

## Top Ten Tips for Effective Meetings

How often have you heard yourself or others commenting, or even complaining, “I spend all my time in meetings and there’s never enough time to do what I agreed to do in the meeting.”? Meetings are a necessary part of our professional lives. They’re not going away, but we can learn to manage them better. Below are just some of the many tips I discuss with leaders who are looking for solutions to running more effective meetings.

### 1. Is there a real purpose to the meeting?

Yes, meetings are one of the most effective ways of sharing information and organising actions. However, not all meeting organisers are that clear about their purpose for the meeting and what the measure outcomes need to be. Start here, examine what’s required and then determine if a meeting is the best way of achieving it. In some cases, a series of phone calls and face-to-face conversations with individual stakeholders may be the best approach versus hosting a meeting of numerous stakeholders. Understand the primary purpose of the meeting, and although there may be secondary purposes, try not to cram too much into a single agenda. Chances are you won’t get through it all, and then the feelings of ineffectiveness may continue or worse, increase. Simplicity and clarity of purpose are critical.

### 2. Have you included the necessary stakeholders and what do each of them want to achieve?

You may be clear about what you want to achieve with the meeting, but what about the other stakeholders? Everyone will be coming to the meeting with a different “framework” or perspective and needs they’re operating from. Sometimes we refer to this as the individual’s agenda. It may be helpful to be clear about who needs to be there based on their needs and who needs to be there based on the project or purpose needs overall. As you consider each person to invite, it may be helpful to contact them personally and discuss the purpose of the meeting from yours and their perspective, and then agree about their attendance or how you’ll update them of the appropriate outcomes if they don’t attend. As the meeting organiser, this is ultimately your responsibility, even if you delegate someone else to various tasks associated with it.

### 3. What is the accountability to the outcomes of the meeting?

Is there an agenda prepared in advance? Do the participants know what to prepare for, what to expect to be discussed, and what decisions they will be asked to make? Meetings need outcomes, and the best outcomes are those that are measurable. Who is going to do what, when, why is this important, and what are the ramifications if it's not completed within the required (or promised) specifications? Time and time again we see recurring meetings where particular stakeholders advise that they haven't completed their commitments from the last meeting. Be clear about how you want to handle these situations both privately with the individual and publicly within the subsequent meetings.

Also within this point is being clear about how you'll manage the situation where key stakeholders advise last minute they can't make the meeting due to other priorities. It can be quite easy for some to simply not be reliable to attend meetings, which can greatly reduce the effectiveness of the event. These situations may involve one-on-one conversations with the individual around the topics of commitment, priority, responsibility and buy-in to the process (the "what's in it for me?" conversation).

### 4. What could you accomplish if the meeting was scheduled for half the time?

When planning your meeting for an hour, imagine what you would have to do differently to achieve the same results if you only had half an hour. What different behaviours would you demonstrate before the meeting in terms of briefing the participants and preparing them for the event? What would you do differently facilitating the meeting? And what follow-through behaviours would you put into practice afterward to ensure the outcomes and commitments are being met? Now consider that those behaviours for the half-hour meeting may also be suitable for the hour meeting to be more effective. Give it a try even if you have all the time in the world. The other participants who have tighter schedules than you may thank you for it.

## 5. Are you using technology effectively and for the right reasons?

Most of us have heard the term, “Death by PowerPoint”. Do you engage in this meeting killer practice? If so, you may wish to consider seeking out a coach or trainer to assist with presentation effectiveness skills. Do you use phone and web conferencing effectively? If the technology isn’t up to scratch, and/or the quality of the connection is poor, these technology issues become a distraction for the facilitator and the participants and it makes it extremely difficult to focus on the purpose of the meeting. Consider running mock events to test the technology, and then improve the system, before using it on the real participants.

Also consider that not all of your participants may be as comfortable with technology as you are. Be sure to spend the time to get the individuals comfortable with the use of the system before throwing them into the meeting. Otherwise, those individuals may be more focused on their frustration with technology and therefore not fully “present” to participate.

## 6. Is there an effective leader, facilitating the meeting? Maybe someone not emotionally linked with the outcome? Maybe rotate the chair?

Some leaders are great visionaries, but not necessarily great organisers. If this is you, are you willing to relinquish the chairing of the meeting, and instead provide the opening vision? Is there an experienced and successful meeting facilitator within your team that you can hand this crucial role over to? You are not losing face in taking this opportunity, but instead may be inspiring others to do the same for their own meetings. Outsource the organisation to the most qualified. You may also wish to consider rotating the chair of the meeting so that the entire team can learn these effectiveness skills. At the end of the day, you’ll never be short of effective meeting leaders.

## 7. Are you asking for commitments and timeframes? What about the 24 hour rule?

One of the biggest shortcomings we find in meetings is the lack of commitments being documented and then followed through and measured at the next meeting. Each participant, and at the very least the chair of the meeting, needs to have the authority to challenge the stakeholders to make real commitments with real time frames attached.

The “24 hour rule” is that for when agreeing to a course of action for an objective, if the individual commits to and accomplished the first task with 24 hours, they will then double their chance of success at the overall objective, as compared to those who don’t commit to something in that timeframe will then reduce their overall chances of success.

Consider this exercise: Schedule a one hour meeting, but you know you only need half an hour. When the agenda is worked through in 30 minutes, advise the participants that the remainder 30 minutes they had scheduled for this meeting is now to be dedicated to accomplishing the first step(s) of the commitments they’ve made today. Everyone leaves the meeting and immediately takes action.

## **8. How do you manage excuses and “problems” and keep the group solution and action focused?**

We’ve all experienced meetings that seemed to be more of a whinge session than an effective meeting. In rare instances, that may even be the purpose of the meeting. But the majority of times, there is a real opportunity to move past the excuses and get solution focused. There are two primary ways of addressing this:

At a group level, you can set the solution-focused expectation and demonstrate the necessary behaviours to challenge excuses, ask for options and gain commitments to action. As excuses pop up, challenge the team equally with the individual to come up with a solution. You have a choice of calling the individual up on their excuses-focused behaviour in the presence of the group or not. Depending on the environment and culture of the group, either choice can be an effective strategy.

At an individual level, you can privately challenge and coach individuals who are not demonstrating effective behaviours. Sometimes it’s about an attitude shift from seeing “problems” to seeing “opportunities.” If you don’t feel you have the necessary skills to coach someone around this concept, who can you engage to assist? The foundation for this must be the intent to support the individual to grow versus a performance management framework.

### 9. Get yourself invited to a meeting run by someone known for their effectiveness and learn from them.

There are experts all around us. Are you utilising their knowledge and skills effectively? Not every leadership skill has a classroom solution to it. Sometimes we need to explore who's great at something, and then be open and brave enough to ask for their assistance and mentoring, even if that person is at a lower position in the organisation than you are. You set a great example to others by doing this, and in many cases you are extending a great compliment to the person with the skills you wish to learn from, by recognising their strengths and expertise.

### 10. What change would occur if you removed all the chairs from the meeting room?

The Japanese have learnt a great lesson in facilitating meetings in rooms without chairs. Everyone must stand up and get through the agenda in record time. If the meeting is dragging out, the physical discomfort the participants go through may encourage them to advance the course of the meeting. There are pros and cons to this approach as you can imagine, but do you also see how there may be parts of this style that might provide benefit to some of your meetings? Is it worth a try?

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