

Bite-Sized Training™

Meeting Skills



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1. Introduction

Meetings can be great for getting work done quickly and effectively – or, as we all know, they can be a huge waste of time!

In successful meetings, team members work together for a set period of time to achieve clear objectives. A good meeting chairman or woman establishes an encouraging atmosphere in which ideas flow with ease. The net effect is “synergy,” where the combined talents and knowledge of the group is greater than the total of the individual inputs.

In this **Bite-Sized Training™** session, we look at the essential, common-sense skills that you can use to conduct great meetings. In the next hour, you will learn three practical guidelines for creating and leading effective meetings, and you’ll discover some specific techniques that you can use to get the best contribution from attendees.

This session also looks at meetings from another important angle, which is how to become an effective participant, so that you can help meetings run as well as possible.

When you’ve completed this session, you’ll have all the tools that you need to hold productive meetings, and you’ll be clear about how to be a creative and energetic participant in meetings chaired by other people.

2. Running an Effective Meeting

There are two aspects to consider when developing your meeting skills: *knowing how to run a good meeting* and *knowing how to be a good meeting participant*. In this session, we'll focus primarily on the skills for chairing effective meetings, but we'll also provide some common-sense advice on how to participate in them positively.

Before we discuss the guidelines for running effective meetings, think about your experience of meetings in general.

It's usually easy to pinpoint why a meeting was bad. For example, there was no agenda, the discussion was poorly controlled, it ran over time, and so on. However, it may not be so obvious why a meeting went well.

Action:

Think about one or more successful meetings that you've attended in the past, and answer the questions below. Once you've written down your answers, see how they compare with the meeting guidelines that we look at later in this session.



Describe a meeting that has gone well in the past.

What made it great?

What did the leaders do to accomplish the goals of the meeting?

What did the participants do to help it run smoothly?

Successful meetings are all about the chairperson's preparation and knowledge. An effective leader understands that a great meeting needs to follow three guidelines:

1. It must have a clear objective. Participants need to know exactly why they're there and what needs to be done during the allotted time to achieve this objective.
2. It must have a clear start and finish time, which it should not run over unless absolutely necessary.
3. It must follow a sensible order. By the end, attendees should know the specific steps that they need to take after the meeting.

"Meetings Take Minutes and Last Hours"

You may have heard this saying before, as it reflects what many people think about meetings: they often last far too long.

The amount of time that a meeting should last depends on its objective. However, most participants have a good idea about how long it should take, and will start thinking that it's "dragging on" when it goes beyond this time.

Here's an example: a corporate manager grew frustrated with meetings that overran in his company. "By the end of them," he joked, "death seems a reasonable alternative."

He vowed never to run meetings like these, so he introduced a new rule: "When I am the leader, none of my meetings will run for more than an hour." Once he'd told everyone, he upheld it ruthlessly. The result? At the end of one meeting, the participants actually cheered him! People had been waiting for someone to take this lead for a long time!

The rest of this section will look at each of the three guidelines in more depth, so that you can get a clear idea of how to implement them in practice. But, before we get into them, let's address what everyone hates – bad meetings.

Being in a terrible meeting is like wandering into a swamp. You get stuck, confused, make slow progress (if any at all), and wonder how in the world you got there in the first place. By the time you get out of the swamp, you're simply glad that you survived and you have no desire to repeat the experience.

In case you feel like you're alone, consider the results of a 1998 [study](#) by MCI, which found that 50 percent of meeting time is wasted. In the same study, 91 percent of respondents said that they daydreamed during meetings, 73 percent said that they did other work, and 39 percent admitted to falling asleep!

From a manager's perspective, these are worrying statistics. But here's a simple fact: these problems can be avoided. To prevent them, and to chair great meetings, follow these common-sense guidelines.

Guideline 1: The Meeting Should Have a Clear Objective

Before chairing a meeting, make sure that you know exactly what you want to achieve, and that achieving this objective outweighs the cost of holding the meeting.

Here's a simple guide to determine whether the meeting has a clear purpose: is there a definitive end result that you want to achieve?

A meeting objective will vary depending on the issue that you want to resolve. So ask yourself:

- Do I want a decision?
- Do I want to generate ideas?
- Do I want to communicate a particular point?
- Do I need the team's input on company plans?

This kind of planning helps you keep your meetings on track, and it also allows you to use your time wisely.

Tip:

This may sound like an obvious question, but have you asked yourself whether you actually need to hold a meeting?

If the matter can be handled better through an email, you don't need to waste everyone's time by getting them together.

Remember, the purpose of a meeting isn't simply to deliver information to passive participants – it's to share ideas and get input!

Action:

Think about the last meeting you attended that failed because its objective was unclear. How could the objective have been better defined? Write this in the box on the next page.



Why did the meeting fail?

How could this have been avoided?

Guideline 2: The Meeting Should run to Schedule

On the list of meeting no-nos, wasting people's time ranks near the top.

Imagine that a key participant shows up to a meeting 15 minutes late. There are 10 other attendees, who have been sitting around for 15 minutes when they could have been doing something productive. When you add it all up, two-and-a-half hours of company time have been wasted!

This is not even counting the less measurable impact of this tardiness, such as resentment toward the person who was late, the boredom of sitting around, and the lost energy and motivation. Fortunately, there's a simple cure for this: starting the meeting at the allotted time, and creating a written plan to keep the meeting on schedule – an agenda – and sticking to it.

Agendas are organizational tools that can benefit both you and the meeting participants. When you use them correctly, they can help keep everybody on track... and on time.

Although the idea of creating an agenda may seem daunting, it doesn't have to be complicated – remember, it's simply a guide to help you achieve your meeting objectives. As a general rule, an agenda should be a maximum of two pages long.

Consider the following points:

- Priorities – what items must be covered?
- Results – what must you accomplish?
- Participants – who needs to attend?
- Sequence – in what order will you cover the topics?
- Timing – how much time should you spend on each topic?
- Date, time and place – when and where will the meeting take place?

Once you have an idea of what needs to be covered and for how long, you can then look at the information you should prepare beforehand.

An agenda is also a useful tool for setting up expectations for how attendees will be involved. Passive participants are a recipe for a bad meeting: most people don't want to sit around just listening for an hour (or more). They'll get bored or restless, or they'll daydream.

So, in the course of writing your agenda, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do the attendees need to know to make the most of the meeting?
- What roles do I expect them to perform during the meeting, so that they can prepare in the right way?
- Should certain people only contribute for part of the meeting? Or do they need to be there at all? (Would they get everything they wanted from the meeting's minutes?)

If you've called your meeting to resolve an issue, let participants know that you'd like them to come prepared with possible solutions. Or, if you're discussing an ongoing project, ask each one to summarize his or her progress to date, and to circulate the reports among members.

Another effective method for increasing attendees' involvement in meetings is to assign particular topics of discussion to different people. On the agenda, indicate who is leading the discussion or presentation for each item. This tactic increases "buy in" from participants, as they'll want to shine during their section, in front of their peers and managers.

Tip:

You can help yourself stand out in meetings by learning how to present effectively. For help with this, complete our Bite-Sized Training session on [Giving Better Presentations](#).

We stated earlier that an agenda is a great way to stay on track, but we didn't tell you how to do this. Well, it's easy! Simply use your agenda as your time guide. For example, let's assume that, during a meeting, time is running out for a particular item. If this is the case, you have several alternatives:

- Hurry the discussion.
- Push for a decision.
- Defer it until another time.
- Assign it for discussion by a subcommittee.

Action:

Think back to the last meeting that you attended that wasted attendees' time. Why or how did this happen? What would you have done to make better use of people's time? Write this in the box on the next page.



Why or how did the meeting waste attendees' time?

How could you have made better use of people's time?

Now, let's turn our attention to guideline three, and structuring a meeting so that it follows a "sensible process."

Guideline 3: The Meeting Should Follow a Sensible Process

When participants leave your meeting, they should feel as though it followed a logical order.

What's more, you'll want to engage with people as fully as you can. This is so that they can participate effectively, and contribute to the meeting's output.

Participation Before the Meeting

Participation should begin before the meeting itself. Once you've prepared an agenda, circulate it to the attendees and consider asking them for feedback and ideas.

This step is useful because:

1. Team members may have something important to add. For example, one may realize that you've allotted too much time to a particular item, while neglecting other, more important items. Another team member may point out that a few of the items have been settled already, and they can be taken off the list for discussion.
2. Fresh eyes can spot things that are missing from the agenda.

Whatever the reason, it's important to get feedback from attendees about your proposed agenda.

Participation During a Meeting

Now, let's turn to the meeting itself.

There are several techniques that you can use to help ensure that all team members are satisfied, and that they contribute their valuable knowledge and expertise.

Technique 1: If certain people are dominating the conversation, make a point of asking others for their ideas.

Use the following tactics to do this:

- Ask someone else to comment on what the dominant participant has said. This takes the discussion away from that person. For example: "Jo, what do you think about the points that Raj has been making?"
- Ask the dominant participant to bring his or her remarks to a conclusion. An example is: "Raj, you've raised a number of interesting points. Would you please summarize them for us?"
- Ask quieter members of the group for their thoughts. For example: "Alana, you haven't spoken yet. What do you think?" (But only do this if you think that they are comfortable answering in front of the group.)

Technique 2: At the end of each important agenda item, check that everyone understands the outcome by summarizing the conclusion.

Use common sense when summarizing: only do so with major or complicated items, not with minor points that are obvious to everyone.

Once you've provided an overview of the discussion, ask people to confirm that it is fair.

Technique 3: Take appropriate minutes.

As the meeting's chairperson, make sure that you assign to a team member the responsibility of taking minutes. If possible, choose someone who summarizes and writes clearly, so that the information is easy for everyone to read and understand.

Minutes should be appropriate to the situation. For example, if they're needed as briefing notes for people who have not attended the meeting, they should explain conclusions comprehensively. If all that's needed is a list of actions that people have agreed to take, they can be much shorter. Some meetings, particularly those that convene to solve one-off problems, may not need minutes at all.

Technique 4: Watch the body language of team members, and make adjustments as necessary.

You want team members to stay focused during a meeting, so pay attention to their body language. If they're squirming in their seats, or gazing off into space, they are likely to need a short break. Remember the truth of the old saying: "The mind can absorb only what the seat can endure."

A break can also be used in a situation where one team member is dominating the meeting, and you need to take him aside to inform him politely that other participants deserve a chance to express their opinions.

Technique 5: Keep the meeting on topic.

Always keep the meeting objective firmly in mind. Although it's human nature for participants to wander off-topic, it's your responsibility, as the chair person, to keep them on track. Sometimes this may feel like "herding cats," but you'll have the respect of participants at the end of the meeting, and you'll accomplish the stated objectives efficiently.

Technique 6: At the close of the meeting, quickly summarize.

Summarize the next steps, and inform everyone that you will be sending out minutes promptly. By providing minutes, you can help keep everyone focused on what was agreed at the meeting.

Technique 7: Follow up from the meeting.

Where the meeting is one in a series, for example a monthly board meeting, you need to make sure that people have done what they agreed to do since the last one. This is where it's useful to review previous minutes, and monitor whether people are completing activities in the next meeting. Without this disciplining process, meetings can quickly become unproductive.

After the meeting is over, take some time to consider what went well, and identify what could have gone better. Evaluate the meeting's effectiveness, based on how closely you met your objectives.

This continuing process of improving how things happen will help you get better at running successful meetings in the future.

Action:

Think back to the last meeting that you attended, and consider the meeting process itself. Answer the questions below.



How could the process have been improved, so that the meeting was more effective?

What would you have done differently, so that the meeting made better use of people's time?

Tip:

After every meeting, analyze what went well and what didn't.

Think of this as "quality control." Ask participants what was positive and what wasn't, and seek their input on how to improve the meeting process. Then, implement the best suggestions!

So far, we've talked about how to be a good meeting leader, but it is also important to learn how to participate effectively when you're not in the chair. We'll look at this next.

3. Being a Good Meeting Participant

Before we talk about how to be a good meeting participant, complete the following activity.

Action:

Think back to a past meeting where the attendees, including yourself, helped it succeed. Then answer the following questions.



What actions did you take that contributed to making the meeting successful?

What actions did other participants take that contributed to its success?

The key to being a good meeting attendee, not surprisingly, is active and positive involvement. Here are three ways to improve your participation:

1. Read the Agenda Ahead of Time

This simple act helps you organize your thoughts before the meeting, so that you can start to formulate ideas on the subject to be discussed, and express them clearly when everyone is together.

2. Stay Focused

Resist the temptation to daydream. [Listen actively](#), and pay close attention to what other people are saying.

3. Contribute Your Thoughts and Ideas

When appropriate, share your ideas with other meeting participants. Remember, the organization hired you for your brain, not for your ability to occupy a chair.

Offer ideas in the spirit of accomplishing the meeting's objective. Also, while it's important that you speak out when you think an idea won't work, make sure that you do this in a positive, mature way.

4. Ask Others to Share Their Views

Ideally, meetings are about "synergy" – where the combined talents and knowledge of the group is greater than the total of the individual inputs. Encourage others to elaborate on their answers, and ask for other people's opinions on what you've said.

4. Key Points

To lead meetings in an effective manner, follow these three guidelines:

1. The meeting should have a clear objective, which will accomplish something concrete and lead to a definite end result.
2. The meeting should stick to a schedule, and not run over.
Write an agenda to manage meeting time effectively, as this will help to keep everybody on track!
3. The meeting should follow a sensible process.
By the time participants leave, they should feel that they've had the opportunity to contribute positively to its outcome.

And don't forget to make the effort to be a good meeting participant! Prepare carefully, listen actively, contribute thoughtfully, and encourage others to join in.