



Mastering Effective Meetings

Effective meetings take a lot of preparation, but can get a lot accomplished in a short amount of time. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

By: Kate Smith, Special Projects Coordinator, Dennison Railroad Depot Museum, Dennison

Early in my career I wanted to make sure I was on the right track. I asked several people to brainstorm some ideas that would help guide me in my new position. I scheduled a meeting with an idea of what I wanted to accomplish but was care free about the details. It was far from a 'good' meeting. Attendees were late and conversation was unorganized. My meeting was in no way "effective,"

and it was clear that I was clueless on how to run a quality meeting.

Unfortunately, meetings sometimes get a bad rap because they can be unorganized, are poorly facilitated, or have attendees that are unfocused, show up late, and are distracted by their cell phones. I hope this list gives you some tools to make your next meeting effective and leaves people wondering when they can meet with you again!

Have a Clear Objective/Goal:

Whether it's a one-time meeting or a routine staff meeting, every meeting needs a clear goal to get off to a great start.

Be Respectful of Time: I've had a glance at my boss' schedule. It's overwhelming how many meetings she is expected to attend and then get some work done on top of it. People are busy. Make sure you are meeting only when necessary and have a plan

(continued on page 3)

Building Your Agenda

I gave a presentation on effective meetings several years ago. I interviewed ten professionals to get some stats for my talk. One of them said, "I think agendas are a must for meetings. In fact, I hate meetings that don't have one." The other nine responses were similar. No matter how it looks, agendas are a necessity for an effective meeting. Here are some quick tips for developing a great agenda!

Send agendas out ahead of time. It not only serves as a reminder but helps everyone to prepare for the meeting.

Don't forget to schedule breaks.

You should also plan to stick around after the meeting for a few minutes. If someone tries to pull the group on a tangent, you can suggest that they meet with you afterwards to chat.

I always try to end a few minutes early, if possible.

At the bottom of the agenda I like to list any upcoming meetings. Occasionally, if we need an extra boost of progress, I'll even put how many days until the event.

(continued on page 1)

to accomplish as much as possible. Start on time. End on time. Stay on track. Be sure to inform attendees of exactly what they should expect at the meeting, as well as the time commitment involved. All will be happier at the end of the meeting when something has been accomplished in a short amount of time.

Good Timing is Key: You may want to avoid Monday morning meetings, as many may forget so early in the work week. Steer clear of Friday afternoons as well. Check with your committee about meeting in the evenings or weekends, and beware of the holidays! It is safe to assume most people are either on vacation, or wish they were on vacation, the whole month of December.

Be Prepared: As the leader of the meeting, your main jobs are to make sure objectives are met, agendas are followed, and distractions are kept to a minimum. To meet these objectives, preparation is key. Arrive early and be ready when others arrive, be educated on what you're discussing, stay on track, set ground rules if needed, end on time, and make sure you are available after the meeting for additional questions. Be careful to leave no items "hanging" unless you make a decision to table them. If you ignore them; so will everyone else.

Agenda, Agenda, Agenda: Come to the meeting with an organized agenda and make it clear that you will be sticking to it. Agendas range from simple to very specific. Send it to attendees early, so they attendees can prepare. Notify anyone who is expected to give a report ahead of time. If you're planning a long meeting, be sure to schedule breaks.

To Snack or Not to Snack: The great debate. Some opt for snacks

because it's ideal for meetings where you want to encourage networking or brainstorming. It promotes a social atmosphere and conversations. Frankly, if your meeting reminder indicates there will be donuts or pizza, I just might show up! Some steer clear of snacks. They feel it's a distraction, an expense and leads to more needed breaks. Decide which works best for your meeting.

Consider Room Set Up: Room set up can make or break a meeting. Be sure your location has necessary equipment available and comfortable seating. Theater, U-shape or classroom style is ideal if you need to give a presentation or stage yourself as the leader of the meeting. Conference and square setups are best for conversation. If you're incorporating a meal, banquet style may be the way to go.

Take Notes: Write down any great ideas and who is doing what. You may want to ask someone else to take notes so you can focus on the meeting.

Difficult People: Whole books have been written on how to handle

difficult people during meetings and you can never stop getting better at it. Try to anticipate any problems that may arise and have a plan for how to handle them. Stay calm when an outburst or an obvious physical display is causing problems at your meeting. Be prepared to change the subject, meet with someone individually, or address the problem right then and there.

After the Meeting: Send out notes or minutes. You may also want to send reminders or follow up with individuals to ensure they're making progress on their tasks. Make sure you do your tasks as well!

Alternatives: Consider other options for meeting. Conference calls, online messaging services and shared document programs may help you to accomplish your work in a different fashion that better suits your team.

In sum, an effective meeting takes a lot of preparation. I encourage you to try these tips and see if you leave your next meeting feeling eager to have another. Good luck! ■

Building Your Agenda (continued from page 1)

If you've done this much work, be sure to follow through and check on everyone's progress between meetings.

If you have a motivated group, a general agenda may do the trick. If not, a specific agenda may be needed. Here are some suggestions for fitting everything in on time:

- Consider adding the start and end times to your agenda.
- Add times for reports and changes in discussion directly on the page.
- Encourage reports or ask others to lead portions of the discussion if you have trouble getting good conversation. I put the names right on the agenda so they know it's coming! Make sure if someone is asked to give a report they know in advance.
- Schedule a recap at the end of the meeting to tackle any unresolved issues or review your task list.

Use your agenda as the main tool to keep your group focused and on track. Keeping people on the agenda can be challenging but so worth it when you've had a quality meeting. ■