

Effective meetings

Ever sat through a meeting for hours only to come away thinking, what was the point in that, did we actually achieve anything? If you have, don't despair, not all meetings have to be a chore; a properly organised meeting can be quick, concise and productive, leaving you with a sense of achievement and feeling motivated.

The obvious things that can make meetings happier places are also some of the most effective ones such as reading any minutes or written reports before getting to the meeting so that it can be started in good time. Another obvious thing is good time keeping which can make all the difference to a meeting. Making sure that meetings start on time is very important, especially to those who made the effort to actually be there on time! If someone is late, don't recap what you've covered, doing so sends the message that it is OK to be late for meetings, and it wastes everyone else's time.

To help the attendee's preserve the will to live, state a finish time for the meeting and don't over-run. To help stick to the finish time, arrange the agenda in order of importance so that if you have to rush items at the end you won't skip the more important ones. Let everyone in the meeting know that this is a shared responsibility and that they can all help the meeting reach its goals.

One the most useful things you can do in preparation of a meeting is to write an agenda and circulate it before a meeting, this way members can be invited to add to or amend the order of proceedings in advance and not waste valuable time at the beginning of the meeting.

An agenda is essential if the meeting is to have any structure to it and should highlight all the issues that need to be covered. This way, the items that need to be discussed are at least written down so won't be forgotten and it *should* prevent members of the group going off on a tangent with irrelevant items.

Typical agenda:

1. Apologies
2. Approval of the minutes of the previous meeting
3. Matters arising (including actions from the minutes)
4. Items (list issues to be discussed)
5. Any other business (open to any business not on the agenda)

A good **Chairperson** needs to lead a meeting, to stick to the agenda and be decisive about when the meeting needs to move on from an item. Without this you could find yourself waking up 3 hours into the meeting with no idea of what's been going on only to ask the person next to you who has somehow managed to stay awake but also has no idea.

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A Chairperson needs to ensure everyone's thoughts and ideas are heard by guiding the meeting so that there is room for discussion but not so as any one individual is allowed to dominate. If one particular item is dominating the meeting and no clear resolution can be seen then it may be useful to stop the discussion, quickly summarise it and arrange for it to be dealt with by either a sub-committee or working group. Alternatively suggest that the item can be held over until the following meeting, by which point a clearer more informed discussion may take place, then move on to the next item on the agenda.

Another way to improve productivity at meetings is to create *sub-committees or working groups*. If an item or action is being procrastinated over or looks like it may deserve more time than can be allocated at a single meeting, then delegate a smaller group of people to go away with the issue and come back with options for actions. Sometimes a smaller group of people focused on one particular issue can be more effective than the whole group spending most of the meeting talking about it and never getting around to the other items on the agenda.

Minutes should be brief and concise and should highlight decisions made and actions to be taken. Good minutes act as a simple record of who has done what and who now has to do what, and by when. Copies should be sent to those involved and the minutes should then be approved at the group's next meeting where the chair or in their absence, another honorary officer, can sign them if all present have no issues arising from them.

Finally, don't leave a meeting without assessing what took place, recording any actions that need to be taken and making a plan to improve the next meeting.

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