

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Effective meetings

When a meeting works well, it can generate great ideas and add enormous value to the work environment. With a little extra care, thoughtful planning and good management, you can ensure all your meetings are inspiring, efficient and enjoyable. This briefing looks at ways to help you do exactly this!

It examines the meetings process and offers tips for tackling different types of meetings, the roles involved, group dynamics, constructing the agenda and planning the practicalities of the event.

Why, Who, What, When, Where?

As you start planning your meeting consider these questions: Why are you having a meeting? What about? Who needs to be there? When do you need to hold it, and where? You may find by answering these questions your initial ideas change; that the meeting isn't as vital as you thought; or that it is more important and complicated than you anticipated.

Why have a meeting?

Good meetings start with a clear purpose. Carefully examine this. What are you hoping to achieve? What outcomes do you need? This will help you consider the overall meeting aim as well as smaller aims you might want to deal with during the course of the meeting.

Types of meetings:

Meetings usually fall into formal categories (e.g. AGM, board, finance committee, task group, team, department, senior management, project, editorial etc.). They will also fulfil one or more of the following functions. Deciding these will help you clarify your purpose.

- **To inform.** This meeting will usually involve some form of presentation followed by a question and answer session. It should focus on the person presenting the information – so the opportunity for discussion may be limited.
- **To solve a problem.** Here everyone should be encouraged to participate from the start. This kind of meeting can be relatively informal. Free flowing discussion should be encouraged, although this may still need to be facilitated and/or moderated by a chairperson.
- **To make a decision.** This type works in an informal or formal setting. If a formal structure is chosen, items for decisions should be presented to the chair (or committee) for decision by the deciding group.
- **To learn.** This would be a purely educational experience for the group, (e.g. by having a speaker, video presentation or discussion on a new topic).
- **To carry out legal business.** This is done to conduct business which by law (according to legislation or organisation's constitution) has to be transacted.
- **To support.** This type of meeting will be either in a social setting, or in a support capacity (i.e. faith groups in the workplace).

Who?

To achieve your goals you will need certain people to be present at the meeting. Decide who these are. Amongst the people you choose you will also need people to take on certain roles: a chairperson or facilitator, a host and someone to take minutes. Sometimes meeting roles are clear and straightforward, but at other times it can be difficult to decide who will take up these positions.



Chairing/facilitating

Effective chairing or facilitating is key to making a meeting successful. Good chairs/facilitators develop their skills over time; so if you or the person you choose for the role doesn't get it right straight off, remember practice makes perfect!

The following steps will assist with this process:

- Introduce everyone, or get them to introduce themselves. This is particularly important with new groups or if new people join existing groups. Remember to allow time for this process;
- Throughout the meeting ensure everyone gets a say. Ask quieter or shy members a question or for their opinion; gently stop very confident or loud people from dominating the proceedings or talking over others;
- Delegate responsibilities and share work evenly to ensure participation by everyone. Make sure people understand their tasks;
- Distribute written reports ahead of time so they can be discussed (not read) during the meeting and everyone has an equal knowledge of the issues to be discussed;
- If the meeting is going to run over ninety minutes or so, consider a brief break in the middle, or at an agreed time, perhaps with refreshments. Set a time to return and stick to it;
- Keep the meeting lively and interactive – avoid long presentations and change the pace when necessary. When exploring ideas and making decisions consider alternatives to general discussions. This helps to give clear direction and keep the energy flowing. Throw in an ice-breaking activity at the start and after lunch. Ask useful questions and make sure different people answer them.

Try using some of the following techniques:

a) brainstorming: List as many ideas as quickly as possible. Don't stop to evaluate, discuss or criticise. It is surprising how many ideas can be generated and how even the most off-the-wall ideas can spark creative thinking and inspire something really useful;

b) pairing off and small groups: Talking something through in small groups or pairs offers people the opportunity to listen to each other and a less threatening space to give their views. It is a good way to make sure everyone feels heard and a useful way to deal with a difficult issue, since people are more ready to listen once they have had a chance to speak their mind. Someone from each small group can then give a summary report on their discussion;

c) round-robin reporting: Go around the group asking each person to respond to the question or proposal at hand. This technique gets everyone's input and helps keep anyone from dominating a discussion. Another possibility is to get each person to write down several ideas, then go around the group and let each give one idea;

d) straw polls: When faced with a list of options, straw polls provide an alternative to voting. Try giving each person two to four votes (depending on the length of the list and number of people) to distribute among the choices. This helps to get the sense of the group without forcing a decision and encourages people to express support for more than one idea. Eliminate ideas with little or no support and focus on the remaining options;

e) listing pros and cons: This is a good way to evaluate an idea and helps people see both sides of a proposal. Divide a flip chart page into 'pros' and 'cons' and let people list all the advantages and disadvantages they can think of.

Secretary

Even if the 'secretary' is not formally called the secretary someone needs to take minutes during the meeting. Look at minutes from previous meetings to get an idea of the desired format (as they can vary greatly). Also:

- Follow the agenda carefully. Use it as a structure for your notes;
- Minutes should be kept brief and may even be written in note form. Remember – the minutes should be clear to people who were absent from the meeting!;
- Write up and distribute the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting – this will encourage prompt action on issues raised. Before distributing the minutes ensure the chairperson sees and approves them.

When choosing a secretary, pick someone with strong listening and documentation skills. The same person can be asked to be secretary at every meeting, or the role can alternate.

Host

Just as important as chairing and minute-taking is the host role. The host takes responsibility for booking the venue, refreshments, necessary equipment, gathering papers, welcoming people as



they arrive, and clearing up. Someone with strong administrative skills would be ideal. Often, the role of the host and secretary are taken on by the same person.

What? The agenda

By the time you get to writing the agenda you will have decided what the issues are to discuss, what you want to achieve and what type of meeting it will be.

So why do you need an agenda?

The agenda is a vital way of formalising the event. It:

- shows people what will be discussed;
- reminds people why the meeting is being held, and tells them all the details they need to know;
- lets people know they can contribute, on what topics and where appropriate;
- help them prepare for all the issues to be raised;
- reassures people that the meeting will be organised and will stay within a reasonable time frame;
- offers a 'script' for the meeting and gives it shape, purpose and direction;
- suggests the outline for the meeting minutes;
- helps evaluate whether the meeting was a success or failure.

Who should write the agenda?

Usually the person chairing the meeting constructs the agenda. Often it is co-created between the chair and the manager, director or CEO. However, not all meetings have the same requirements.

The person writing the agenda should ask everyone who will be present whether they having anything specific they want raised. Give people a deadline for adding items to the agenda so that it can be circulated in advance with any other important documents. This allows enough time to read long or complicated documents. Make the agenda informative and practical to encourage participants to prepare well, and turn up ready to join in the discussions.

What goes into an agenda?

An agenda should be short, simple and clear. The basic structure should follow a defined order,

for example:

- **Name of group/organisation.**
- **Type of meeting** (AGM, monthly committee, staff team meeting, management meeting, project meeting, editorial group meeting etc.).
- **Date of meeting.**
- **Start time and expected end time** (or expected duration) – to enable participants to plan their day in advance. It can be very helpful to also place a start time against each agenda item to help keep the meeting running within a time-frame.
- **Location.**
- **Apologies for absence** – names of those who were invited but unable to attend.
- **Matters arising since last meeting.** Use the minutes of the last meeting as a guide – but be wary of re-running the previous meeting.
- **Items to be raised and in what order** – these are usually numbered, with specific headings for each topic. Include the name of the person who suggested the item (so they can be contacted), and enough detail to be self-explanatory.
- **Any Other Business (AOB).** The chair should be informed at the beginning of the meeting of any item to be raised here (if this hasn't already happened). S/he can then decide whether or not to include it in this meeting or carry it to the next meeting. This stops people 'sneaking in' items without the others having the opportunity to plan and consider their responses. Some organisations prefer to drop this item from agendas, to restrict the meeting to specific items and the arranged time limit.
- **Formal Closure** – once everything has been discussed, the chair should sum up all of the items on the agenda and the follow-up actions to be taken, checking that nobody has been allocated an unrealistic workload. The chair should also remind everyone that minutes will be circulated, check that the minute taker is happy with their record of events, and agree a time and date for any subsequent meeting. The chair should thank everyone for attending and emphasise the achievements of the meeting.

Presenting agenda items

When presenting an agenda item:

- only take around one to two minutes;
- say what you want to achieve (i.e. discuss the item, make a decision, approve a paper, receive information or make recommendations);

- give a brief rundown with more background;
- give a short list of the most important issues for discussion;
- refer to any previous discussions or decisions that are relevant;
- refer to any support papers or material.

Presentations

If you are to give a presentation, or you ask someone else to, make sure you/they have time to carry out background research beforehand. Help them if need be so they can make an informed contribution. Offer them a chance to talk to other colleagues, have a look at notes or minutes from previous group meetings, or do some reading from relevant publications. Make sure too that the presentation is focused on the main message you want to convey at the meeting – rather than just a series of facts that underpin this message. If the audience needs to know all these facts and figures, perhaps produce a handout that they can digest in their own time. Try to utilise the presentation as a way to influence and shape their opinions about the issue.

When? Where?

Things to do before the meeting.

- Choose a suitable date that will allow for the optimum attendance.
- Book a suitable venue – somewhere comfortable and easy to get to. Make sure the venue has appropriate disabled access and facilities if necessary. Visit the venue if possible beforehand.
- Contact all the people attending to make sure they know about the meeting and remind them of any tasks they agreed to do.
- Circulate any papers that will be needed for the meeting in advance – at least seven days in

some cases (e.g. for board/committee meetings that may require a great deal of preparation). Relevant documents might include accounts, things to be approved, background papers, directions/map if needed, and most importantly, the agenda (see previous page.)

- Arrange catering – is tea/coffee/water to be provided? Are there any attendees with special dietary requirements? Water should always be available.
- Gather together any tools that might be needed (e.g. a flip chart, markers, handouts, pens and paper, overhead projector, recorder).
- Set up the meeting room so that everyone can see and hear each other and can see any visual aids. Make sure to accommodate for any disabilities.

At the end of the meeting

Do a quick evaluation with everyone involved to gauge how it went. This also gives people the opportunity to comment. A quick and simple method is to make three columns on a flip chart, with the headings 'Good / Do More Of / Do Differently.' Get participants to list the things that were good, the good things they can do more of, and what could be done differently in the future. You might also want suggestions as to how. List all the comments in the appropriate columns and try not to argue with the suggestions! By paying attention to the needs of the group, you can use the evaluations to adjust how you plan the next meeting. This will help to make your meetings more efficient, effective and enjoyable.

Further information

VAN briefing 80: 'Monitoring & Evaluation – a general guide'

www.effective-meetings-tips.com

Disclaimer: We have taken reasonable precautions to ensure that the information contained in this Briefing is accurate. However, the document is not intended to be legally comprehensive. We recommend you take legal advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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