

## RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS.

The A-B-Cs of running effective meetings,including  
Planning and preparation,establishing the agenda  
Conducting the meeting,action planning and follow-up.

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### **HOW TO ORGANIZE AND RUN EFFECTIVE MEETINGS**

Meetings are necessary to coordinate individual efforts, collaborate on joint projects, garner support for ideas, sell ideas, solve problems collectively, and make consensus-based decisions. Essentially, meetings are a gathering of two or more persons to collectively accomplish what one person cannot. However, not all meetings are really necessary.

#### **FIRST DECIDE IF YOU NEED TO HAVE A MEETING**

Many meetings don't need to be held, and often those that are held are attended by more people than necessary. Often times there are more efficient ways to "meet" your objectives without holding a meeting. Some of these alternatives include: phone calls, conference calls, memos/letters, postal mail, e-mails, teleconferencing, and listserves.

First, one needs to decide if a meeting is necessary. Before scheduling or attending your next meeting, clearly define the objectives for yourself or the group if you are the person responsible for the meeting. To help you think through your objectives, ask yourself the following four questions:

- Why am I scheduling or attending this meeting?
- What do I want to accomplish or gain?
- What information will be exchanged or decisions made?
- Who will be attending that I need to meet or gain their support?

Once you have clarified your objectives, you still need to determine if a meeting is the best way to reach them. To make sure a meeting will be the best use of time and energy for all concerned, determine if it will be used for at least one of the following reasons:

- To convey information to a group
- To solicit information from a group
- To answer questions
- To participate in group decision making
- To brainstorm ideas
- To solve problems
- To network
- To sell an idea, product, or service
- To show or provide support for others

If you have determined a meeting is the best avenue to carry out your team's objective, then you should begin to organize for an effective meeting.

### **HOW TO ORGANIZE FOR A MEETING**

Good meetings aren't accidents - they are the result of good planning. The time you spend before will result in major benefits later by efficiently using the meeting time, accomplishing objectives, and avoiding the need for follow-up meetings. When deciding to hold a meeting, you should also decide who should attend and what is the purpose of the meeting. To help in planning meetings, below is a checklist of major elements essential for meeting effectiveness.

#### **Purpose:**

Plan meetings with purpose. Define the purpose or objective of the meeting (e.g., to reach consensus on how volunteer leaders should allocate their time).

#### **Participant:**

Who needs to attend this meeting to accomplish the purpose?

#### **Structure:**

How should the meeting be organized to best accomplish the purpose? Some techniques may include:

guest speakers, videos, brainstorming sessions, panel sessions, discussion groups, demonstrations, etc.

Whatever technique is selected, it should have the greatest impact on the participants to attain the meeting objective.

#### **Location and Time**

Select a meeting place that best matches the participant's needs, the objective, and the meeting structure.

When planning where to meet, give consideration to size, comfort, accessibility, adequate parking, room acoustics, equipment needs, etc. Choosing a meeting time depends

on the availability of participants and meeting facilities. The anticipated length of the meeting should

also be a factor in deciding when to schedule the meeting.

### **Agenda**

A meeting agenda should be prepared and distributed to participants at least three days prior to the meeting day. An agenda is crucial to meeting success in three ways: 1) it clarifies the objectives so people understand the meeting purpose and tasks; 2) distributing the agenda prior to the meeting helps participants plan and prepare to make an effective contribution; and 3) during the meeting, the agenda provides direction and focus for the discussion.

There are a variety of agenda styles but essentially they should contain at least the following elements: title (e.g., evaluation review meeting), time (e.g. 8:00-10:00 a.m.) date, location, discussion items, and names of persons responsible for covering each item. Some people prefer to include time allotments for each agenda item to improve meeting effectiveness (e.g. review minutes 1:05-1:10).

### **Responsibilities:**

There should be a mutual understanding of not only the meeting purpose, but also individual assignments and how they fit into the total program. Those meetings that are more focused on brainstorming or creativity may require little or no individual assignments. In task-oriented or policy deciding meetings, it is best to prepare a written summary of assigned duties so individuals know what their responsibility is for the meeting.

### **Confirmation:**

If it is a first meeting or if the meeting is on a new day or time, individually contact all participants a week to three days before the meeting day. Contact can be as simple as sending everyone a friendly reminder through office e-mail, phone calls, or a post card reminder through the mail. For regularly scheduled meetings, choose a location and meeting time and try not to change it.

Planning does take a certain amount of time, however the burden of planning does not have to fall fully on the leader's shoulders. The leader is responsible for seeing that the planning gets done, not necessarily for doing it. Every step can be delegated. If you are responsible for conducting the meeting and you chose to delegate the tasks of organizing the meeting, make sure you are familiar with the agenda, objectives, and any relevant background information before the meeting begins.

## **HOW TO RUN EFFECTIVE MEETINGS**

The meeting leader or facilitator is responsible for setting the meeting tone, keeping the discussion on track, and making sure everyone has a fair chance of being heard. The leader or facilitator should also summarize relevant points and tie things together when the discussion jumps around between interrelated topics.

Filling the role of leader or facilitator is no easy task, especially when personal agendas clash or misunderstandings occur. Although a well-planned meeting will significantly reduce surprises and meeting confusion, there is no guarantee everything will run smoothly, even with the best planning. Here are some suggested guidelines on how to run effective meetings:

- **Begin on time and end on time** - If you begin a meeting five to seven minutes after it was scheduled, you are starting late. Starting a meeting late sends the message that it's okay to be late and it shows a lack of respect and appreciation for those who make the effort to arrive on time. Some people may have back-to-back meetings. Ending on time shows respect for participants' valuable time. However, no one ever complains if you are fortunate enough to end early.
- **Use the Agenda** - Review the agenda with participants at the beginning of the meeting and ask them if any changes need to be made on time allocations or discussion content. Continually refer back to the agenda throughout the meeting to keep discussion centered on the stated purpose and specified agenda items. Post the agenda on an easel pad and tape it to the wall, this way everyone can refer to the agenda when discussion seems to be getting off track.
- **Use an Ideas Bin** - A "bin" consists of blank sheets (one or two) torn from an easel pad and taped to the wall. Any idea that is unrelated to the current topic is written on the easel pad paper (i.e., placed in the bin). The bin serves two valuable purposes: 1) it stores valuable ideas for consideration at an appropriate and convenient time, and 2) it allows discussion to stay focused on the agenda topic. Using the bin is an effective way to keep discussion focused and it helps people hold onto their thoughts and ideas without being disruptive to the meeting. Explain the use of the bin at the beginning of the meeting. During the meeting the team leader or the facilitator should record bin items as they come up, or participants should record their own bin items when they feel discussion is getting off track.
- **Establish and Use Ground Rules** - Ground rules are explicit rules that the group agrees to follow to help them facilitate productive discussions. Whether the group formulates the ground rules or the meeting leader/facilitator presents them, all group members should reach consensus on following the ground rules. The ground rules should be written down on easel pad paper and taped to the wall for everyone to see. Ground rules lay out the expectations of "the way things should be done at meetings." Ground rules are used to facilitate group interaction, not to restrict it. The group can change the ground rules or add new ones based on group needs. Examples of some typically used ground rules include: arrive and start on time; stick to the agenda; everyone participates; be realistic when accepting follow-up tasks; focus on interests, not positions; separate people from the problem; respect different viewpoints; share responsibility for following the ground rules.
- **Control dominating individuals** - Make sure each individual has a fair chance of expressing ideas and opinions. Do not let one person dominate the discussion. Of equal importance is to ensure that quiet participants are expressing their ideas and opinions. This may require the leader or facilitator to directly call on the quiet member and ask them for their opinion or for any ideas they would like to share.
- **Bring Food** - Food energizes and motivates people more effectively than any other meeting tactic. Although many people still prefer the standard coffee and donuts, alternatives such as fruit, juice, and bran muffins can be provided. For afternoon meetings, cookies, hard candy, fruit, and cheese are several suggestions.
- **Summarize** - Conclude the meeting by summarizing the discussion, decisions made, tasks delegated, deadlines, and any action required by participants. Depending on the time available, either address bin items or place them on the agenda for the next meeting. Include in the summary any review plans for follow-up or the need to schedule any succeeding meetings. It is far easier to schedule the next meeting while everyone is at the table than it is to wait and contact each participant individually.

The responsibility for the success and effectiveness of the meeting ultimately rests equally with everyone in the group. A well-planned agenda, posted ground rules, and using a bin are the three most important keys to running effective meetings. Meetings can be fun and productive. It's easy to get caught up in the pressure of the meeting and lose sight of perspectives. Stress diminishes creativity and spontaneity and generally lowers the quality of results achieved by the group. So relax and remember that the best results come from groups who are able to laugh together, discuss their mistakes, and take pride in their efforts.

#### REFERENCES

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