

16

Managing meetings



Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

Introduction

Meetings can be hard work! Sometimes even the people who have to be there are bored and think they are a waste of time! However, you will almost certainly have to attend some meetings and the following points will help you to make sure your meetings are productive and even enjoyable.

Why are you having this meeting and who should attend?

A meeting to make a final decision on a project (e.g. to go ahead or not) is very different to a meeting to review possibilities and find out what people already know and who would be good to be involved in the project. Good meetings publish an agenda (what you will discuss) in advance and the best include a statement about what the meeting is meant to achieve (e.g. to identify and agree a response to the delay in delivery caused by customs'). Who should attend will be covered by rules (e.g. a Director of Engineering must be present) and custom and practice (e.g. the Marketing Manager usually comes to the first meeting of any project). People with technical skills or managers who will agree who will work on the project may also need to attend. Try to keep the number of people small but never exclude people who have a reason to be there (even if they can be difficult!).

- Make sure you understand what will be discussed, the purpose of the meeting, who needs to attend and your role in it.

How do you prepare for a meeting?

You can spend more time preparing for a meeting than in the meeting itself! Make sure you have access to all the data that might be needed and spend time thinking about what you want to get from the meeting (e.g. 'I need permission to order the kit now') and an acceptable compromise (e.g. 'I could wait two months until the next financial year but that will make installation of it very tight and any delivery delay could become a major problem'). Sometimes relevant papers are published before the actual meeting. Make sure you have read these and understand the issues being raised - this might involve doing some research prior to the meeting.

- Make sure you prepare carefully and take any relevant documents to the meeting. It's not a good look to say, 'I'm sorry I left that at home!' Have a compromise position ready to use for anything you need from the meeting.

Do you need a chairperson and minutes?

Small meetings of people who know each other well may not need chairing but most business meetings benefit from having a chairperson. A chairperson or facilitator should keep the meeting to time, draw people into the discussion (particularly if they need encouragement) and sometimes ask someone who

is monopolising the meeting to give someone else a chance to speak! The chair should stop people interrupting each other – not always easy! A good way to organise large meetings is to ask people to signal when they want to talk (e.g. a raise a hand) and the chairperson can write their names down and call on them in turn. Notes taken in the meeting can be published as minutes – particularly for more official meetings. It is not usually possible for the chairperson to also take notes, so it is good to have a regular minute-taker or ask for a volunteer at the start of the meeting. Minutes should be published as soon after the meeting as possible.

- Make sure you have a chairperson if needed and support them as they try to manage the meeting.

How can you deal with 'difficult' people?

You may think that a particular person is difficult, but they probably think the same about you! Try to avoid 'triggers' like throwaway remarks or jokes that look clever to you but just annoy them. Try to maintain a calm response to anything they say – you don't need to correct every statement or win every argument. Look for opportunities to build on their suggestions and seek agreement where possible. Also, if you know you're likely to argue with someone in the meeting don't sit opposite them. It looks like a face-off before you even start! Sit next to them, it's much more difficult to argue with someone if you have to turn to look at them!

- Make sure you do not trigger other peoples' anger by silly remarks and try to keep yourself calm if they do it to you.

Why do some meetings seem to achieve so little?

Putting forward ideas in a meeting is called 'proposing'. If everyone in the meeting is busy proposing, there will be lots of ideas, but nothing gets decided because everyone is too busy defending their ideas! To 'build' is to take someone else's proposal and build on it to make the idea better. If someone proposes putting bins in the workshop to collect rubbish for recycling someone else could propose insisting students take all their rubbish away to recycle at home. A smarter person might build on the waste bin idea by suggesting that perhaps there could be separate ones for recyclable and non-recyclable rubbish.

- Make sure you build on other peoples' ideas at least as often as you propose your own ideas.

What are the rules for online meetings?

Online meetings can be more difficult to manage than face-to-face ones because it is difficult to

pick up the visual clues people give out when everyone can see each other. You may need to agree more formal rules for an online meeting (e.g. only the chairperson can invite someone to speak) and use the chat and messaging system to support communication other than just talking and listening. Make sure you know how to use the relevant software (e.g. sharing your screen, switching cameras and microphones off and on and any chat function). People turning up late because of connection issues or not being able to use the software properly when they get there are the biggest annoyances in online meetings. Also, think about what will people see on your computer desktop if you share your screen and remember, computer microphones can pick up comments from people who are not seen in the video feed!

- Make sure you know how to use the online meeting software and will have good internet access when you need to join.



Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. What sorts of meetings need a chairperson?
2. What is an agenda and when should it be produced?
3. What is the difference between 'proposing' and 'building' in a meeting?



Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Think of a meeting you attend regularly. Would you say it works well or not? In what way? Do people know why they have to be there and the purpose of the meeting? Does it make decisions and how does it make them (a vote or the chairperson decides)? Are documents produced before the meeting and do people usually read them? Think about how you would improve this meeting and, if possible, share your ideas with the meeting to create some change.
2. Think about a meeting you are going to join in the next few weeks. What is it for and what do you want to get out of it? Make a plan for what you want to get from it – but be respectful and collaborative ... this is not just shouting and insisting on your own way!