



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF MEETINGS

Meetings can often feel like a waste of time and are generally hampered by a lack of agenda and poorly defined goals. Sutton and Millar (2011) suggest that there are a number of things that can be done to improve the quality of meetings. See the ten tips below which are based on their work.



1, Know When a Meeting is Necessary.

Organisations should have guidelines around when a meeting should be called and when alternative methods of communication would be equally effective. Meetings are likely to be needed where unresolved issues are impeding progress or where an agenda requires full group input. Organisations need to decide who should be in meetings and how to keep other parties up to speed on progress.

2, Take Time to Think About the Scheduling of the Meeting

However useful the meeting, it is still taking people away from their desks and disrupting the flow of work. Try to schedule meetings so that they cause minimum disruption.

3, Be Realistic About the Time that you Allocate to the Meeting

When arranging meetings, people are often influenced by the neat time slots offered in Microsoft Outlook. It is unrealistic to expect complex problems to be addressed and resolved in the space of one hour and you may need to allocate more time for some meetings. Equally, there are many meetings that can be perfectly effective with a lot less than one hour.

4, Make Sure That you Have a Clear Agenda and That you use it Wisely

Nixon and Littlepage (1992) found that the most effective meetings had clear goals and an agenda that was followed. Carter (2011), however, suggests that rather than following the order of an agenda slavishly, it is more effective to discuss the agenda items at the beginning of the meeting and decide which ones are most important and therefore which ones should be allocated the most time.

5, Encourage People to Participate in the Meeting

Leach et al (2009) found that participants involvement in the meeting had a major impact on how effective they thought the meeting was. People sometimes struggle to participate in meetings either



because they do not understand the topic or do not have the confidence to speak up. Sometimes, it is difficult to speak when there are strong characters or perceived experts in the meeting. The skill of the chair is crucial in ensuring that sufficient information is provide prior to the meeting so that people can equate themselves with the subject matter. Equally, the chair needs to use his/her facilitation skills to try and involve and engage all parties during the meeting.

6, Find a role model

If you are unsure about the quality of your facilitation skills or you feel that your skills could be further improve, find yourself a good role model and observe what they do and which actions appear to be most effective.

7, Choose the Right Environment for Your Meeting

Research has demonstrated that the environment in which a meeting takes place can have an impact on the quality and outcomes from the meeting e.g. some environments are more conducive to creative thought than others. The format of the meeting is also something to consider e.g. Bluedorn et al (1999) found that 'sit-down 'meetings tended to last 34% longer than 'stand-up' meetings but produced no better outcomes.

8, Use Humour but be Aware of its Potential Downside

Humour is a great ice-breaker and helps to create a feeling of friendliness, inclusion and informality. It can, however, also be divisive if the humour consist of 'in-jokes' that not all parties are aware of. People can easily feel excluded and may feel devalued and disengaged.

9, Create a Social Atmosphere for Your Meeting

The better people get on with each other, the easier it is to discuss and explore difficult issues in a calm and rational way. It stands to reason then, that creating a social atmosphere at the outset and during your meeting is likely to pay dividends. In addition, Carter (2011) suggests that if you know that there are difficult issues to discuss at a forthcoming meeting, then if possible, you may wish to meet up with some of the key participants in a social environment first e.g. over dinner. This helps create amicable relationships and a good foundation for productive discussion.

10, Assess the Quality/Effectiveness of Your Meetings

It is good to seek feedback from attendees so that you know which aspects of your meetings are working and more importantly, which ones could be improved. Luong and Rogelberg (2005) suggest that the pace and flow of meetings should be reviewed as part of general effectiveness.