

Managing Effective Meetings: A Powerful Tool for Leaders

By Ed Oakley

Anyone can hold a meeting. Forming a work group and conducting a productive meeting, however, is a greater challenge. This article has tips for meetings that get results.

Determine the outcome or objective of the meeting

Having a clear purpose goes a long way to ensuring a successful outcome. Ask yourself and/or the participants questions like:

- What would be the most valuable thing we could accomplish with our time?
- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- How does this meeting contribute to the organizational goals and objectives?

Plan in advance

Abraham Lincoln was notorious for planning and said that for every 1 hour spent planning, it would save 8 hours in implementation. Considering the project failure rates in organizations it would be hard to argue with him.

- Determine the type of meeting (i.e., problem solving, brain storming, dissemination of information, etc.) and what format will support that purpose.
- Assess what information or other preparation will be needed. How will you communicate the results to others not participating in the meeting, but who need to be apprised of the outcome?

Choose the participants

Select those who have a reason to participate. Those attending should:

- Have a thorough knowledge of the meeting subject-matter and be ready and able to make a valuable contribution.
- Be responsible for implementing decisions or bringing a project to the next stage; represent a group that will be affected by decisions made at the meeting.

Between four to seven people is generally ideal for any meeting, ten is tolerable and 12 is stretching the limit. Meetings tend to be more productive when the number of participants is low. In large group meetings, there is less opportunity for individuals to participate and consensus decision-making becomes extremely time consuming and frustrating.

Roles

Determine what roles will be needed (i.e., someone to take notes, story board, present important information, etc.). The most critical role is the facilitator. This person is responsible to meet the meeting objective, keep it on track and tactfully ensure no one person dominates the meeting. Select a facilitator who will make sure the ground rules are followed and maintain a neutral stance.

Develop guidelines

These are often created once and reused in subsequent meetings. It is helpful to list them on posters or flip charts that can be referred back to again and again. Some examples are:

- No criticism
- Confidentiality
- No one will be interrupted while speaking
- Ideas won't be judged in order to encourage creativity
- Start and end on time
- Don't present a problem without being able to present a solution.
- It's ok to pass

We have found that a fun way to enforce guidelines is to take a piece of paper, crumple it up, and, if someone violates a guideline, throw it at them. It keeps the mood light while still sending a very important message.

Use meeting openers

These can be fun and getting the meeting off on the right foot. It is important that the expectation be set up front to only take one or two minutes in order to minimize time impact. Some examples are:

- What would you like to get out of this meeting?
- Share something about you no one else in the room knows about.
- What has been the best part of your week?
- Where are you having success in you area right now?

Use visuals

Most people can see what you are presenting better than they can hear it. Doing both will ensure your message gets across. Use flip charts and white boards to set the agenda, brainstorm, or present ideas.

The parking lot

It can be easy to get stuck on issues that might be important, but not directly tied to the objective of the meeting. Using a flip chart list the items as they come up. At the end of the meeting resolve what actions need to taken to deal with them.

Questions

Jack Welch once said, "When managers ask questions, they aren't looking for answers, they're looking for validation." Questions are a powerful meeting tool. They elicit participation, ideas and creativity.

Even if you already know the answers, asking the right questions engages people. People embrace and own what they participate in. It creates ownership, accountability and a greater commitment to produce the results.

A case in point. An Inventory Control Manager shared that at his weekly meetings he essentially dictated what came down from above, sharing the numbers and then asking: "Any questions?"

After participating in our workshop he started using Meeting Openers and Closers at the weekly meeting, as well as using Effective Questions to invite participation throughout. One key question he began to ask each participant was: “What can we count on you to do?”

There is now much more involvement and much better attendance. As a result of the improved communication in the meetings, the participants continue to ask better questions in their respective areas.

They have reduced the amount of overtime. All of those who impact Inventory Control are engaged and own it, versus only the managers and supervisors.

Their meetings shifted from information dissemination to active participation and ownership of improving results.

Focus on the end in mind

Think about the last time you were asked, “Why isn’t this working?” or “Why aren’t you hitting your targets?” How helpful are those questions? What people really feel is being asked is “Why are you such a screw up?”

Brain research has discovered that the mind literally operates by asking itself questions. This is how we learn. It automatically focuses people on the question being asked.

So the quality of what we learn, how we learn, and where we focus it is directly attributable to the quality of the questions we are running on. How does this relate to meetings?

A Quality Systems and Audit Manager took over a new group. There was a perception of unfairness and bickering; everyone was mad. He found that they were arguing over the number of audits they were supposed to do every day. It seemed that some people just audited easy boxes, leaving harder audits to others.

The manager asked: “What can we do to improve this situation and make it fair?” They came up with a point system. Each person had to have so many points per day - easy audits score fewer points, harder boxes earn more points. He asked: “How do we make this work?” They all helped develop the process and benchmarks. As a result they all bought-in to making it happen.

Now they’re talking to each other. They ask each other “How did you do it?” They now share the best practices so everyone tries to get above the required points. Friendly competition was established. There is no more in-fighting and complaining.

Effective questions not only turned this meeting around, they also engaged the participants in creating a solution to the problem. A problem that, because they had created, they owned.

Also, notice how their questions became infectious, and they began asking questions amongst themselves and created a continuous learning environment.

Questions ought to focus on the outcome of the meeting, constantly referring the group back to the meeting objectives. They should be opened ended and forwarded focused. “Why aren’t you hitting your targets?” should be replaced by “What do we need to do to hit our targets?”

It is really a simple matter of focus. Do you want them focused on all the reasons something won’t or isn’t functioning, all the while feeling frustrated and probably angry? Or, do you want them focused on what it’s going to take to produce the results? Questions will get you to either place depending upon which ones you ask.

Meeting closers

Wrap up each meeting by summarizing what was accomplished. Here is a brief checklist:

- a. Have tasks that were created during the meeting been assigned a “who will do what and by when?”
- b. Were the objectives of the meeting met? If not, is another meeting required?
- c. How effective was the meeting? What could we improve on for next time?
- d. What did you get out of the meeting?
- e. What issues (PARKING LOT) came up that we were unable to resolve? What actions steps should be taken?

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