

**Title: We Have to Start Meeting Like This! The art of great meetings.**

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**Preview:** In this publication you will learn...

- ◆ How to prepare for meetings
- ◆ Ideas for conducting a meeting
- ◆ How to follow up a meeting for maximum results.

**I. Introduction:**

We've all been in meetings that could not end soon enough and in other meetings where much was accomplished and people felt good about it. Good meetings don't just happen; they require planning, preparation and with a little time and practice, skills that group leaders and members can learn.

When meetings are fair, open and honest, the opportunity for healthy discussion and meaningful results is increased significantly. Being fair means:

- ◆ Providing opportunities for people to participate in ways that work well for them by scheduling meetings at convenient times- with advance notice
- ◆ Being prepared to apply ground rules without bias in the meeting.
- ◆ Accommodating individuals with special access needs.
- ◆ Making room for different communication styles so everyone has a chance to participate.
- ◆ Making sure the people who are affected by your group's decisions are involved whenever possible in making those decisions.

Being open means:

- ◆ The meeting process is straightforward, understandable, and explained verbally and in writing.
- ◆ The only agenda is the one in front of the group.
- ◆ Participants understand their roles in the meeting.
- ◆ There is a safe environment for the exchange of ideas, with agreed-upon and enforced ground rules to support people and their ideas.

Within the context of meetings, honest means:

- ◆ Telling the truth.
- ◆ Posting desired meeting outcomes up front.
- ◆ Eliminating hidden agendas; topics are addressed openly.
- ◆ Taking everyone's input at face value.
- ◆ Asking for input only when decisions have yet to be made.
- ◆ Promising what you can deliver. (Simon-Brown, 1998)

**II. Preparing for Your Meetings**

Taking time to involve others in crafting a well thought-out agenda is time well spent. A meeting agenda is your group's road map from beginning to end with all

the steps in between for reaching your meeting outcomes. Here are some ideas for developing an effective agenda as a key tool for effective meetings.

### **1. Send out an advance agenda prior to the meeting to...**

- ensure that important business is not overlooked.
- remind people of the meeting.
- help members identify important items and prepare to discuss them.
- help members focus on issues, to contribute, and to feel a sense of progress.
- ensure meetings start on time, move forward and stop on time.

### **2. Detail your agenda**

- Elaborate on the expected action for each item; is the agenda item for...
  - information – an update not requiring discussion.
  - discussion – members can be prepared to explore the issue as a group.
  - decision – that requires group action.
- Identify the person responsible for an item by listing their name and amount of time they need next to the agenda item.
- Arrange the agenda items in order of priority knowing that the early part of a meeting is usually the liveliest, and the order of items influences the meeting atmosphere. Information items are usually brief, requiring no group action and can be placed first or last on the agenda. Decision items are best placed early on the agenda when the energy level is highest.
- Distribute copies of the agenda so all can follow along and support the group chair in managing the meeting.
- Be flexible with the agenda and open to revision based on the group's will to proceed as planned or the group's need to change course.
- Start and end on time unless the group renegotiates a different ending time. If a meeting time cannot be extended, decide which items to defer for the next meeting agenda.

### **3. Arrange for facilities and materials**

- When individuals are comfortable and relaxed, they tend to be more productive in meetings.
- Whenever possible, hold meetings where the space is comfortable with good seating, lighting, air circulation, open visibility and the atmosphere is informal. Arrive early to set up the space so it will work for you.
- Healthy food and beverages are almost always appreciated and contribute to an inviting setting.
- If group members are unfamiliar with each other, nametags or table name cards with large, dark print help individuals to use names in the meeting.
- Meet in rooms that are large enough for several small group discussions simultaneously if needed. Tables are helpful if writing is involved. Chairs in a circle contribute to a group discussion where individuals can see each other's faces.

- Visual aids such as easels with newsprint, chalkboards, overhead projectors and other equipment should be checked in advance to ensure they are available in working order, and you know how to operate them.
- Accessible entrances, nearby restrooms and telephone access all signify a welcoming environment for participants.

Group Roles: Running an effective meeting requires the active participation of everyone. Here are some key roles (which can be filled by the same people or rotated):

**Group Leader:** The group leader is responsible for conducting meetings, guiding discussions, helping everyone participate who wants to, and making sure that the group is paying attention to how it interacts as it carries out its work.

**Secretary or Recorder:** The role of the secretary is to record the meeting notes while also serving as an active group member.

**Time Keeper:** The timekeeper assists the group leader with the enforcement of time frames established for agenda items, in addition to acting as a regular group member.

**Group Member:** Actively engages in the group's work, shares air time, and pays attention to the flow of the meeting.

### III. Conducting the Meeting

The meeting chairperson, leader or chosen facilitator for the meeting will...

1. Convene the meeting on time.
2. Introduce the members and guests.
3. With cooperation of group participants, establish priorities and decide how much time to spend on each agenda item. Ask the group for additional agenda items and suggestions for group guidelines – how the group wants to conduct its work.
4. Keep the group focused on the subject.
5. Have the group follow the time commitments for each agenda item.
6. At the end of each agenda item:
  - Check to be sure that everyone who wanted to talk was able to contribute to the discussion.
  - Summarize or ask someone else to summarize the discussion and outcomes. Make sure the secretary also records the summary.
7. If time allows, as a last agenda item, evaluate the meeting by asking:
  - Did we accomplish our goals for the meeting?
  - What remains to be done?
  - What can we do to improve how we work together?
8. Identify the next meeting agenda items if they are known.
9. Schedule the next meeting time, date and location.

10. RE-CAP. At the end of the meeting, give a summary of what was decided. Thank the group for their good work, and make sure the group understands the next steps.
11. Call the meeting to a close on time, unless the group has renegotiated a new ending time. (Simon-Brown, 1998)

#### **IV. Following up a meeting**

The group chairperson, leader or meeting facilitator should pay attention to the following:

1. After the meeting, notes of and action plans that were decided upon should be recorded and distributed to the participants. This will serve as another reminder of responsibilities and assignments. It also becomes a permanent record of actions taken.
2. Check with the secretary/recorder for clarity of minutes.
3. Transfer leftover agenda items to the agenda for the next meeting.
4. Distribute copies of the minutes.
5. Conduct any correspondence necessary for carrying out the agenda items.

#### **Do we need a committee?**

Unless a specific committee job can be stated in writing, a committee is probably unnecessary. Confusion and vagueness about a committee's purpose can lead to frustration. Do not appoint a committee to do a task better accomplished by one person. Re-examine each existing committee and, if necessary, redefine its purpose or eliminate it.

If a committee is proposed, you should be able to answer these questions:

- Why should the committee be established?
- What is its job?
- What are its responsibilities and limitations?
- When should the committee's job be completed?
- What is the budget?
- What other resources are needed and what resources already exist?
- What is the committee's power to make independent decisions?
- What is the committee's relationship with and accountability to the larger group or organization?

#### **V. Effective Meeting Highlights**

1. Avoid holding meetings when they are unnecessary. Determine if individual conversations would be more appropriate. Ensure that meetings have useful content.
2. Keep meetings as small in size as practical. Select only participants who are directly involved and able to deal effectively with agenda items.
3. Select a convenient time and location for the meeting. Make sure the location is accessible to folks with special needs

4. Be realistic about meeting length. End meetings before fatigue sets in. Try to limit the meeting to one hour, and generally never exceed two hours. Create an agenda and use it.
5. Inform participants in advance about the purpose, agenda and objectives of the meeting so they can come prepared.
6. Open the meeting with a welcome, overview of the agenda and gratitude for individuals' attendance. Ask members to introduce themselves if they do not already know one another and encourage participation by all.
7. Establish and maintain an open climate that is conducive to a genuine and free-flowing exchange of ideas. Establish ground rules in the agenda, if the group needs such guidelines.
8. Keep the meeting in perspective. Focus on outcomes and avoid pressuring, criticizing, and preaching.
9. Maintain the proper pace. Keep the meeting agenda on schedule. Build in stretch breaks as needed.
10. Pause at intervals to summarize ideas and the discussion up to that point; then proceed with further discussion or move on to the next subject.
11. Summarize at the end of the meeting. State conclusions, recommendations, and actions agreed to in the meeting. Assign responsibility and due dates for action items.
12. Set the next meeting agenda if time allows.
13. Evaluate the meeting.
14. Close on an encouraging note.
15. Concisely document the meeting with recorded notes and distribute them to those involved in the meeting prior to the next meeting. (Simon-Brown, 1998)

If you are interested in learning more and improving your skills in meetings, check out the other publications in this series or the resources on the list below that were used in writing this publication.

## References

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11. *Great Meetings*, Dee Kelsey & Pam Plumb. Hanson Park Press. 2001.
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