

HOW TO AVOID MEETINGS THAT ARE A CHORE OR A BORE - A HANDY GUIDE FOR PLANNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS¹

How many times have you sat through a meeting in abject boredom, wondering what the purpose was and desperately wishing you were elsewhere? If you are organising or calling a meeting, would you know the common pitfalls to avoid so you don't inflict the same pain on others?

A critical determinant of the success of your meeting occurs before it even takes place – in the preparation stage. This handy guide sets out some key guidelines to follow before any meeting to ensure you maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of meetings you organise.

Knowing Your Objectives

1. Always be clear about the purpose of a meeting from the outset.
2. If an issue can be resolved without a meeting, cancel the meeting.
3. Consider what would happen if a regular meeting were not held.
4. All parties should be informed at an early stage if they will be dealing with confidential issues in a meeting since this may affect the approach of the participants. If an agenda will contain a mixture of confidential and non-confidential items, ensure that the status of each item is made clear to all of the participants in advance.
5. Ask yourself the following questions before even deciding to have a meeting:
 - a. Is the purpose of the meeting clear to everyone?
 - b. Who needs to attend the meeting?
 - c. Does everyone need to attend the entire meeting?
 - d. Is there a better way of addressing issues than having a meeting?
 - e. What needs to be prepared for or distributed in advance of the meeting to make it more productive/effective?

Achieving Your Objectives

6. Preparing an Agenda is a must! How?
 - a. Keep it short and simple (KISS!) – 1 page if possible
 - b. Discuss most important items early in proceedings when participants are most alert
 - c. Ensure the chairperson is informed of any agenda changes
 - d. Specify the date, time, place and purpose
 - e. Wherever possible, include the time for each item as the time allocated for each item is often indicative of its priority
 - f. Be generous with time allocation – ending early is better than over-running

¹ A good practical guide on this subject, including checklists and self-evaluation exercises, is "*Essential Manager's Manual*" by Robert Heller & Tim Hindle, Dorling Kindersley, 1998.

7. Using the agenda as a tool to achieve buy-in:
 - a. Distribute a draft agenda to all attendees, inviting their suggestions for other items
 - b. Incorporate suggestions in next draft where time permits and if these do not detract from meeting objectives
 - c. Re-circulate the final agenda to all attendees as far in advance of the meeting as possible
 - d. Do not present participants with a revised agenda only when they arrive at the meeting, unless absolutely necessary. If this cannot be avoided, always explain last minute revisions before proceeding with the meeting.
8. As participants:
 - a. Ensure you know the meeting objectives and why you have been invited to attend
 - b. Work out what you want to say before a meeting begins:
 - i. Conduct research
 - ii. Identify supporters and dissenters
 - iii. Contact other participants before a meeting if necessary to canvass support on issues or sound out their views
 - c. Brief other participants about relevant problem issues before the meeting

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