

So You're Leading a Meeting?

By Dianna Booher

You have attended scores of them. Probably even a few this week. And for some reason, the thought of sitting in on another one leaves you nauseated. They're called *meetings* and they're an integral part of business life—here to stay.

Understand the basics of how to conduct a meeting and you'll be known as one who gets things done; neglect these basics and you'll only waste everyone's time.

Meet for the Right Reason

When you call a meeting, know the reason. Skip the meeting if you have nothing special to discuss, if you don't need others' input, if you have already made up your mind about a course of action, or if getting others involved would only complicate your plan.

Do call a meeting if you need to present information to a large group quickly and you don't want to write it down, if you want input from others on your idea, if you want to gain "buy in" or motivate and energize the team about an idea.

Set an Agenda

Some people think that agendas lend too much structure to a meeting, that people can't be spontaneous, or that the atmosphere will be too formal. That's like saying if you plan for a vacation by packing the right clothes, arranging for transportation, and deciding on a destination, that you can't relax and be spontaneous along the way.

When leading a meeting, set an agenda and stick to it. Use active verbs, summarize the issue at hand in one sentence, and let the group know what you expect on each issue—"for discussion only," "to collect data," or "for decision."

Whether you follow the agenda or take an occasional detour, having an agenda will give others the peace of mind that the meeting is going somewhere.

Stay Out in Front if You Intend to Lead

Nothing frustrates and turns off meeting attendees more than having a leader who doesn't take control. State your role at the beginning and what authority the group will have.

You don't have to have all the answers, do all the talking, or make all the decisions, but you should be out in front. Either lead or give the responsibility to someone else and get out of the way.

Someone is always in charge of a meeting. If it's your meeting, make sure it's you.

Select Attendees Carefully

Selecting your list of attendees is as important as choosing which issues to discuss. Ask the right people and you have a good chance of having a lively, informed, useful exchange of ideas. Ask the wrong people and you establish a war zone.

Don't seek popular people, persuasive people, or positioned people—seek the *right* people for your purpose.

Own the Setting

Just as an athlete has a distinct advantage when competing on his home field, a meeting facilitator can also know and own the turf.

If you want authority and a no-nonsense atmosphere, schedule the boardroom. If you want an energized group, go for a well-lit conference room. For an informal chitchat session, try someone's office. If you want to play host, provide coffee or snacks in a parlor or schedule the meeting for a nice restaurant.

Ask yourself what atmosphere you'd like to create in your meeting and plan accordingly.

Meetings don't have to be another "necessary evil." They can be the most efficient and effective way of getting quality work done quickly, completely, and on time—without merely creating more work.

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For more tips on effective meetings, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.