

Host a Constructive Meeting in 9 Steps

Accomplish tasks and avoid wasting your colleagues' time

By JADA A. GRAVES

October 4, 2012



Office meetings aren't meant for discussing weekend plans, reality TV, or football games—lunchtime is (cutthroat, but true). Still, many of us waste what's meant to be productive office time waiting on the late meeting-goers, engaging in extraneous chatter, and fielding distractions. According to Susan Heathfield, a management consultant, company owner, and the writer of About.com's Human Resources section (humanresources.about.com), more meetings would stay on task if people considered both the time and expense required to sit in on one. "Meetings are one of

the most expensive things that organizations do, when you think of all the salaries of all the people sitting in. And organizations don't do the simplest things to make sure their meetings pay off," she says.

Follow these nine steps for staying on task before participating in your next office meeting:

Step 1. Set an objective. Determine whether what you need accomplished warrants a meeting before you request people's precious time. Don't take colleagues away from their jam-packed schedules if a well-written and proofed email might achieve the same end result. "Meetings should be for making decisions or setting explanations of what needs to be done. They should have a goal and should have an attainable outcome," Heathfield says. "Meetings should never be set to go over data, to read things, or to review things."

Step 2. Create a detailed outline. Piggybacking off step 1, "have an agenda and stick to it," says Laura Leist, a certified professional organizer and founder of the professional organizing services company Eliminate Chaos. Schedule big-ticket items for the beginning of the meeting, when you have your co-workers' undivided attention.

Also write out your agenda and distribute it before the meeting takes place. Then on Game Day (aka meeting time) that crib sheet can help you stick to what's scheduled. The advance prep on your part will also give your co-workers the time needed to do their own pre-meeting prep. "I hate meetings where you show up, look around the room, and everyone is reading a paper," Heathfield says. "That's something that could be done ahead of time."

Step 3. Be conscientious of time. You know what the meeting's purpose is and have a written outline of tasks, so now you're ready to set the time. Be sensitive to the fact that you're utilizing your co-workers' time and aim for frugality. "Consider scheduling a 45-minute meeting instead of using a whole hour, or a 25-minute meeting instead of 30 minutes," says Leist, who tackles many of the same issues in her book *Eliminate the Chaos at Work: 25 Techniques to Increase Productivity*.

Heathfield adds: "The American populace has gotten in the habit of scheduling one-hour meetings. Take a careful look at your agenda and goals, and set the time frame needed to get them accomplished."

Step 4. Schedule for the middle of the week and the middle of the day. Avoid Monday blues and dodge Friday ennui. "Shoot for Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday," Leist says. "Tuesday is especially great, because you've got the rest of the week to schedule follow-ups or find out about actions set in the meeting."

And both Heathfield and Leist warn against planning a late-afternoon session. "It's a terrible idea to set a meeting between 3 and 5 in the afternoon," Heathfield says. "Your co-workers are worn out by that time and won't listen as well."

Duck the early morning, too. "Avoid setting something for when people first get in," Leist says. "A lot of people have stuff left over from the night before that they need to wrap up, or things have hit the fan when they first arrive at work and they need to handle it." The sweet spot would be after 10 a.m. but before noon, so that people still have good energy and aren't too hungry for lunch.

Step 5. Start on time. Set an example of how efficient you want the meeting to be by actually beginning at the time you set. Also consider giving incentive for other participants to arrive on time, Leist suggests. "Set a rule that the last person in the room has to take notes."

Step 6. Stick to your agenda. An effective moderator has to keep the meeting moving and put the kibosh on tangents, from funny anecdotes to even work-related issues. "Personal agendas are a significant thing that derails meetings and takes them in an entirely different direction," Heathfield says.

The meeting's attendees can share the responsibility by economizing their words wisely. "The more people who speak just to be heard, the more people are going to tune out," Leist notes. "Be sure that when you speak up, you're going to contribute to the subject matter at hand."

Step 7. Stand up for short meetings. Office employees tend to sit too much as it is. Spend a 15-, 20-, or 30-minute meeting on your feet to get the blood circulating and inspire brevity. "You tend not to get complacent. You're going to discuss the discussion points and then move on," Leist says.

Step 8. Give breaks—and treats—for long meetings. Sometimes a half-hour jam session won't cut it. But powwows that last longer than 60 minutes should also allot break time. And Heathfield recommends providing snacks to keep energy up for completing the tasks at hand.

You might also try opening a lengthy session with a team-building exercise. "I came up with something last year called my 'one-word icebreaker' and my audiences have gone hysterically happy over it," Heathfield says. "You could go around the room and ask people to describe how they see the company in one word. It helps to get people energized and motivated."

Step 9. End on time. Or better yet, end early. Heathfield recommends concluding the traditional hour-long meeting on the 50-minute mark instead. "That gives people a 10-minute window to make it to whatever else they have scheduled," she says.

"The minute you go over is the second that you're implying you don't care about other people's time," Leist adds.