupt than if they know you are likely to talk for ten minutes! It also means that you are less likely to get bogged down in detail.
3. Be clear and logical - emphasise the important points
4. Check understanding - to make sure you have managed to get your message across
5. Be animated - this keeps interest. Of course, don't do too far and distract people from your key messages.
6. Avoid emotive phrases - particularly if the situation is sensitive
7. Summarise your main message - vital if you have been speaking for a long time.

(adapted from: www.thebusyexec.com/pro_development/s_co_me.htm)