

## LEADING A SUCCESSFUL MEETING

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This document includes a synopsis of a skills workshop presented by the Leadership Institute at Harvard College which focused on (i) preparation for a meeting, (ii) sample agenda templates, (iii) common meeting challenges and their solutions.

### **Bad meetings happen to good people□ but, you can avoid it!**

The success of a meeting largely depends on your preparation. Keep these simple tips in mind for planning and executing an effective meeting.

#### **Effective Meeting Checklist**

- ✓ Before:
  - Identify the meeting's purpose
  - Create an organized agenda
  - Assign roles (facilitator, note-taker, time-keeper)
  - Invite the appropriate people
- ✓ During:
  - Start and end on time
  - Set ground rules for meeting behavior
  - Review purpose
  - Follow agenda
  - Agree on action items and responsibilities
- ✓ After:
  - Follow-up (distribute meeting summary and action items)
  - Follow through



There are many ways to organize an agenda and here are several samples. After including the specifics of who/when/where, the vital parts of an agenda include: state the purpose, indicate the specific topics, how long to spend discussing them, and the decisions and actions to take.

### Agenda 1: Grid Format

Purpose or Intended Outcome:			
Attendees:			
Date , Time, Location:			
Agenda Item	Duration	Who	Expected Outcome
1.			
2.			

### Agenda 2: Table Format

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting Leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time/Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Item	Priority	Owner	Objective	Allotted Time	Responsibilities
1.					
2					

### Agenda 3: Outline Format

Meeting Date, Time, Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants: \_\_\_\_\_

Main Objective: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Top Priority Issue (duration)
  - Owner/Responsible Party
  - Decision or Outcome
  - Actions to take
2. Second Priority Issue (duration)
  - Owner/Responsible Party

Additional Notes:

We've all been in unproductive, endless meetings. You may have experienced some of these unfortunate scenarios; you're not alone. We'll discuss how to fix and prevent them in the future.

## Common Meeting Challenges and Suggested Solutions

1. A meeting participant is dominating the discussion.
  - Simply say to the person who has been dominating discussion, "Thank you, <name>. Now we'd like to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."
  - Make participation one of the ground rules for everyone at the meeting.
2. The group keeps repeating the points made.
  - Use a flipchart to write down points as they are made, so that meeting attendees can see what has already been brought up.
  - Get the group's attention, and in a summary statement, paraphrase back to the group what they are saying. This assures them that they are being understood and gives the facilitator a chance to move the conversation to a different topic.
3. There is no or little group participation – group falls silent.
  - Do a stretch break.
  - Throw out a crazy idea to break the ice and stimulate discussion.
  - A small stretch of silence is also not a bad thing: let your audience have some quiet time to process what has been said and formulate a response. You may wish to tell them whenever you ask for their input on something that you will give them a few minutes just to think, so any period of silence that follows will be natural and expected, rather than awkward.
  - If you are running a large group meeting, try breaking everyone up into smaller groups.
  - Consider having different members of your group take turns acting as the meeting facilitator. This can make each individual feel more comfortable with speaking up at meetings in general.
4. The groups gets stuck on a particular agenda item.
  - Have the group vote on whether to end the debate or continue it at a later point. If the group chooses to end the debate, hold a second vote to determine what the resolution to the question being debated will be.
  - You as the facilitator can recap the various opinions being expressed and explain where the major similarities and differences lie. This should aid the group in working through its areas of disagreement.
  - To bring the discussion towards a close, tell the group that you will only allow three more comments and then table the issue for a future meeting.
5. The meeting is going off track/The meeting isn't productive
  - Redirect the group to the agenda and purpose of the meeting. If discussion has veered off to a tangential issue that is not directly relevant to the agenda but nonetheless important or interesting to the group, announce that you will follow up with the topic later.
  - Remind the group of timely priorities and upcoming deadlines.

6. Running out of time - not enough time to cover all the agenda items.

- Request permission from the group for more time.
- Schedule longer meetings.
- See whether some items could be handled outside meetings (ex. via email). Most email applications have an option to automatically thread messages, so you can keep replies pertaining to the same email bundled together and organized. A rule of thumb is that if an item requires more than 4 or 5 emails to settle, it should probably be reserved for a meeting.
- If you find that a topic only concerns particular group members, allow others who aren't interested or aren't involved to leave.

Additional General Tips:

- Consider sending out action items from the previous meeting 24 hours before the next meeting to remind attendees what they will be reporting back on.
- If you are concerned about whether people are actually reading the meeting minutes, ask them and get their feedback. Another strategy is to insert questions in the minutes that you would like their input on – that way, if they don't respond to the questions, you know they didn't read the minutes.
- Try to have a sense of humor as a facilitator to create a friendly atmosphere.
- Hold meetings in a non-distracting place.
- Allot time for socializing / casual chatting at the beginning (when people are still trickling in anyway) or the end of a meeting.