

Managing meetings

Meetings are essential for team working and getting things done. But done badly, they can feel like a waste of time and energy. Read on for six tips for successful meetings.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. minutes
2. to acknowledge
3. to dominate
4. underlying
5. efficient
6. vocal
7. clarification
8. to put someone on the spot

Definition

- a. to be the loudest or most noticeable part of something
- b. being productive with the least use of time or effort
- c. to accept or recognise the importance of someone or something
- d. a written record of what is said at a meeting
- e. often expressing opinions by talking
- f. to force someone to answer a difficult question
- g. under the surface or not immediately obvious
- h. a clear and easy-to-understand explanation of something confusing

Managing meetings

We've all been in badly managed meetings: meetings that seem to go round in circles without any decisions being made; meetings that are dominated by the same few voices; meetings where people talk and talk with no clear purpose; meetings that seem to go on forever ...

A European survey found that the typical staff member spends 187 hours a year in meetings. The report suggested that 56 per cent of those meetings were considered unproductive. In a survey of office workers across the UK, it was found that each employee cost their company an average of £38.50 for every meeting they attended.

So how can we have more efficient, effective and even inspiring meetings? Here are six tips.

1. Set a clear agenda.

An agenda is a list of points to be dealt with at the meeting, in the order in which they will be discussed. If you have a long list of bullet points, consider prioritising the items and breaking each topic down into its key issues.

Indicate on your agenda how much time you'll be spending on each topic, who will be presenting or leading it and whether a decision or some kind of solution will be needed. Also, remember to send out the agenda a few days before the meeting so that participants have time to prepare.

2. Review the attendee list.

When we are busy, the last thing we need is an invitation to a meeting we don't really need to attend. So, consider carefully who needs to be there. Invite someone to a meeting if:

- the points on the agenda are relevant and the decisions will affect them
- they have expertise to contribute
- they have the authority to make the decisions required.

3. Keep the meeting focused on the agenda.

Follow the agenda and politely redirect participants back to it if you find that they have gone off-topic. Introduce the idea of 'parking' ideas and discussions that are not strictly relevant or urgent. This gives you the chance to acknowledge ideas and issues that might be important to the participants but which are not a priority right now. You can then follow up by including 'parked' ideas in the meeting minutes and exploring them at a different time.

4. Encourage participation and be sensitive.

The most vocal participants might not be the ones with the best ideas. Give everyone a chance to speak and encourage participation from quieter colleagues. However, avoid putting anyone on the spot. Also, be sensitive to underlying issues and emotions and help the group deal with conflict in a productive way.

5. Clarify, check and record.

Don't assume that everyone understands each other, especially when the meeting language isn't everyone's first language. Ask for clarification, summarise each time a point is made, check that the participants agree and ensure that decisions are made. Ask someone to take notes of what is being discussed and ensure that action points – tasks to be done and who will do them – are recorded in the minutes.

6. End the meeting on time.

Meetings that don't end on time can leave participants feeling tired, frustrated and stressed. So, assure your participants that the meeting will end on time and set the timer on your phone to ring about five to ten minutes before the end. Use the last five to ten minutes to summarise and bring the meeting to a close.

If we all make an effort to make every meeting we attend an efficient and effective one, meetings can help us communicate well and be part of a productive team.

Sources:

- <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/how-long-spend-meetings-year-thirteen-days-uk-workers-average-a8542861.html>

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the three correct answers for each question.

1. Which of these are examples of badly managed meetings?
 - a. Meetings that don't finish when they are supposed to
 - b. Meetings where only the loudest people get to give their opinions
 - c. Meetings where no decisions are needed
 - d. Meetings where discussions go off-topic

2. Which of these are true?
 - a. The average European office worker spends nearly 200 of their annual working hours in meetings.
 - b. According to the survey report, the majority of meetings were productive.
 - c. A meeting with ten participants would cost a UK company about £385.
 - d. Unproductive meetings are a waste of time and money.

3. Which of these should you do when creating an agenda for a meeting?
 - a. Consider which of the items are more important.
 - b. Create subheadings or a list of smaller points for each topic.
 - c. Show which items need to be resolved during the meeting.
 - d. Send the prepared agenda to the participants an hour before the meeting.

4. Who should be invited to the meeting?
 - a. People who will be affected by the decisions made in the meeting
 - b. People who can follow the conversation via email or the minutes
 - c. People who have the knowledge to deal with the issues on the agenda
 - d. People who have the power to make the required decisions

5. What should you do when someone goes off-topic?
 - a. Tell them they've gone off-topic and they should be quiet
 - b. Suggest they 'park' their thoughts in the 'parking lot'
 - c. Record their thoughts or ideas in the minutes
 - d. Follow up on their thoughts or ideas at a different time

6. What should you do during a meeting?
 - a. Insist that everyone speaks
 - b. Remember that some people might be unhappy about certain discussions
 - c. Clarify and summarise each point
 - d. End the meeting on time

Task 2

Write a number (1–8) to put the steps in the correct order.

- _____ Go through the points of the agenda.
- _____ Start the meeting.
- _____ Prepare the agenda and consider who needs to be invited to the meeting.
- _____ Send out the agenda to the participants.
- _____ End the meeting.
- _____ Redirect participants when they go off-topic and summarise each point.
- _____ Follow up on 'parked' topics and issues.
- _____ Send out the minutes of the meeting.

Discussion

Have you been in any badly managed meetings?

Answers

Preparation task

1. d
2. c
3. a
4. g
5. b
6. e
7. h
8. f

Task 1

1. a, b, d
2. a, c, d
3. a, b, c
4. a, c, d
5. b, c, d
6. b, c, d

Task 2

1. Prepare the agenda and consider who needs to be invited to the meeting.
2. Send out the agenda to the participants.
3. Start the meeting.
4. Go through the points of the agenda.
5. Redirect participants when they go off-topic and summarise each point.
6. End the meeting.
7. Send out the minutes of the meeting.
8. Follow up on 'parked' topics and issues.