

Tips for conducting meetings to achieve positive results

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Do you ever wonder why some meetings seem to last so long? Is it because discussions are allowed to veer off track? Is it the result of disorganization or a lack of preparation? It is these and similar situations that lead participants to question whether their time involved in meetings is well spent. Although organizations readily recognize the value of time as a resource and place it under a microscope in examining productivity and processes, its use can easily be overlooked in the context of day-to-day meetings.

It is the responsibility of both leaders and participants to ensure that time committed to meetings is productive. This need becomes even more apparent during an economic downturn when organizations are scrutinizing ways to manage more efficiently and effectively while implementing necessary cost savings.

Regardless of your role, there are steps that you can take to use time more wisely and increase the overall effectiveness of meetings. The following tips focus on ways that you can take responsibility for achieving these positive results.

Tips for conducting meetings:

1. Apply a deliberate and disciplined approach in deciding whether to select meetings as your means of communication. Ask yourself questions, such as the following, in making these decisions: What is your purpose in communicating? Is there a need to meet or will other communication methods best achieve desired results? Should e-mail and other types of communications be used in conjunction with meetings?
2. Focus on your purpose throughout the planning process. Take the nature of the meeting (e.g. decision making, information sharing, brainstorming, training, problem solving) into consideration. Decide how often it will be necessary to meet. Examine the degree of formality and structure required. Determine which participants are necessary in order to accomplish desired objectives.
3. Take time to pinpoint details when preparing for meetings. Be attentive to participants' needs in making decisions, such as those that involve the selection of locations. Throughout the process, ask yourself a number of key questions, including those that focus on who, what, when, where, why, and how.
4. Provide participants with pertinent and timely information. Circulate an agenda with the scheduled date, times, location. Include other relevant information, such as

the purpose, topics for discussion, materials to review prior to the meeting, and items that attendees are responsible for bringing. If participants are asked to make presentations, give them sufficient time for preparation.

5. Establish expectations and set a positive tone at the beginning of the meeting. Discuss the agenda that will be followed and describe what you would like to see accomplished. Outline group and individual responsibilities, which also can include expectations for interpersonal interactions. It may be beneficial, for example, to remind participants initially that input should be relevant to the subject at hand and not a repetition of what has already been said.

6. Calculate the length of meetings after reviewing your agenda, the amount of information to be covered, and the overall goals that you want to achieve. Allow time for breaks, as needed.

7. Facilitate the discussions in a methodical, focused, and respectful manner. Focus not only to content but also on interpersonal interactions. Look for ways to involve all attendees in discussions. Be aware that individuals who perceive that they have been treated disrespectfully by other participants may be hesitant to make future contributions.

8. Close the meeting with a summary of discussions, including items agreed upon, action steps to be taken, and any designated timeframes. Based on the nature of the meeting, follow up with an overview and request that participants provide feedback outlining necessary revisions.

Tips for participating in meetings:

1. RSVP as soon as feasible and within established deadlines. In the event that your schedule changes after you have confirmed attendance, provide notification promptly, even if the problem arises at the last minute.

2. Review the agenda and other information in preparation for the meeting. Bring any materials necessary to accomplish its objectives.

3. Arrive on time. If you are delayed unexpectedly, ensure that the leader knows that you are going to be late. Catch up on what took place without disrupting the meeting.

4. Turn your cell phone on silent or vibrate. If you foresee the need to handle a call due to an emergency or similar situation, make necessary arrangements with the leader before the meeting begins.

5. Stay focused on group discussions. Listen and allow others to finish speaking without interruption. Avoid engaging in activities that are not in keeping with the purpose of the meeting, such as whispering, exchanging notes, reading e-mails, and updating to-do lists.

6. Pay attention to your nonverbal communications. Eliminate those that show disapproval (e.g., rolling your eyes) or a lack of interest in what others are saying. Keep in mind that a smile, eye contact, and other approachable behaviors create a climate that is conducive to the exchange of ideas.

7. Participate when you have something to offer. However, refrain from dominating discussions or “talking just to talk.”

8. Monitor your actions on a meeting-by-meeting basis to ensure that they contribute to achieving positive results for you and other participants.

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