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Running Effective Meetings by Tony Atkins, Director of Advanced Training

How many of us have experienced the frustration of being involved in a long, poorly run meeting? How many of us have experienced this on more than one occasion? How many of us have asked ourselves, "why am I here"? How many of us have repeatedly wasted our time and our life in this way?

How many of us take responsibility for making meetings productive and beneficial, interesting and enjoyable, a motivational experience and an effective use of everyone's time? As the chairperson we may recognise that our role is to ensure the meeting is as effective and productive as possible. I wonder how many people actively consider how best to achieve such results.

Equally, I wonder how many people realise that all attendees are responsible for making the meeting as productive as possible. When we are not the chairperson, we need to recognise that as a member of a poor meeting we can either be part of the solution, or contribute to the problem.

Clearly, everyone shares the responsibility for making the meeting a success. By understanding what contributes to productive meetings and developing the skills of an effective chairperson, we can help others to perform this vital role. When needed - using appropriate sensitivity - we can support and prompt the chairperson to perform their role effectively, so that the meeting is both productive and enjoyable.

As meetings are an integral part of today's business life, we can all benefit by refreshing our thoughts on what contributes to running an effective meeting.

Meetings need Purpose

We all recognise that a business meeting needs to fulfil one or more specific purpose. It should not simply be allowed to happen just because it has always happened. Avoid slipping into the chat meeting syndrome with little or no purpose

Normally, our meetings are held to achieve one or more of the following:

- inform, motivate and gain commitment
- sell ideas or services and influence others to act
- review progress and instigate action
- initiate corrective action
- solve problems and make decisions
- generate ideas and identify the way forward
- co-ordinate activities and administer the business.

To achieve maximum benefits everyone needs to be clear about the purpose or purposes for meeting.

Meetings need an Agenda

An agenda is essential and should normally be circulated in advance so that people can contribute to best effect. The chairperson always remains responsible for the agenda and the meeting, no matter what they choose to delegate.

The agenda should state clearly who is expected to attend, where, when and for how long. For each topic it should identify the lead speaker, objective(s) and how much time is allocated. The chairperson must have clear in their mind what they need to achieve on each topic. For example, if the purpose is to review progress, they must discourage problem solving or designing by committee. The agenda should make this clear to the meeting in advance and, if necessary, the chairperson needs to remind people if they stray.

Skilful chair-people maintain and build the group's involvement by organising the agenda according to the anticipated level of mutual interest that each topic will engender. They start with the topic of least interest and end with the one with most. This helps to create an increasingly excellent group spirit and ensures people leave feeling good about the meeting. An additional hidden benefit of this approach is people are more likely to want to attend the next meeting.

This does require a skilled chairperson to ensure that the meeting is controlled and planned timings are met. Otherwise, there is the danger of over running, and/or not covering later - and often the most important - topics properly.

Tips for Effective Meetings

1. Have a cut-off date for any contributions to the agenda.
2. Issue the agenda beforehand, in good time, to stimulate pre-thought.
3. Issue briefing papers with the agenda when new concepts or complex technical matters are to be discussed. This should help aid individual understanding - saving meeting time and enabling people to raise the quality of their contribution.
4. Give each agenda item a maximum time allocation and, where appropriate, a lead speaker.
5. Always start on time - penalise people absent, not those present.
6. Design the room layout to aid meeting objectives.
7. Ensure that action points are clearly agreed by everyone and recorded against the appropriate participants at the time of discussion. Action points should never contain surprises and people should not be tasked in their absence.
8. Everyone should leave the meeting with a copy of the action points, or they should be received within 24 hours.
9. The first item of any meeting should be a brief progress update on the action points of the previous meeting. This can be done by exception, so that time is spent only on actions still to be fully implemented.
10. If any other business items arise, they should be accepted (or not) beforehand, at the discretion of the chairperson and slotted into the most suitable position within the agenda. Avoid having AOB as an agenda item at the end. This makes people contribute to the agenda and gives others time to consider and consult on all topics before the meeting.
11. Whilst maintaining control of the meeting at all times, it is important that the chairperson encourages a participative, non-threatening atmosphere. Otherwise, timid people may feel unable to contribute information that could be vital.

The chairperson must get everybody involved. They must bring in shy members and control talkative people.
12. Be liberal with praise when justified.
13. Never attack or criticise individual attendees at the meeting, or in pre or post meeting paperwork. Any required criticism should be handled constructively in private.

14. Always display a positive attitude towards meetings. Sell the benefit of future meetings.
15. Ensure no interruptions, unless they further the business of the meeting, or are of a personal or business 'crisis' nature, which truly requires the immediate attention of an attendee.
16. For regular team meetings consider agreeing, with all involved, a ' Team Meetings Contract' for the desired operation of meetings. Ensure to build in flexibility to suit the changing needs of the attendees.
17. Periodically check the perceived effectiveness of team meetings with all involved.
18. In team meetings, handle any obvious negatives at the beginning and build the interest throughout the meeting - ending on a high motivational level.
19. Preparation is vital. Inadequate preparation wastes not only the chairperson's time, but that of all the others.
20. Having the correct people attend the meeting is clearly important. This is the responsibility of the chairperson.

As a general rule, avoid part-time attendance. This is often indicative that there should be two meetings instead of one. Do not distort meetings to accommodate individuals except on a very exceptional basis. This devalues the meeting and can de-motivate others.

21. Evaluate benefits by asking people informally, outside the meeting, whether anything could be done to improve the meeting. It is their time as well as yours.

At the very least they may better appreciate why you run the meeting the way you do and you may pick up useful ideas.

22. Four recognised 'musts' for success:

- skilled chairperson
- well written agenda
- correct people present
- concise, accurate and effectively progressed action points.

23. Meetings are enjoyable for most people if they are well chaired and not unnecessarily long. If your meetings are not enjoyed, think again.

Note

Tony Atkins will welcome the opportunity to discuss any views or comments prompted by this article. He can be contacted on his direct line number 0118 979 2533, or by email at tony.atkins@a-t.co.uk.

Advanced Training will be happy to discuss your specific business needs and help you to deliver the right development for your people.