

# Meeting Challenges



by David Elam

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As a project manager, effective communications are central to your work. Undoubtedly your communication channels involve meetings, including face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, and videoconferences. And you're probably frustrated and annoyed that meetings are not as effective as you might expect. You likely find that meetings are called without clear objectives, that they start or end late, that participants arrive unprepared, and that follow-up actions are not completed as agreed. It's not just you—a simple online search will yield numerous statistics about the ineffectiveness of meetings. The good news is that as either leaders or participants, we can meet and overcome the challenges of ineffective meetings.

You have the greatest ability to control meeting effectiveness when you serve as the leader, even in an organization where ineffective meetings are the norm. The following steps will help you prepare for and lead an effective meeting.

## 1. Establish and communicate the meeting objective.

Although some meetings may be called without a clear objective, the more common situation is that the individual calling the meeting doesn't clearly communicate the meeting objective. Your meeting will be more effective and productive if participants have an advance understanding of meeting objectives.

## 2. Prepare an agenda and distribute it in advance of the meeting.

Agenda templates are available online or in word processing software and make it easy to create an agenda. Your agenda should include the meeting objective, meeting time and location, participants and responsibilities, and time allocation for each agenda item. Be sure and distribute the agenda far enough in advance of the meeting to allow participants to comment on the agenda and prepare for the meeting.

Beware of the "standing agenda." A standing agenda can breed complacency. If you find it necessary to use a standing agenda for a regular project meeting, take time to customize it to reflect

the objective of the specific meeting. For example, for a regularly scheduled status review meeting, replace the generic item "deliverables status" with a specific requirement for a named individual to provide an update on the progress and completion forecast for a specific deliverable.

## 3. Explain what must be done in advance to prepare for the meeting.

Project meetings are objective- or results-oriented. If it's a kickoff meeting, participants should review the project plan in advance of the meeting, reflecting on their responsibilities and interactions with others. If it's a status review meeting, participants should be familiar with the deliverable and their contributions to it. If it's a problem-resolution meeting, then participants should be familiar with the problem, what caused it, and how to solve it. Let people know what they should do to prepare for the meeting.

## 4. Keep the meeting on time.

Start and end the meeting on time and honor the time commitments for each agenda item. If you are using audio or Web conferencing, make sure you know how to use the technology so that you can start the meeting on time and effectively manage meeting flow. Avoid acknowledging the latecomers who announce their entrance with "sorry for being late." Although people may not come to love your meetings, they will know that they won't have to wait for the slackers, that they will be out on time, and that their preparations will be put to use.

#### 5. Allow enough time for action item development, review, and documentation.

Effective meetings provide a clear path forward and often generate action items for follow-up outside of the meeting. It is important to capture these action items, clarify any requirements while meeting participants are present, and establish completion dates for identified actions. If this portion of the meeting is rushed or neglected, the meeting objective may not be achieved.

#### 6. Distribute meeting minutes.

As soon as possible after the meeting, distribute an appropriate summary of the meeting. It is usually sufficient to list the participants, what was accomplished, and agreed-upon action items and schedules. Often, it can be useful to distribute the meeting record to individuals who did not attend the meeting, but may be affected by the meeting outcome. For example, supervisors or resource managers may be more supportive of the meeting participant's contribution to action item completion if he or she understands the scope of the commitment.

### Be a Good Participant

Even if you don't lead the meeting, you can still take steps to improve the effectiveness of someone else's meeting.

#### 1. Understand what is expected of you when you are invited to a meeting.

You can limit your attendance at many meetings by simply asking about the meeting objective and your role. You may find that you may be able to submit information without attending the meeting or your question may prompt the organizer to more thoroughly plan his or her meeting.

#### 2. Prepare for the meeting.

Once you know what is expected of you, prepare for the meeting so that you can fulfill that role in the allocated time. You'll leave the meeting with forward-looking action items and you may avoid a follow-up meeting to discuss the same information.

#### 3. Be on time.

You're wasting other people's time and being disrespectful when you arrive late for a meeting. If for some reason you must join a meeting late, let the organizer know in advance so that meeting can begin as scheduled.

#### 4. Complete your action items as agreed.

A common complaint about meetings is that there isn't follow through. You can contribute to meeting effectiveness by doing your part to follow through on action items. You'll also find that people are more likely to follow through on action items for your meetings if you follow through on action items for their meetings.

Meetings will remain an important activity for successful, engaged project managers. And while technology has produced new options for conveniently conducting meetings, those options have not produced better meetings. Instead, it is increasingly convenient to participate in ineffective meetings more frequently! As either leaders or participants, we have the ability and the responsibility to improve meeting effectiveness. When we accept our responsibility to influence meeting outcomes, we're well on the way to meeting the challenge of challenging meetings. **em**

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