

How to Run an Effective Meeting

Every manager will be responsible for running a meeting at some time. While many people dread meetings, they can be productive, and even invigorating, when well-run.

There is an art and a science to running effective meetings that many people never take the time to learn. Formal meetings require planning and structure, as well as a format conducive to productivity. Here are some tips for running a great meeting:

Get the word out Give everyone adequate notice of the time, place, and purpose of the meeting. If documents will be discussed or referenced, provide copies to participants beforehand and ask that they read them. Be sure to have extra copies of the documents at the meeting.

Start on time Set a clear start time and adhere to it whether everyone is there or not. This is especially important with a meeting that takes place regularly. While it's all right to occasionally delay the start of the meeting due to extenuating circumstances, if you consistently start late because you're waiting for everyone to show up, the rest of the crew will start to arrive late, thinking, "Those meetings never start on time, anyway." Have a specific end time, too. Although meetings may occasionally run over, things generally move along more quickly when there is a scheduled end time rather than an open-ended one. Adherence to established time frames demonstrates respect for participants' time.

Make everyone comfortable Be sure there's adequate seating at a large enough table or room. Ideally, everyone should be able to make eye contact. Provide refreshments when possible, and ask everyone to turn off their cell phones and pagers or to set them to vibrate. Mention that taking non-urgent calls is disruptive and distracting.

Have a printed agenda. It gives structure to the meeting. Participants know what's coming and can follow along. Having a printed agenda helps keep the meeting moving because participants can see what's left to discuss and know how much time remains.

Lead the group, but don't control it Throw an idea out there, give supporting data, and ask for input. Be sure everyone has a chance to speak. There will always be those who are talkative and those who are quiet. As the group leader, it's your responsibility to make sure every voice is heard. If someone tends to dominate the discussion, you can tactfully say, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet." And since some people won't chime in on their own, you could say to someone who is quiet, "Frank, what are your thoughts on this?"

Discourage side conversations. Healthy debate is good, but if an argument erupts, you'll have to intervene. If someone responds in anger or interrupts another, say calmly but firmly, "Let Janice finish talking. Let's hear her out before reacting."

If the conversation goes off on a tangent, bring it back to the main subject. If a discussion goes on too long, you could say, "We're going to have to move on to the next topic. We have a lot to discuss in the remaining time. Let's wrap this up."

Summary At the end of any meeting, it's a good idea to recap any decisions and agreements made, repeat any follow-up that is required by specific members of the team, and mention a day and time for the next meeting.

Like everything else, running an effective meeting is something you get better at with practice. But by following these simple guidelines, you're guaranteed to run a more effective meeting next time.