

Effective Meetings: 6 Tips for Making the Most of Your Time



Everyone wants to run productive and effective meetings. The problem is that a meeting is a double-edge sword. It can be a great way to share information or engage in participatory group planning if run correctly. They can also be a massive waste of time if not. How can you ensure that you are planning effective meetings? Try a few of these tips...

Running Effective Meetings Tip #1: Choose Your Meetings Wisely

Some people's knee-jerk reaction to a problem is "Let's have a meeting!" But face-to-face meetings are time-consuming, and there may be another more effective way to handle the situation. Ask yourself the following questions before choosing to meet:

- If you need to disseminate information, could you do it with a memo or report?
- If you want to engage in a dialogue, can you set up a phone conference?
- If you are trying to brainstorm a decision, may participants submit their ideas in writing?

If a meeting will most efficiently accomplish your goals, great – have one! Otherwise, look to the alternatives.

Running Effective Meetings Tip #2: Select Your Audience

It's also important to make sure that the people who attend your meeting:

1. need to be there
2. can contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

Let's assume that you are going to have a budget meeting. You should ask the following questions to make sure that this is an effective meeting:

1. Does your entire organization have to gather to set your annual budget?
2. Would you accomplish more if you invited a select group of participants who are most directly involved in financial planning?



3. Do you need to meet separately with every department team leader?
4. Could you consolidate these individual appointments into one group assembly to save time?

After answering these questions you should be better equipped to decide how to run the meeting and who needs to be involved.

Running Effective Meetings Tip #3: Plan Ahead

As they say in football, the best defense is a good offense. This is also true with meetings. Try to avoid “impromptu” gatherings – you’ll get better results if you plan in advance. This gives participants ample opportunity to clear their schedule and prepare mentally for the task at hand.

You should ask attendees for any discussion items a week prior to meeting and send out the completed agenda 2-3 days before the event so that everyone can review it.

Running Effective Meetings Tip #4: Start on Time

One of the biggest challenges for any meeting is controlling how long it takes. Be clear up front about the start time, and don’t wait for stragglers. Think about convening at an odd time – people are more likely to arrive promptly for a meeting that begins at 3:42PM instead of 4PM. Also avoid asking people to gather on Monday mornings or Friday afternoons – you almost guarantee attendees will be running late and low on energy.

Running Effective Meetings Tip #5: End on Time

In order to end a meeting on time, you must:

1. know exactly what topics you plan to cover
2. allot a set amount of time for each issue
3. have a method for keeping participants on track

Use your agenda and minutes to guide the discussion. Assign a timekeeper to signal each move to the next agenda item. You can either control the discussion or it will control your meeting.

Limit the time each person is given to talk, don’t be afraid to cut someone off if needed, and keep things moving from debate toward action. Running effective meetings requires rules, boundary lines and someone who is willing to enforce them.

Running Effective Meetings Tip #6: Be a Good Meeting Participant

The responsibility of running effective meetings does not lie entirely with its planners. It is also up to you, as a participant, to help the meeting along. Prepare in advance by:

- reviewing the agenda
- writing down any questions or issues you want to bring up
- collecting all of your materials together in a single folder or project file

If you have a lot of material, subdivide it onto categories in a classification folder. That way you can get to information quickly in the meeting. Confirm the meeting time before leaving and plan to be 5 minutes early so you can settle in.

Always bring a pad and pen so you can take your own notes (never rely just on the meeting minutes!) Take time at the end of the meeting to clarify any assignments you have accepted, their deadlines, and the method of reporting back. If you follow these simple guidelines you will be well on your way to running more effective meetings.

by Ramona Creel

