

Better meetings

For managers, meetings are an unavoidable chore. But follow these tips and you can avoid them becoming too much of a bore, says **Craig Ryan**.

1 DO THE GROUNDWORK

Establish clearly what the meeting is for. What is the bare minimum that must be decided? What problems must be resolved? If you can't state this clearly, you're not ready to have the meeting.

2 WHO, WHERE AND WHEN

Think carefully about who to invite – just because the meeting's important to you doesn't mean it's a good use of other people's time. Consider your objectives – smaller meetings are better for taking decisions, bigger groups will produce more ideas and discussion. Invite people well in advance and email a reminder the day before. Lay on tea and coffee, or at least some water – thirsty people find it hard to concentrate. And don't default to first thing in the morning: research has found the optimum time to schedule a meeting is 3pm on Tuesday.

3 WHAT'S YOUR AGENDA?

Unless it's a regular meeting with a fixed purpose, you're going to need an agenda. No ifs, no buts. A simple bullet list of discussion topics is fine for shorter meetings, but make sure you clearly indicate the decisions that *must* be taken, and put the most important items at the top. Longer meetings need more structure, and it's worth allocating time for each part of the discussion.

4 WHAT'S THEIR AGENDA?

Remember, other people will have their own expectations for the meeting. Email the agenda well in advance, and allow people to suggest changes, but politely refuse anything which isn't directly relevant to the objectives you've set. Consider asking other people what they want to get out of the meeting. This will help you guide the discussion towards satisfying as many participants as possible.



5 IS THIS WORKING?

It's an unwritten rule (until now) that technology like overhead projectors and teleconference equipment will not work as expected and that anyone who knows how to use it will be on leave or in another meeting. Arrive early and make sure everything's working. If possible, check it out the day before. Only allow PowerPoint presentations if they will actually add something to the discussion – if you're looking for a wide range of contributions, presentations tend to narrow the discussion to what's up on the screen and can encourage "groupthink".

6 GETTING STARTED

Try to start bang on time and make sure everyone knows the finish time. Appoint someone – not the facilitator – to take notes, or at least record the decisions taken. Establish any ground rules at the start (such as whether people should ask questions during presentations or keep them until the end). Once the meeting has started avoid lengthy recaps for the benefit of latecomers.

7 KEEP ON TRACK

It's your job as facilitator to keep the discussion on topic, on time and to make sure everyone gets a fair crack of the whip. Have a clock in your eyeline so you don't have to keep looking at your watch while other people are speaking. Invite those who aren't saying much to make a contribution and, if someone is dominating the conversation, politely ask them to let colleagues have a say. If you notice people's attention wandering, it's time to move on or take a decision, whatever the clock says.

8 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The single thing that *must* come out of any meeting is agreement on what happens next – even if it's just another meeting! Everyone should have something to do as a result of the discussion; otherwise, you need to ask yourself why they were there in the first place.

9 JUST A MINUTE

Formal minutes are unnecessary for most meetings, but a note of the meeting is vital. A simple list of any ideas put forward, decisions taken and, crucially, who has agreed to do what (and by when), should be enough. If there were unresolved disagreements at the meeting, note these too.

10 AFTER THE SHOW

Circulate your note to everyone, including invitees who were unable to attend, as soon as possible after the meeting. Include copies of visual presentations and scans of any brainstorming flip-charts. Keep everyone informed about progress on the action points agreed, and remind them of their responsibilities once deadlines are approaching. And don't forget to thank them for their contribution.

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