



Every day 83 million people attend 11.5 million meetings

Do you dread attending meetings because they are dull, unproductive, disorganized and too long? With proper planning and preparation, any meeting can be effective and enjoyable. Meetings have several functions. They give members a chance to discuss and evaluate goals and objectives, keep updated on current events, provide a chance to communicate and keep the group cohesive. But most of all, meetings allow groups to pull resources together for decision making. If the facilitator starts with a careful plan and finishes with a thorough follow-up, the meeting will "run smooth."

Meetings can make or break your group. If your meetings are well prepared and facilitated in an efficient manner, they'll help strengthen your group. On the other hand, if your meetings are poorly planned and poorly run, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to advance your group's goal.

There are two major parts to every meeting that influence one another:

- Content
 - What the meeting is about

- Process
 - How the meeting is managed
 - How attendees participate
 - What is achieved

Poor meeting management can derail even the most interesting content. Poor content can cause loss of interest and action by bored participants.

Types of Meetings

The meeting objective determines the most effective way to conduct a meeting. Most meetings fall into one of three categories:

Problem Solving: The objective of a problem-solving meeting is to discuss an issue or conflict and determine how to solve it. Participants should be briefed about the problem ahead of time so that only a short review is needed in the meeting and the majority of the time can be spent determining how to solve the problem. Participants should leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what the next steps are and who is going to perform them.

Brainstorming Meeting: The objective of a brainstorming meeting is to produce new ideas about a specific topic. Participants should be told the objective and their role in advance of the session. Background materials, if available, should be distributed in advance. The tone of the meeting should be loose and informal. A facilitator is recommended.

Informational Meeting: The objective of an informational meeting is to provide or receive information about a specific idea or important matter. When scheduling an informational meeting, the first question to ask is "is this meeting necessary?" Or could another form of communication such as email, a memo, or voice-mail be used instead? If a meeting is necessary, be sure the participants have a clear understanding of the objective and are provided with an agenda.

There are three basic steps to running effective meetings:

- preparation
- facilitation
- follow-up

Before The Meeting

1. Define the purpose of the meeting. Every meeting must have a purpose. A meeting is not always the most effective way to communicate. Before planning, scheduling, or accepting an invitation to a meeting, ask these questions:

- Why are we calling people together?
- Is a meeting the most effective/efficient means?
- Would a memo/email/call suffice?
- Is there a need/desire for group interaction?
- What would happen if we didn't meet?
- What is the purpose of this meeting?
- What will the group be doing?
- What action will be taken?
- What are the desired outcomes?
- Can someone else help facilitate?

2. Develop an agenda. Distribute the agenda and circulate background material, lengthy documents or articles prior to the meeting so meeting members will be prepared and feel involved and up-to-date.

Use these questions to plan the agenda:

- List of attendees: Have you invited everyone who should be there? Have you invited anyone who doesn't really need to be there?
- Agenda item 1, 2, 3, etc. (time frame): What is your major objective for each item? Is there someone who should lead the discussion? Is there any special way decisions will be made? List each agenda and time frame separately.
- Materials/special equipment needed: What should people bring with them to be prepared for the meeting? Including this enhances participation.

3. Choose an appropriate meeting time. Set a time limit and stick to it, if possible. Remember, members have other commitments. They will be more likely to attend meetings if you make them productive, predictable and as short as possible.
4. Select an appropriate Venue. Choose a location suitable to your group's size. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression.
5. If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other, i.e., a circle or semi-circle. For large groups, try U-shaped rows.
6. Use visual aids for interest (e.g., posters, diagrams, etc.). Post a large agenda up front to which members can refer.
7. Vary meeting places if possible to accommodate different members. Be sure everyone knows where and when the next meeting will be held.
8. Select Duration of the meeting. Be careful not to fall into the trap that meetings have to start on the hour (or half hour) and last in 30 or 60minute intervals. Schedule a 20 or 40 minute meeting if that is the amount of time needed to cover the topic.

During the Meeting

1. Greet members and make them feel welcome, even late members when appropriate.
2. If possible, serve light refreshments; they are good icebreakers and make your members feel special and comfortable.
3. Start on time. End on time.
4. Review the agenda and set priorities for the meeting.
5. Stick to the agenda.
6. Encourage group discussion to get all points of view and ideas. You will have better quality decisions as well as highly motivated members; they will feel that attending meetings is worth their while.
7. Ask *How* Questions.
8. Encourage feedback. Ideas, activities and commitment to the organization improve when members see their impact on the decision making process.
9. Keep conversation focused on the topic. Feel free to ask for only constructive and non- repetitive comments. Tactfully end discussions when they are getting nowhere or becoming destructive or unproductive. Avoid Disruptions.
 - Are discussions on target?
 - What refocusing strategies do you need to use?
 - Encourage conflict to be expressed openly and direct it toward decision making
 - Focus on desired outcome(s)
 - What progress was made?
 - What remains to be done?
 - Develop a written action list before closing the meeting

10. Keep minutes of the meeting for future reference in case a question or problem arises.

11. As a leader, be a role model by listening, showing interest, appreciation and confidence in members. Admit mistakes.

12. If the purpose of a meeting is to reach a decision:

Do:

- Establish how decisions will be made early on
- Communicate this as part of the objective
- Attempt to reach consensus if possible
- Record all decisions reached

Don't:

- Unduly try to influence decisions made
- Leave decision-making to chance
- Leave decisions unmade without follow-up plan

13. Summarize agreements reached and end the meeting on a unifying or positive note. For example, have members volunteer thoughts of things they feel have been good or successful or reiterate the organization's mission.

14. Focus on:

- What you do – Not who you are.
- Here and Now – Not then and there.

15. Avoid negativity and politics. While these are present in all organizations, an effective meeting focuses on what *can* be done and not what can't.

16. Set a date, time and place for the next meeting.

After the Meeting

1. Write up and distribute minutes within 3 or 4 days. Quick action reinforces importance of meeting and reduces errors of memory.
2. Discuss any problems during the meeting with other officers; come up with ways improvements can be made.
3. Follow-up on delegation decisions. See that all members understand and carry-out their responsibilities.
4. Give recognition and appreciation to excellent and timely progress.
5. Put unfinished business on the agenda for the next meeting.
6. Conduct a periodic evaluation of the meetings. Note any areas that can be analysed and improved for more productive meetings.



Meeting Evaluation Checklist

The meeting was well planned

- Members were notified in advance
- There was a pre-arranged agenda
- Officers and committees were ready to report
- The meeting room was pre-arranged

The meeting was well organised

- The meeting started on time
- Guests were introduced and welcomed
- Agendas were available for all members
- The purposes for the meeting were made clear
- There was a transition from the last meeting
- One topic was discussed at a time
- One person has the floor at a time
- Discussion was relevant
- The chairperson summarised the main points of the discussion
- The meeting moved along at a workable pace
- Committee assignments were complete and clear
- Plans for the next meeting were announced
- All that was planned for the meeting was covered

Participation in the meeting

- Members participated in discussion and voting
- The chairperson made good use of questions
- The pros and cons of all issues were considered
- Members gave suggestions to committees
- Responsibilities were evenly distributed
- Members participated in planning the agenda for the next meeting

The value of the meeting

- Progress was made toward goals
- Something was learned

Attitude of the meeting

- Attendance was good
- Everyone present was on time
- Members knew one another
- There was a "warm up" period before the meeting
- There was some humour during the meeting
- Members and officers helped one another when needed
- There was an atmosphere of free expression

Resources:

- Amnesty International – Successful Meetings
- University of Oregon, Leadership Resource Office
- Matt Cameron, and Cheryl Azevedo Johnson – Santa Clara University
- "Achieving Effective Meetings – Not Easy But Possible" by Bradford D. Smart. Santa Clara University
- Tacoma University – Student Life