

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Planning and Leading Effective Meetings

Almost everyone has had the experience of a long, dull, unproductive, disorganized meeting. Great meetings don't just happen automatically—they're designed. Successful meetings are planned with the people, goals and processes needed to make it successful in mind.

Meetings have several functions. They move group actions forward by presenting information and collaborating. They provide a venue to review, evaluate, discuss, problem-solve and reach decisions. Colleagues may also meet for social reasons, to satisfy their need to belong, and their desire to communicate, build and share a common reality.

Using this three-step process to design and conduct an effective meeting will ensure that you meet both the task and social functions of a meeting:

1. Preparation (before the meeting)
2. Conducting a meeting (during the meeting)
3. Follow-up (after the meeting)

Before the Meeting

Being clear and organized in advance can go a long way towards making a meeting run smoothly and effectively. Here are some tips to try and help everyone be prepared:

- **Be clear about objectives.** If participants don't understand the purpose of a meeting, it will wander in as many directions as there are participants.
- **Create a solid agenda.** Outline topics to be discussed, along with a time budget for each item. Start by looking at the meeting's objective, since your agenda is the path to achieving it.
- **Distribute the agenda, along with any background material and lengthy documents, prior to the meeting** so participants will feel prepared, involved and up-to-date. This also saves time during the meeting.
- **Choose an appropriate meeting time and length.** Remember, people have other time commitments. They will be more likely to attend meetings happily if you make them productive, predictable and as short as possible.
- **Arrange the room so participants face each other in a circle, semicircle or U-shape.** Choose a location suitable to your group's size to avoid the stuffiness and tension of a small space.

During the Meeting

The process is important. People will be happier and bring more to the table if they know what to expect in a meeting. Here are some items to help improve the meeting's productivity:

- **Start on time and end on time.** Be respectful of everyone's time commitments.
- **Set ground rules.** Most people attend meetings with expectations of how others should act. Have the group identify important expectations. Some common ground rules are: One speaker and topic at a time, respect other's points of view, don't interrupt, and be honest.

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- **Review the agenda and ensure everyone is clear about what the priorities of the meeting are.**
- **Encourage all points of view and get ideas on the table.** You will make better decisions and have more motivated participants. Meetings improve when people see their feedback has an impact on the decision-making process.
- **Keep conversation focused.** Tactfully end discussions when they are getting nowhere or are becoming destructive or unproductive.
- **Keep minutes.** Don't worry too much about details, and focus on tabled issues, decisions reached and items for follow-up.
- **Summarize agreements reached.** End the meeting on a positive note.
- **Set a date, time and place for the next meeting.**

After the Meeting

Seeing action come of their input will encourage all participants. Make sure to:

- **Prepare and distribute minutes of the meeting within a few days** to reinforce the importance of the meeting and reduce memory errors.
- **Follow up on delegated decisions.** See that all participants understand and carry out their responsibilities.
- **Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of your meetings.** Note any areas that can be improved on for better productivity.

Use the following meeting evaluation checklist to ensure you run an effective group:

Meeting Evaluation Checklist

- Participants were notified in advance and given a pre-arranged agenda.
- The meeting started and ended on time.
- The purpose for the meeting was made clear.
- There was a transition from the last meeting.
- One topic and one person had the floor at a time.
- The meeting facilitator summarized the main points of the discussion.
- Everyone was clear as to what action items they were responsible for.
- Everyone participated and expressed their thoughts.
- Plans for the next meeting were arranged.
- Minutes were distributed within a few days of the meeting.

Meetings can become the most productive part of the working day. If you think of every meeting as a chance to gather valuable input and implement ideas, everyone involved will come to value the process and see results.