

The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme in association with ProSeminar

Making meetings work

Complaints about time wasted in meetings are common. Unfortunately training seems to be primarily aimed at chairing skills, but every participant has a role to play in ensuring the effectiveness of a meeting - in a sense 'everybody's a chairbody'. Most meeting time is actually spent in meetings which don't have a formally recognised 'chair person' - any gathering of two or more people for the purpose of discussion is a meeting.

Here are some tips to help everyone get the best out of meetings of all sorts.

1. Before agreeing to meet, check the purpose of the meeting. Does your understanding of the purpose match that of the other party (parties) involved?
2. Check if it's really necessary to meet face-to-face. Could a planned and scheduled telephone discussion substitute and save unnecessary travel time?
3. Does the situation really require your input? Could others manage without you?
4. Based on your understanding of the purpose of the meeting, anticipate the information needs of the other parties and circulate appropriate documentation in advance. Don't waste valuable meeting time reading out what others could have read before.
5. Check the schedule of the meeting. Try to make sure it takes place at a time convenient to you. Particularly if travel is involved, avoid accepting meetings at a time which can eat up a whole day.
6. Agree a finish-by time for the meeting. This applies even if it's an impromptu meeting. Finish-by times provide a useful discipline and help to keep discussion focused. Finish-by times are also essential if you're to plan your other work. If someone suggests a three o'clock meeting, ask them 'Three to when?' or 'How long do you think we'll need?'

7. Identify your personal objectives for the meeting in terms of 'what do I want to be able to do, or need to be able to do, by the end of this meeting?' Write the objective out in one or two succinct sentences and use this as the starting point for making meeting preparation notes.
8. Having worked out your objective, think about what you need to do to achieve the objective. What information do you want to give the other party(s)? What information do you need from them? Make a list of the points you want to cover as part of your meeting preparation notes.
9. If the meeting is likely to involve negotiation or compromise, identify to yourself your essential interests - those upon which you cannot compromise. Make sure you don't lose sight of these essential interests during the meeting. Think also about ideal outcomes and pursue these, but be prepared to be creative and to explore win/win approaches.
10. At the outset of the meeting agree with the others a structure for the meeting and the ground which will have to be covered. You can even tell people what your objectives are in terms of what you want to achieve by the end of the meeting. While formal meetings may already have an agenda, informal meetings need to ensure that an agenda building process takes place at the outset. Note down the agreed agenda items and use the agenda to keep discussion focused.
11. Accept that discussion may go off at a tangent. Tangential conversations may be necessary and can be creative. Use your notes to ensure you can unravel the tangent and get back to the main structure of the meeting. Try to make sure that issues don't get left in the air when a tangential conversation leads you off one topic onto another.
12. Don't add to or elaborate upon other peoples' 'red herrings'.
13. Clarify and agree specific action points for each issue under discussion. Identify who is to do what by when. Write notes.
14. Be wary of the pitfalls of face-to-face communication. Try to communicate clearly. Anticipate and avoid possible ambiguities. Listen carefully to what people are saying. Make sure you hear what they say rather than what you think they're going to say. Be alert and responsive to the hidden messages or signals others may be giving. Signals provide opportunities for exploration.

15. Be constructive. Avoid emotional responses. Choose your words and tone carefully. Always keep your objective in sight and adopt a rational strategy to achieve it.
16. Don't be afraid to voice your own views even if you think you might be the odd one out. Too much conformity can lead to poor decisions. Challenging the consensus can be helpful. Remember the Emperor's new clothes.
17. Before the end of the meeting, check your preparation notes to make sure that you've covered all the points you wanted to cover and that you are now equipped to do whatever comes next.
18. Write up your notes soon after the meeting, even if they're only for your file. Confirm action points by memo or letter.
19. And finally. Make sure you do the things you've agreed to do. Follow-up.

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