

Holding Effective Meetings

By Robert Gerrish

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We've all been to meetings that, for one reason or another, turn out to be a waste of time. Someone doesn't turn up; the meeting starts 20 minutes late; there's a squabble about whose turn it is to take the minutes; or the meeting gets side-tracked by a particular issue and nothing is resolved.

Poorly planned and executed meetings waste everyone's time and, as the business owner, your time is valuable! For those working alone, the sense of frustration this causes is particularly acute. You don't have a team of people back in the office taking care of business while you wait anxiously for a meeting to begin or end.

So how can you make meetings more productive?

Whether you're moderating or attending a large meeting, having a one-on-one meeting with a client or participating in a remote meeting via phone or video, the same principles apply: plan the meeting well and keep it focused.

If you're the chairperson or moderator of the meeting you have certain responsibilities. Firstly, decide if a meeting is really needed. Could a memo or email update everyone on the status of a project? Try making it a policy to only hold meetings for problem solving, not simply to give status reports.

Next, examine your list of attendees. Do they all need to be present? Sometimes the more attendees you have, the less productive your meeting will be.

Then, on the day before the meeting, confirm the time and location with the attendees, especially if the meeting was arranged several days in advance.

The timing of a meeting can have a significant effect on its productivity. Schedule it before lunch or end-of-business to eliminate unnecessary discussion and encourage participants to focus on the task at hand. Some time managers suggest scheduling meetings for an odd time, such as 4:10pm. Strangely, having this unusual time seems to improve punctuality.

Unless they are critical to the start of the meeting, begin on time ignoring any latecomers. And

have a set time for both starting and finishing the meeting. By behaving in this way, serial-latecomers (for that's what many of them are), will start to get the message that the meeting is more important than their disrespectful behaviour.

Schedule the meeting far enough in advance to allow participants to plan their schedules and use an agenda to keep the meeting on track. Distribute the agenda in advance, to allow participants to prepare appropriately. This prevents debates about the purpose of the meeting - a common and very frustrating way to begin any gathering.

At the end of the meeting, develop an action plan. An action plan ensures the meeting will be productive. Assign responsibility to specific people and give them due dates. Distribute the action plan to all participants.

There is also much you can do to facilitate productive meetings even though you may be simply an attendee, not the moderator.

For example, think about the objectives of the meeting in terms of your attendance. Is your presence really needed? If not, inform the moderator and spend your time doing something more productive.

If your attendance is needed, confirm the location and time the day before the meeting if the moderator has not done so.

Be on time and be prepared. Try not to stray to topics outside the scope of the meeting. Stay focused on the discussion.

The same rules generally apply to one-on-one meetings, but there are some additional tips to consider.

While it's important to be on time, try not to arrive too early. This implies that you have time to waste. Also keep busy while you're waiting. Not only does this indicate that you have things you need to be doing, it also allows you to make the most of your time - you'll get things done!

Don't wait more than 15 minutes, unless you feel you absolutely must. If 15 minutes have passed, try to reschedule the meeting.

When they are well handled, meetings can be very worthwhile. The sharing of ideas and solutions to problems can be particularly beneficial to those working alone; brainstorming helps ease feelings of isolation. And with a little foresight and planning, you can have meetings that are not only productive, but help you achieve success for yourself and your clients.

Robert Gerrish supports business owners on a path to loving their work. From his base in Sydney, he coaches clients from the US, Europe & Australasia. To receive more of his tips subscribe to his Flying Solo ezine at <http://www.flyingsolo.com.au>
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