How to Have Better Meetings

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: General

We've all attended unproductive or pointless meetings. Why am I here? When will this end? Why am I feeling frustrated and confused? But done well, meetings can bring emerging issues to the forefront, catalyze exciting ideas, build consensus, and form a sense of connection and partnership. Here are some ways to make your next nonprofit meeting a productive one.

Before the Meeting

Question whether you need to meet. One of the most important questions to ask is: "Could this meeting be an email?" Be selective. Ask: What issue do I want to explore? Is there a problem I want to solve during this meeting? What is the best possible outcome?

Gather the right people. Don't invite everyone just for fear of hurting somebody's feelings, but don't keep the group so narrow that you miss key perspectives. Consider whose input and knowledge are essential to reach the goals of your meeting.

Consider sharing a simple agenda or overview of the meeting goal and key topics. When you share the goal or purpose of the meeting and the topics that will be addressed, you give people the opportunity to brainstorm ideas on their own in advance. This can be especially helpful for introverts, and allow the group to focus its time together on fruitful discussion.

During the Meeting

Order up! Start with the meeting goal and follow with the most important items. Resist the inclination to tackle the easy items first.

Make time to connect. We meet to get work done, but we really meet to connect, and the pandemic years reinforced the importance of connection. Allow a few minutes at the beginning of a meeting for teams to share responses to a question — even something as simple as "What are you most excited about right now, personally or professionally?"

Start and end on time. Waiting for late participants disrespects people who arrived on time. (If you're running the meeting, plan to be there 5 minutes early, so even if you're late, you'll be on time.)

For larger meetings, consider inviting people to accept specific roles. It's helpful to designate or seek a volunteer facilitator as well as a note-taker. In some instances, asking someone to serve as a 'devil's advocate' can be helpful. The devil's advocate identifies possible challenges or gaps in consensus solutions or strategies. Ideally, ask meeting participants to volunteer for these roles.

Ask open-ended questions. If you already know the answer, it's not a good question. Open-ended questions lead to fruitful, generative conversations. A few to try: "What resources would we need to do that?" "How can we get better at this task?" "What might we need to do differently to help our clients at this time?" "What are we seeing on the horizon that we should be thinking about?"

Let others share their ideas before you do. In some team cultures, if the leader expresses a strong view first, others will simply follow the leader. If you've already made up your mind, it's probably too late to ask others for their opinions. If you truly want to hear different points of view, listen before sharing yours. **Give everyone an opportunity to speak.** Invite thoughts from people who don't tend to dominate the discussion by going around the table or virtual meeting room. If someone starts to dominate the conversation, ask them to take over recording notes. That will shift their focus to listening.

End with an action plan. Leave the last few minutes of every meeting to discuss the next steps. Communicate who will make the final decisions on what was discussed at the meeting, when they will do so, and what everyone else's role is.

Resources

- How to Run a Team Meeting – Calendly
- How to Run Effective Virtual and In-Person Meetings – Slack
- Better Meetings Are Possible. Here's How. – NPR
- 9 Ways to Make Your Meetings Matter – Forbes