

ORGANIZING AND HOSTING MEETINGS

Guide

Organizing meetings:

- 1) Prepare for the meeting. Many meetings are wasting people's time because they are not prepared well – and the first thing you want to do is to make an agenda. Resist the temptation to “just wing it”; an agenda is a powerful tool that greatly enhances the chances of having a meeting that leaves all the attendees satisfied with the meeting. A good agenda functions in several important ways:
 - a) It increases the likelihood that people will accept the meeting invite, as meetings with unclear agendas – or no agenda – signal that they may be a waste of time.
 - b) It clearly defines the meeting's objectives, helping everybody to be on the same page. For example, “To adjust the sales forecast for Q2 to reflect the expected extra revenue from clients [x] and [y]” is pretty clear, whereas “sales forecast discussion” is vague.
 - c) It provides structure and order to the meeting. And if every item on the agenda is timed, you can better control the timely progress of the meeting. A good agenda makes the meeting effective and, consequently, shorter.
 - d) It helps attendees prepare for the meeting. If you clearly state what the expected preparation is, there are no excuses for not being prepared (remember to provide all attendees with the needed materials beforehand).
 - e) It helps you control the meeting by simply referring to the agenda. For example, if an attendee starts to ramble on about something, you can avoid that he or she derails the meeting by saying, “Thank you for your input. The purpose of this meeting is ... [x]. I suggest that we take your topic in the next meeting / in another meeting / etc.”
- 2) When making the agenda, it's often a good idea to collaborate with some of the key attendees and stakeholders. That way, you get better buy-in to the meeting and make sure you haven't forgotten something. Put the most important and difficult topics first to ensure that they will be addressed in case the meeting is cut short or some other topics take longer than expected. And always make time in the agenda to decide on action items or next steps – numerous meetings end half-baked and with no clear decisions, actions, or responsibilities, simply because time was not allocated for this crucial step. Finally, if it is a long meeting, add short breaks to the agenda for people to check email, get fresh coffee, stretch their legs, etc.

- 3) Next, make the meeting invitation. Limit the number of attendees to only those who really need to be there. Consider who will for sure contribute or benefit from the meeting – and invite only those. Don't fall into the trap of inviting people because you fear that they would get offended if they weren't invited. And always check people's calendars when you invite them to see if they are available (this obviously isn't feasible with customers and partners, etc., where you don't have access to their calendars). Then decide on the length of the meeting; think about how you can make the meeting as effective and least time-consuming as possible; many people default to making meetings that are one hour, two hours, a half hour, etc. But why not 45 minutes? Or 20 minutes? Meetings almost always take up all the time allocated, so try to assess how much time is needed instead of choosing, for example, the standard one hour. Remember, if there are ten people in the meeting, ten people may be wasting their time!
- 4) In case you are trying to get a meeting with someone who notoriously has a very busy schedule, you can use some special strategies to increase the chances that a meeting invite is accepted.
- a) First, you can suggest two or three options to choose from. Be sure to make your suggestions concrete; for example, "Thursday 13:00 or Friday 8:30."
 - b) Second, as people tend to be optimistic about their future being less busy than their here-and-now, you can make an invite for a date rather far into the future, when people's schedules are less filled.
 - c) Third, you can invite for only a short meeting to get the connection made and then only present your top most important topic. For example, you can suggest to meet just 15 minutes or meeting for a quick cup of coffee.

You can combine these strategies.

Hosting meetings:

- 1) If it is a physical meeting, arrive early and test the technology (including a projector, whiteboards, markers, etc.).
- 2) Start the meeting on time; you usually don't wait for latecomers.
- 3) First, establish the objective of the meeting in a few words. Everybody must have the same understanding of why the meeting is being held.
- 4) Make a short introduction round if anyone doesn't know each other.
- 5) Ensure that someone is assigned to take the meeting minutes.
- 6) Ensure that the agenda and the allotted timings for each topic are followed. However, be somewhat flexible with the timings; sometimes, the most productive discussions should be allowed to run longer. Conversely, if conversations are dragging and not leading to much productive outcome, you can decide to move on to the next agenda item before time. The point is that you are responsible for making the most productive use of everybody's time. When the time is soon up for a topic, or for the whole meeting, you should notify all; for example, "Now we have 5 more minutes to wrap this up." You may also delegate the task of keeping track of time to one of the participants if you need to fully concentrate on leading the meeting.
- 7) Ensure that everybody with something relevant to contribute is heard and that the most outspoken people are not unduly dominating the conversation.
- 8) If participants drift off topic, lead them back to the core topic again.
- 9) If a new and valuable topic comes up that is not on the agenda, don't allow it to sidetrack the meeting. Instead, make a note of it and postpone it for a follow-up meeting.
- 10) End the meeting with clear and specific resolutions and actions: what should be done, by who, within which timeframe, and how to follow up.
- 11) Schedule the next meeting date (if applicable).
- 12) Finally, end promptly on time, so everybody's time is respected; the participants may have other meetings or activities scheduled right after your meeting. If you believe it would be productive to extend the meeting, ask everybody in advance: "I believe it would be productive to extend the meeting by 15 minutes. Is everybody ok with that?"