



Focus

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Five Reasons to Hold a Meeting

People leave effective meetings enthused and with a sense of purpose. They know the time spent meeting was justified by the outcomes.

Then, there are the zombies – lethargic, sapped, and mumbling about anything *but* common goals, shared purpose, and milestones. The slow death march from the assembly place clearly signifies another failed meeting. Poorly-planned meetings depress the human spirit and waste time and money. With a little planning, however, meeting outcomes dramatically improve.

Planning and carrying out effective meetings is an important leadership competency, and, like all competencies, it can be mastered with study and practice. Whether you're meeting by phone, telepresence, or in person, and with one other person or many, always do the following:

- Prepare a written agenda. Use the three meeting components – topics to be covered, desired outcomes, and the processes (building blocks) to reach the outcomes – as a guide for the meeting agenda. For example, a brainstorming session followed by voting on alternatives may be key components of a problem-solving meeting.
- Set and honor a time limit for the meeting. Nothing brings focus like working with a deadline. After all, if deadlines weren't important they wouldn't begin with "dead."

Begin preparing the agenda by defining the meeting goal(s). The goal is the reason for the meeting. If the goal is fuzzy, the meeting is destined for failure.

Meetings on straightforward issues, with limited downside potential in the case of failure, may include several goals. As complexity and what's at stake increase, limit meeting goals to one or two at most.

The top five reasons to carry out a meeting follow.

Make decisions

The most important reason to meet is to make a decision. Nothing beats the immediacy and interaction of gathering as a group to clarify an objective, flesh out alternatives, and evaluate options with balanced listening and advocacy. The more difficult the decision, the greater the importance of a well-run meeting.

Advance the thinking

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making progress in solving a problem or analyzing a situation is the second most valuable reason to meet. A complex project requires systematic thought and a careful assessment of risk and reward. So does making a choice with much at stake. Advancing the thinking on a subject may include identifying root causes, establishing milestones, evaluating options, and identifying critical success factors.

Obtain input

Maximizing the quality of feedback and/or ideas requires face-to-face encounters. The dynamics of group interaction can stimulate thinking or prompt a person to raise a concern that might otherwise go unmentioned. Separating *gathering input* from *decision making* also reduces the time people spend trying to influence others and increases the numbers of options for consideration.

Build capacity

Increasing a team's capacity may involve skill-building, clarifying roles and responsibilities, improving communications, and more. In the context of this article, capacity-building refers to a dedicated meeting devoted solely to training or productivity improvement. For example, building capacity would include developing employee listening skills or problem-solving abilities.

Share information

Meeting just to share information is generally a waste of time in today's interconnected work environment, and I list it here – in last place – to make that point. Except in fast-paced, dynamic environments, information can usually be delivered before or in place of a meeting. Nevertheless, a major part of many meetings is devoted to information sharing, like reviewing the financial report or listening to project manager reports. That's also the most boring part of the meeting, and a time when the attention of participants may wander. If information must be shared, focus on exceptions, or areas where improvement is needed, or topics on which a decision is required; then engage participants in suggestions, advancing the thinking, or decision making.

Also, spend the last few minutes of the meeting confirming key decisions, clarifying action items, and recording responsibilities and due dates. Then distribute meeting notes (unless required, "minutes" with their long narrative passages should be avoided in favor of summaries with lists and bullet points that focus on key decisions made and next actions required) within 24 hours of the meeting. If you cannot get the notes out within a day, most likely they'll be stale and of little use when they are eventually published.

To master your meetings, and banish post-meeting zombies to B-movie land, begin by preparing a written agenda for every meeting or planned teleconference. You'll notice an immediate improvement.

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