

# The leaders' guide to having effective meetings

Every organization has them, but not everyone does them well.

Conducting effective meetings is a skill that can easily be learned, and it's the mark of a great leader.

Effective meetings aren't that difficult to plan and pull off. They are one part organization, one part charisma, and one part timekeeping.

Remember these basic skills to making your meetings effective:

## **Number one: Begin on time.**

It's one of the true hallmarks of a great leader. Begin your meetings on time, each time. If twenty people attend a meeting, and you start that meeting 10 minutes late, all you have to do is work the math: Ten times 20 equals 200. That's 200 minutes wasted! Start a meeting 10 minutes late, and, assuming your staff is busy and organized, you've killed over an hour-and-a-half right there. When you start meetings late, people become accustomed to your lax attitude. It reflects on your leadership abilities. People decide you care more about yourself than them.

On the rare occasion where you run late, call in and have the meeting get underway without you. It's the rare staff who needs their leader there all of the time, particularly if you have prepared the staff well.

## **Number two: Determine the meeting's purpose.**

A meeting without a purpose will rarely accomplish anything. Begin with the end in mind, and work toward that end. If the reason for the meeting is simply for better communication among departments, that's a noble goal, but it's not an excuse to just sit around and talk. Determine a purpose, and work toward the purpose. Assign individuals to prepare information ahead of the meeting, so you don't waste time scavenging for it at meeting time. If new issues come up, unless it's something simple that can be dealt with right now, you're usually better off calling a short meeting later on, with a preset task, and a group of people optimized for the task you need.

## **Number three: Set an agenda.**

After the purpose is defined, set an agenda for the meeting. Query the staff members who will be in attendance, to see if they have any issues relating to the

topic. Make your assignments at this time, and give each staff member a time limit. Write the time limit on the agenda.

**Number four: Trust your group members.**

It's the rare leader who has all the answers, and the more rare one who actually believes he or she does. True leaders learn to trust their employees. True leaders usually listen more than they talk. Effective leadership includes a give-and-take environment, where ideas can flourish, and resolutions can be reached, especially in meetings.

**Number five: Enforce time limits, and know when to adjust them.**

One of the most important aspects to conducting great meetings is to set a time limit for each item, and then enforce that time limit. If the discussion is widening out to where it seems like it'll take quite a while, form a team to deal with the item and report back to the larger group. That said, effective leaders know that sometimes time limits need to be extended or contracted. Don't let an item overextend its welcome on your agenda, and don't cut off productive discussions too soon, when it looks like a breakthrough is imminent.

**Number six: Keep good minutes, but don't be bound to them.**

I've been in a lot of meetings where half the meeting was spent talking about the "minutes" of the previous meeting. Always remember the traditional definition of a meeting: "An event where the minutes are kept and the hours are lost." Don't be bound to the past. Examine the previous meetings' minutes at the time the agenda is formulated, and add whatever items are still in need of work. Pass out copies of the minutes to people soon after the meeting has been held, and refer people to those minutes as necessary -- but don't be bound by them. Minutes are used to serve you -- not the other way around. Rather than traditional minutes, do "action items" and summaries.

**Number seven: Keep the meetings short, sweet, and to the point.**

It's rare to find a meeting longer than a half hour that actually accomplishes anything. Keep your meetings short -- certainly less than an hour, preferably a half hour or less. Proper meeting techniques will help you keep your meetings short, and keep your staff invigorated; and short meetings will force you to keep yourself and your staff on track.

Always set an ending time for a meeting -- and stick to it. People have lives, and they don't want to be stuck in the conference room all day, smelling the fumes from the whiteboard markers. If the meeting runs out of agenda items, then close the meeting.

I used to date a woman whose office had a Monday morning meeting. This meeting started at 8:30 a.m. and tended to run all day long. They had other meetings like this during the week, as well. Needless to say, this office was not

one of the most efficient offices in the organization. When you have meetings without predefined ending times, you get meetings that never end.

**Number eight: Follow up on the topics discussed, before the next meeting.**

Effective leaders follow up -- and they follow up soon enough to keep the topic alive. Follow up on each topic, and then report back to the group using e-mail or written memos.

**Number nine: Use the meeting as a motivational tool.**

Great leaders teach and motivate at every chance. Even the common office meeting can be such a chance -- through teaching a new skill, communicating a vision, or recognizing individual achievements. Don't let such things get away from you -- they easily can dominate a meeting time; but sometimes schedule meetings that are nothing but motivational training.

**Number ten: Don't "hold court."**

Some meeting-heads will use the meeting as an excuse to show how great they are. True leaders are recognized by the members of their organization as leaders -- they don't have to "hold court" to show themselves off.

Meetings can be either a shining star or a black hole. As the leader, it's up to you to determine which it will become. Choose the black hole, and everything in the company will be sucked right into it, never to emerge again. Choose the shining star, and you give light and energy to the company at large.

Choose wisely.

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