Three Simple Steps to More Effective Meetings

No matter what kinds of meetings you chair or attend, three simple steps will help decrease the amount of time you spend in meetings and increase the effectiveness of those meetings.

Keep Your Meetings from Becoming a Black Hole

Conservative estimates indicate that professionals spend one to two days out of every week in meetings – that's at least 1/5 of a work week.

In fact, professionals are becoming more and more frustrated with the number of meetings they must attend and are questioning the value of those meetings. Some have even labeled meetings as a black hole in their workday representing time that's been wasted and lost.

By understanding the three steps to more effective meetings, you can make your meetings effective, efficient, more productive, and better attended.

Three Steps for Effective & Efficient Meetings

Most people think of the actual time spent in a meeting as all there is to a meeting. Not so. To be more effective and efficient, professionals must recognize the three critical steps involved in meetings.

1. **Planning the meeting**
2. **Conducting the meeting**
3. **Following up after the meeting**

#1 Plan Your Meeting

How many times have you attended a meeting and had no idea what the meeting was about? Odds are when the meeting ended, you felt like you had wasted your time. You weren't able to prepare, or worse – maybe you shouldn't have attended the meeting at all.

Determine Your Meeting Purpose

Planning your meeting is the critical first step. The people attending your meeting need to know why you are having a meeting and why they should attend. Determine the objective of your meeting, and make sure the objective clearly outlines why the participants need to attend.

Determine the Type of Meeting

Once you establish your objective, determine what type of meeting is most appropriate. Some meeting objectives are more conducive to quick, impromptu formats. Others require more preparation and more time.

We find that most meetings fall into one of three categories. Following is a brief description of each type of meeting.

- Huddles or Stand-up Meetings

- Information Sharing or Status Meetings
- Problem-solving or Working Meetings

Huddle

- Brief, informal meeting. Normally lasts 5-15 minutes.
- Usually takes place in the work area and anyone can initiate it.
- Purpose is to share minor issues or problems that can be addressed immediately, including making daily work assignments or discussing the day's priorities.
- Does not need a formal agenda, but decisions and action items should be documented and distributed – especially if some team members were not in attendance.

Information Sharing

- Scheduled, formal, and often routine meetings lasting 15-30 minutes.
- Purpose is to ensure that all members have a chance to speak up and to ask questions about the topic (otherwise, information could be communicated in a memo or email).
- Should have a formal agenda, ground rules, and assignments for meeting roles.
- Used to report progress on action items and to update meeting attendees. Should only be used when the group doesn't have major decisions to be made or problems to be solved.

Problem Solving

- Scheduled, formal meeting that usually lasts 1 to 2 hours.
- Purpose is to solve a problem the group previously agreed to work on together and to make decisions.
- Should have an agenda, ground rules, and assignments for meeting roles.
- Emphasis is on participation, interaction by all members, and consensus building.

Develop an Agenda

Once you have determined the type of meeting that is most appropriate for your objective, you should develop an agenda that is sent out at least 24 hours in advance.

A well-thought-out agenda will go a long way in ensuring your meeting is effective and efficient. An action-oriented agenda should clearly outline the purpose of the meeting, the expected outcomes, and any prework that participants should complete.

The agenda should also include all of the logistical information that participants need including the date, starting and ending times, location, participant list, and meeting roles.

Visit our Tool of the Month to see an example of an action-oriented and detailed agenda and a template you can use for your meetings.

#2 Conduct Your Meeting

Now that your detailed agenda has been sent to your participants at least 24 hours before the meeting, you are prepared to conduct your meeting.

Start and End Your Meeting on Time

Time is a valuable commodity for today's professionals. Meetings that start late and end late eat up their valuable time. One of the best ways to respect participants' time and improve your meetings is to start them on time, stick to the agenda, and end them on time.

Meeting Ground Rules & Roles

Ground rules are important in helping you conduct an effective meeting. These guiding principles will determine how you conduct and behave in your meeting. Assigned meeting roles that involve others are also important and will help you stick to the agenda and the time allotted.

Ground rules may include items like the following:

- Start and end on time
- No sidebar conversations
- No cell phones or PDAs during the meeting
- Use round robin for discussions

Meeting roles could include a timekeeper to help manage the time, a scribe to capture action items, and a gatekeeper to keep the meeting on topic. Having other people actively participate in running your meeting increases buy-in and ownership of the agenda and helps the group accomplish the meeting objectives.

Use Effective Involvement Tools

To ensure that everyone participates in discussions and engages in decision making, use proven tools such as round robin – each person shares one thought on a subject and passes to the next person. Other formal problem solving tools help you engage the group in making good decisions and developing effective action plans.

#3 Follow Up After Your Meeting

Following up after your meeting is the last critical step in making your meetings more effective. How many times have you been involved in a meeting in which you make important decisions and outline clear actions– only to never hear about them again?

Distribute the Action Minutes

Action minutes captured during your meeting outline the *who, what,* and *when* of decisions made and any next steps. Immediately following the meeting, you should distribute your action minutes to ensure that participants understand their commitments and responsibilities. Then you will need to follow up.

Follow Up, Follow Up, and Follow Up

If the group agreed to meet again, those participants who have action items should provide an update on those actions at the subsequent meeting. If the group is not reconvening, you will need to contact individuals to ensure they are following through on their action items.

When the majority of the actions are completed or you meet your goal, develop a summary of the group's efforts along with their results. People like to feel that time spent in the meeting was valuable, and recognizing their efforts will encourage ongoing participation.

Follow the Three Steps

A recent survey by Office Team, a staffing service specializing in skilled administrative professionals, found that "runaway" meetings are some of the biggest time wasters in the workplace. More than 27 percent of workers polled said meetings are the largest culprit for inefficiency and lack of productivity. Don't let your meetings become a statistic.

By following the three simple steps for effective meetings on a consistent basis, you can avoid having them turn into a black hole of wasted and lost time for your organization.

Use the effective meeting checklist below as a quick reference guide when preparing for your next meeting.

If you found this article helpful and would like to read more, please go to our website at: www.collegiateproject.com And browse our ERP Library.

Effective Meeting Checklist

1. Plan the Meeting

- ☐ Schedule the meeting.
- ☐ Include only those who must be in the meeting.
- ☐ Choose a location and meeting room layout that will facilitate an effective meeting.
  - Participants should be able to sit at a table
- ☐ Prepare an agenda.
  - State in terms of desired outcomes.
  - Establish priorities.
  - Establish flexible time limits on items.
- ☐ Distribute agenda and background information in advance using email.
- ☐ Have copies of forms (handouts/electronic) including agenda and action minutes.

2. Conduct the Meeting

- ☐ Start the meeting on time.
- ☐ Read the ground rules.
- ☐ Review the agenda and the time allotted. Review or appoint meeting roles.
- ☐ Review the purpose, objective, or mission.
- ☐ Use involvement skills to ensure participation and commitment.
- ☐ Use meeting processes to ensure participation and commitment (i.e., Round Robin or NGT.)
- ☐ Review action minutes and decisions made.

3. Follow-up on the Meeting

- ☐ Distribute the action minutes as soon after the meeting as possible.
- ☐ Follow-up on discussions and commitments.
- ☐ Check with the participants on the progress of action items before their due dates.