

YOUR CAREER

Increase Your ROM*

(*Return on Meetings)

A revolutionary idea:
Meetings worth the
time you invest in
them.

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Photo by Eyewire

Was the last meeting you attended worthwhile? Did it return value for your time investment? We won't be surprised if your answer is a resounding *no*. Managers surveyed by the Wharton Center for Applied Research rated only 42 percent of meetings they attended as productive. In fact, they said that one fourth of their meetings could've been replaced by a phone call or email.

How do you keep your meetings from being the ones everybody loves to

hate? Following some basic guidelines can help ensure that your meetings are well attended and productive. Although several of these suggestions may seem obvious, we bet they're overlooked in many of the meetings you attend.

Ensure the meeting is necessary. Don't call a meeting just because it's time for one. Schedule meetings when people need to work together, reach consensus, rally around an idea or a plan, or resolve conflict.

Expect to do more than reserve a room. A good rule of thumb is to spend at least the same amount of time preparing for and following up on a meeting as you spend in it. As the meeting planner, you must

- plan and prepare logistics: room arrangement, food, equipment, adjournment time, and what to do when cell phones go off
- organize content: what material you'll cover, what material other presenters will cover, who needs to attend, and what information you'll need to make informed decisions
- follow up on details: Make sure commitments are honored, and tie up loose ends.

Create and distribute an agenda. Agendas act like roadmaps for your meetings, helping you end up where you want to. The simpler and more straightforward an agenda is, the more useful it'll be. Send your agenda out to all participants before the meeting, and ensure that you include logistical information (date, time, location); topical information (items to be discussed, decided on, or learned about and time allocated to each item); and preparation information (what to bring and what participants' responsibilities will be).

Leave space on the page so that participants can record notes on each item, turning the agenda into an action plan.

Include the right people. Four categories of people should attend any meeting:

- people who have necessary information. Invite them to attend for a short time to share their information and answer questions, then excuse them.
- people who can make decisions. They are key to the meeting's success; without them, there's no point in getting together.
- people who will implement the decisions. The implementation team needs to understand what went into

It's About Time

Are you having trouble keeping your meetings on schedule? Consider these questions.

1. Have you set team ground rules about time?
2. Do you start on time?
3. Do you have an official meeting timekeeper?
4. Are you publishing agendas with topic and time-frames indicated?
5. Are your timeframes realistic? Are you able to predict the time needed for each meeting topic accurately?
6. Do you schedule breaks for meetings that run more than 90 minutes? Do people return from breaks on time?
7. Can you tell the difference between time invested (reconnecting, getting to know each other, settling differences through dialogue) and time wasted (covering old ground, talking for the sake of hearing your voice, presenting lengthy "why this won't work" speeches)?
8. Do you look back over past meetings to evaluate the accuracy of your agendas?

the decision, know the scope and parameters of the work, and have their questions answered.

- people it's politically smart to invite. You're on your own with this one, but you probably know who they are.

Know that where and when a meeting is held can affect its outcome. Location and

time do make a difference. For instance, the conference room is familiar and convenient, but the meeting may be interrupted and attendees pulled away.

Offsite meetings require time away from the office, cut participants off from resources, and usually cost money, but they allow fewer interruptions. To gain the advantage of an offsite meeting in-house, try using a conference room in another part of your building.

When scheduling a meeting, avoid Monday mornings and Friday afternoons when participants may have trouble focusing. Also avoid the days just before or after a holiday as too many people may be out of the office.

Consider creature comforts. Uncomfortable people don't think, participate, or perform at top levels. To keep people functioning at their best, answer these questions:

- What food and drink will we serve? (Choose snacks that are low in sugar to avoid blood-sugar highs and lows. Bagels, popcorn, and fruit juice are preferable to sweet rolls, candy bars, and soda.)
- How will we set up the room?
- Does everyone know the location of restrooms and telephones?
- Is there a break scheduled at least every 90 minutes?
- Will messages be taken and delivered during the meeting?
- Can we control the room temperature?
- Will everyone be able to see and hear the information?
- Are the visuals appropriate to the size of the meeting?
- Do people understand the dress code?

You'll save time and make your job easier if you develop a checklist that covers creature comfort issues. Each time you plan a meeting, run down your list so you don't miss any details.

Ask meeting participants to come prepared. Before the meeting, participants should read the agenda, collect

their thoughts on each of the items, and formulate questions. Any tasks they were assigned in a previous meeting should be completed before this one.

Both meeting leaders and participants must take care to arrive on time. That shows they respect others and consider the meeting important. Anyone who's unavailable during an important meeting should let people know beforehand so they can find ways to compensate for the loss of expertise.

Appoint a meeting leader. A good meeting requires the leader to

- start and end on time
- establish ground rules for behavior
- keep conversations on target
- watch for participation patterns, encouraging some people and reining in others
- balance discussions, giving equal time to minority views
- take the lead when conflict erupts, and manage it for the good of the group
- make sure that decided-upon actions are taken.

If you're in an established team that holds regular meetings, consider drawing up agreed-upon standards about the behaviors you intend to use when working together. Develop ground rules regarding participation, treatment of people, timing, confidentiality, roles, and responsibilities.

If your team has been working together for a while, I recommend rotating meeting leadership so that everyone has a stake in making the meetings productive. Or if a group is dealing with difficult issues, you may want to enlist the help of a trained facilitator who can run the meeting from a neutral position.

Select a record-keeper. All meetings need some form of collective, agreed-upon memory. When there isn't an official record of a meeting, consensus can evaporate. Meeting notes should summarize the decisions made, itemize the actions agreed upon, fix accountability

for post-meeting tasks, and document the deadlines for all actions. For a more objective viewpoint at critical meetings, ask someone who isn't a part of the discussion to take notes.

Make sure all meetings end with assignments. You must develop an action plan for each agenda item before you leave the meeting room. An action plan has three components:

- what's going to be done
- who's going to do it
- when it's going to be done.

Make sure everyone is clear on those three points before you move on from any agenda item. As you create your accountability list, make sure everyone shares the responsibilities. Don't load one person with all of the work.

Evaluate your meetings. Evaluating a meeting doesn't have to mean a spreadsheet, stacks of paper, and a large time investment. Just ask participants to answer a few quick questions on an index card during the last three minutes of the meeting.

For example,

- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being terrible and 5 being terrific, I'd rate this meeting a _____.
- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being off the mark and 5 being right on target, I'd rate our decisions at this meeting a _____.
- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being a waste of my time and 5 being an excellent use of my time, I'd rate this meeting a _____.

Check your library, bookstore, or HR department for more forms and checklists that can help you keep track of meeting logistics, plan an agenda, take notes, evaluate meetings, and so forth.

- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being an indifferent participant and 5 being an active participant, I'd rate my involvement in this meeting a _____.

After each statement, ask participants to explain in a sentence why they assigned that rating.

I use brightly colored cards and find that this simple, fast process presented with a little flair doesn't add to the length of the meeting, generates more responses than traditional methods, and is easy to tabulate and report. When used regularly, it becomes a good habit and improves your skills by leaps and bounds.

Ensure accountability. The proof of a meeting is what happens when it's over. As a meeting leader, you need to get tough. Start each meeting by

- reviewing the action plans from the last meeting
- asking for updates on items with long timelines
- demanding explanations for unfulfilled promises
- agreeing upon consequences for tasks left undone.

Meetings don't need to be eliminated from our day; instead, we need to make them as productive and enjoyable as possible. Give meetings their due with advance preparation, full participation, and conscientious follow-through, and watch participants' attendance and interest levels soar.

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