

THE PROBLEMS WITH MEETINGS

Many people who regularly participate in meetings report a majority to be ineffective. For example, one survey* of 635 executives showed that 75% of them were "bothered" by the ineffectiveness of typical meetings they attend. Their reasons are summarized below. Compare your reaction to the meetings you attend to the following negative meeting characteristics:

Meeting Characteristic	"Bothered a Lot"
Poor Preparation	83%
Lack Of Listening	77%
Length	74%
Drifting Off Subject	68%
Questionable Effectiveness	62%
Verbosity Of Participants	60%
Lack Of Participation	51%

From this list it is clear what needs to be done. Now for the guidelines to get it done effectively.

*"Achieving Effective Meetings-Not Easy But Possible," by Bradford D. Smart, Training and Development Journal. American Society for Training and Development reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

SOLUTIONS TO COMMON MEETING PROBLEMS

➤ **Prepare An Agenda**

- ✓ An agenda is a must. It should be prepared in advance and given to participants *before* the meeting.
- ✓ It will serve as a road map to keep discussion on the topic.
- ✓ When distributed before a meeting, an agenda encourages advance preparation; participants will know why they are attending, and be prepared on the topics they are responsible for.

➤ **State Your Objective So Participants Know When it Is Met**

- ✓ The objective of every topic on the agenda should be obvious--if not, the agenda needs more detail.
- ✓ Expect speakers to keep to the topic, and not drift off subject.
- ✓ Use consensus where possible. (Consensus means a compromise is reached that "all participants can live with.") Votes have winners and losers, and losers tend to subconsciously not support or even undermine the decision; with a consensus, everyone wins--and then supports the decision.

➤ **Be Selective When Picking Participants**

- ✓ You want the minimum number of appropriate people. Smaller numbers (max 12) will hold interest and increase participation. You may need to inform some people before the meeting to explain your reason for not including them; offering an opportunity to participate by sending a written report is frequently welcomed.

➤ **Manage Meeting Time**

- ✓ Strike a balance between wasting time and railroading the group. Allow sufficient time for participants to become involved and feel satisfied with the outcome.
- ✓ Start on time. Waiting for latecomers punishes those who are on time.
- ✓ Give each agenda item a time limit, usually 3-4 business items per hour; group agrees to times at start of meeting.
- ✓ If an agenda item reaches the time set, stop discussion, go on with the other items, and return to it at the end of the agenda.
- ✓ Appoint a timekeeper, and then listen to the timekeeper!
- ✓ Keep things moving toward an announced ending time; if exceeding the deadline, all participants should agree to extend the time, or postpone remainder of items until next meeting.

➤ **Take Charge**

- ✓ Use the agenda to keep the discussion on topic.
- ✓ Encourage less active participants by doing "round-robin" discussions where all get a chance to comment--even if it is "no comment".
- ✓ Control those who attempt to dominate by limiting each speaker to one opportunity to express their opinion until all others have had an opportunity to speak. Exception: responding to questions from a participant during a "round-robin."
- ✓ Determine ahead of time the best procedures for achieving the meeting's objective and use them at appropriate times; example: which items (if any) need a vote and which can be decided by consensus.
- ✓ Encourage participants having side conversations to share their conversation with the group.

➤ **Close With An Evaluation of the Meeting and a Summary**

- ✓ Allow participants a minute apiece to state their feelings about how the meeting went: a clear statement of what they liked and what can be done better next time.
- ✓ Every meeting should close with a restatement of the meeting's objective, a summary of what was accomplished toward the objective, and a review of agreed upon actions that need to be taken. Said another way, go down the agenda and mention ACTIONS to be taken by each participant. A good note-taker can focus notes in this manner if it is known that this approach will be taken by the leader. Alternative: close each agenda item with an action statement--but WITHOUT reopening the discussion.

EVALUATE A MEETING

Instructions: Consider the typical meeting you attend, whether in business, at church, in a club, etc. Compare your meeting to the following characteristics of an effective meeting. Check those statements that apply to meetings you normally conduct or attend:

- 1. A working agenda is available prior to the meeting. (A working agenda is one that tells participants what they are expected to do at the meeting and gives them a chance to come prepared.)
- 2. All agenda items have time limits set; participants agree to these time limits before the meeting starts. (10-15 minutes is a typical time for main agenda items.)
- 3. Meeting participants had an opportunity to contribute to the agenda.
- 4. Adequate advance notice of meeting time and place is provided to those invited.
- 5. Meeting facilities are comfortable and adequate for the number of participants.
- 6. The meeting begins on time.
- 7. The meeting has a scheduled ending time; extensions are agreed upon by all present.
- 8. The use of time is monitored throughout the meeting; an agenda item that reaches the agreed upon time limit is stopped and continued at the end of the agenda.
- 9. No one tends to dominate the discussion.
- 10. Everyone has an opportunity to present his or her point of view at least one time on each subject.
- 11. Everyone has a voice in decisions made at the meeting.
- 12. Participants listen attentively to each other without interrupting.
- 13. The timekeeper helped the speakers keep to the topic under discussion.
- 14. The meeting is evaluated by participants, each stating good points and things to improve next time.
- 15. People can be depended upon to carry out on time any action agreed to during the meeting.
- 16. A memorandum of discussion or minutes of the meeting is provided to each participant following the meeting.
- 17. The meeting leader follows up with participants on action agreed to during the meeting.
- 18. The appropriate and necessary people are invited to the meeting.
- 19. The appropriate and necessary people can be counted on to attend each meeting.
- 20. The appropriate and necessary people can be counted on to be prepared on each topic.
- 21. When used, audiovisual equipment is in good working condition and does not detract from the meeting.
- 22. Decisions are by consensus: an agreement by compromise that may not be everyone's FIRST choice, but that everyone can "live with."

Number of Statements Checked _____ x 5 = _____ Meeting Score

A score of 80 or more indicates you attend a high percentage of quality meetings. A score below 60 suggests work is required to improve the quality of meetings you attend.

RATE YOURSELF AS A MEETING LEADER

Instructions: Check each of the following questions based on how you act (or would act) as a meeting leader and participant. Be honest.

- 1. Do I have clear objectives for the meeting?
- 2. Am I selective about the invited participants?
- 3. Do I prepare an agenda, with suggested discussion times, and distribute it in advance of the meeting?
- 4. Do I arrive early enough to check the arrangements?
- 5. Do I start the meeting promptly regardless of who is present?
- 6. Do I follow the agenda?
- 7. Do I manage time and conclude the meeting as scheduled?
- 8. Do I elicit everyone's participation?
- 9. Do I help in the resolution of conflict?
- 10. Do I maintain proper control of the discussion?
- 11. At the end of the meeting, or at the end of each discussion, do I summarize actions to be taken?
- 12. Do I prepare and distribute a memorandum or minutes of discussion?
- 13. Do I request evaluative feedback from participants at the end of the meeting?
- 14. Do I take agreed upon actions?
- 15. Do I follow up on actions to be taken by others?

RATE YOURSELF AS A MEETING PARTICIPANT

- 1. Do I typically know the purpose of the meetings I attend?
- 2. Do I have a clear understanding of my role in meetings attended--why I am attending?
- 3. Do I confirm my attendance in advance of the meeting?
- 4. Do I complete required "homework" such as looking up information or bringing necessary papers?
- 5. Do I arrive at meetings before they are scheduled to begin?
- 6. Do I engage in side conversations while the meeting is in progress?
- 7. Do I leave meetings for reasons such as personal business? (Do the leader and participants know that I plan to leave early?)
- 8. Do I ask questions when I am not sure about something?
- 9. Am I typically open to the ideas of others?
- 10. Am I a good listener? Do I avoid interrupting others?
- 11. Do I actively participate in discussions when there is something worthwhile to contribute?
- 12. Do I help others stay on the subject?
- 13. Following meetings do I take agreed upon action?
- 14. Do I contribute to improving meetings by giving feedback to the people who conduct them by participating in evaluating the meeting at the end, by a note, phone calls, or visit?
- 15. Following meetings do I inform appropriate people who did not attend about what was discussed and the outcome?