

Meetings That Count

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Meetings can be the greatest asset or the greatest time waster. Here are seven golden rules on how to run these gatherings more effectively. When was the last time you went to a meeting at your office, or at your client's office, knowing it was going to be a waste of time?

You can very easily take control of meetings and get results. Meetings are supposed to be a way of: (1) sharing information, (2) creating and brainstorming ideas, (3) making and/or implementing decisions, and (4) ensuring everyone who should contribute actually gets heard. Keep these objectives in mind. Time is a precious resource -- don't waste it in unproductive meetings.

Here are seven attributes of effective and productive M.E.E.T.I.N.G.s that you should master.

M -- Meeting Decision. Decide if it is really necessary to hold it, and if you should attend. Remember that not all meetings need to be held, especially if there is no new business, if key people will not be there, if necessary information will not be ready, or if the reason for holding the meeting is no longer viable. Keep asking yourself, "Is this the best use of my time and my client's time?"

E -- Effective Organization. Take the time to plan and organize. Chances are you have attended numerous unorganized meetings. To avoid this in your own meetings you must ensure that there is a proper system in place. An agenda prepared and circulated well in advance is crucial. Also, choose a convenient location that has the proper amenities and environment.

E -- Excellent Attendance. Ensure everyone who should be there, is there, and that they are prepared to participate. Here are some steps to make it happen.

- The agenda sent out before the meeting should identify clearly who is to do what at the meeting, covering everything from reporting information to contributing resources. It should also indicate what decisions will be made.
- Make sure the agenda includes the date, the time, and the location.
- If the meeting is a regularly scheduled meeting or part of a series of meetings, ensure it is consistent with others.

One of the things that launches a meeting well, is to do a "Good News Report" after the meeting is called to order. Go around the table and each person quickly mentions "the best thing that has happened to me since the last meeting, both personally and professionally." This tactic charges the room with renewed interest, and creates a better understanding among the people you are sharing time with. Try it, but start with the best attitudes around the table first!

T -- Target Objectives. Zero in on the things you really want to accomplish. A well-planned agenda is the tool you will need. Have extra copies for those who always turn up without it. If you are in charge, get to the room early and ensure it is set up properly. Call the meeting to order on time; if you wait for stragglers, not only do you penalize those who were on time, you waste everyone else's time at \$\$\$ per minute, and conversely you reward those who arrive late. If a meeting tends to ramble on beyond the scheduled ending time, then schedule the end to be exactly lunch break time!

Make sure you share the objectives for the meeting with everyone. Give priority to time-sensitive issues and be aware of a logical sequence for items on the list; how they were placed on the agenda may no longer be current in terms of priority.

I -- Independent Chairperson. Ensure that he or she knows the role. An effective chairperson is a must. The individual running the meeting should be prepared to be just that. Their goal is to create a sense of urgency, efficiency, and knowledge. They ensure participants share facts, not opinions, and keep the meeting focused and moving. Summarizing major points, including liberal use of a whiteboard or flip chart to record points, to list options and votes on choices, is part of the chairperson's role.

Most importantly, the chair observes how members react to the comments of others and how discussion affects the group as a whole. He or she should actively listen when others are talking, and make notes on good ideas so that they don't get dropped. Sometimes an idea spoken can change the whole result of the meeting if it is captured.

Sometimes disagreements occur between people with strong personalities. To ensure the meeting does not break down, ask other participants with strong opinions about what they think would work or be fair. If no compromise can be reached quickly, break off the discussion for a set period of time. A useful tactic to ensure everyone speaks and is heard in a meeting is to alternate going round the table starting on the chairperson's right, then on his or her left.

When you're closing the meeting, summarize the actions to be taken (this can be done by the chairperson or the person recording the minutes). The chairperson's final words should acknowledge everybody for their participation and contribution.

N -- Need for Rules. Attendees should be aware of the basic rules, protocols, and procedures. Depending on how large the meeting is, be prepared to take votes and to use common Parliamentary procedure to approve projects, minutes, reports, and activities. A good resource is: O. Garfield Jones' "Parliamentary Procedure At A Glance" (Penguin Books, 1991).

G -- Great Follow Up, the most important part! The minutes need to show who was there, what was discussed, what decisions were made, actions to be taken (next steps), and who is responsible for the noted actions. Also, the next meeting date, time and place need to be included.

On your own, seek constructive feedback as to how participants felt the meeting went, and what could have been improved upon. In particular, if there is someone who is always causing problems, be prepared to talk with them to ensure their behavior improves for the next meeting (but that is another article).

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