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Leadership Essentials

Managing Meetings

A collaborative leader runs productive meetings



Meetings can vary in their format, structure and tone, depending on the subject of the meeting and the general atmosphere of the organisation. Each type of meeting has a different goal, and the purpose and topic of the meeting will affect who speaks, how much they speak and the general tone of the meeting.

Formal meetings are pre-planned and follow a set agenda overseen by a chair person, with a record taken in the form of minutes of the meeting. An informal meeting generally does not have these characteristics, although there may be a chair and some informal notes may be taken. An example of such meetings might include a weekly team briefing.

Deciding whether a meeting is the appropriate option:

Your first considerations are the purpose, the participants and the desired outcome or the objective. Questions that can help you here are:

- Is a meeting necessary and what is to be achieved?
- Is there another more suitable alternative such as phone call, video conference, letter, memo or e-mail?
- What is the desired outcome from the meeting?

Types of Meeting

There are four main types of meetings that are frequently used in organisations, to address important issues.

Information meetings

These are the most straightforward meetings where one member, usually the chair, has factual information or a decision which affects all those present, which they need to communicate. These meetings are usually formal as their aim is to help participants interpret the information, discuss any implications and understand how to put the information to use.

Decision making meetings

These types of meetings tend to follow a structure whereby the problem is fully described, analysed, ideas are encouraged, then evaluated and a conclusion is reached.

Problem solving meetings

In these meetings the chair describes the problem as clearly as possible. Participants are selected according to their experience, expertise or interest and then given all the information to enable them to generate ideas, offer advice and reach conclusions.

Consulting meetings

These are meetings held to discuss a specific issue and can be used to gather participants' views on the topic, such as reviewing a policy, inviting comments, exploring the advantages, strengths or weaknesses of a new initiative.

Planning for a Meeting

All meetings should have:

- a clear purpose to ensure everyone knows what is expected
- take up the minimum amount of people's time
- ensure the most appropriate people are invited to attend and know why they are present

Participants need to prepare themselves to give the best possible contribution and read any supporting information. Ahead of formal meetings an agenda, with supporting documents, should be distributed to all

those attending at least two days prior to the meeting to give everyone time to prepare. It also allows time for participants to consult with others who may be affected by the topics discussed.

The agenda should include the following information:

- date of the meeting, start and finish times with location
- the meeting objectives and topics to be discussed in a logical or priority order

The agenda normally begins with a review of expected actions decided at the last meeting and either at the start or end of the meeting there may be an item called 'Any other business' (AOB). This is an opportunity for important or urgent items that have arisen since the agenda was distributed to be included.

Attending a Meeting

If you are attending a meeting, you should have been invited for your interest in, or your relevant knowledge about, the subject of the meeting, and you will be expected to contribute to the meeting.

It is important that you prepare well, read any material provided with the agenda and check that you have the most up to date versions of any documents.

You may need to consult with your team members, who may be affected by the focus of the meeting, to gather their input and views that you will need to represent at the meeting. You may want to do your own research in preparation for the meeting if you have sources of information that are relevant to its objectives. Your aim should be to make relevant, constructive and helpful contributions so you get a reputation as someone who is good to invite to meetings.

Participants may well come from a variety of different areas, departments or outside organisations and may not normally work together, so you may find there is a lot of discussion, challenge or disagreement. There are likely to be a range of different personalities participating – some people are quiet, reserved, reflective and thoughtful. Others are more outgoing, talkative and seem to find it easy to make their contribution.

Sometimes it can feel quite challenging to make your points clearly so that everyone hears them. Remember, you need to make a contribution and present the views of your department or team, while listening to others' viewpoints and asking them questions to clarify understanding. The best way to become an effective meeting participant is to get as much practice as you can and use every meeting as a learning opportunity.



Managing Disruptive Meetings

If you are leading or facilitating the meeting you may have to deal with challenging or disruptive behaviours. If an individual disrupts the purpose of the meeting by discussing irrelevant and off-topic issues, whether intentionally or not, it is important that you act as quickly as possible to get the meeting back on track. You can do this by thanking the individual for their input, but reminding them of the need to get back to the agreed topic or agenda in order for the meeting to meet its objectives. If the issues raised are important, you might also suggest agreeing another time to discuss these after the meeting is over.

Practical tips for leading a meeting

If you are responsible for leading a meeting, make sure that you:

- Are clear about the objective(s)
- Undertake necessary preparation (including paperwork)
- Invite the right people to attend
- Prepare the venue and seating arrangements
- Ensure essential equipment is present and working
- Start and finish on time
- Ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate and listen to others
- Encourage the views of quieter members, they may have as much to contribute as the more talkative participants
- Keep the meeting on track in terms of time and focus
- Avoid allowing individuals to dominate the meeting
- Manage conflict
- Support effective record keeping and monitor completion of agreed actions

References

Leigh, J & Seely, J *One Step Ahead: Organising and Participating in Meetings* Oxford University Press

Peberdy, D & Hammersley, J (2009). *Brilliant Meetings: What to Know, Say and Do to Have Fewer, Better Meetings* Pearson Education Ltd



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