



ANATOMY OF GREAT MEETINGS



3M Meeting Network

If you're like most people, you're not thrilled by the meetings you spend your time in. There's a reason for this. Great meetings don't just happen automatically — they're designed. Producing a great meeting is like producing a great product. You don't just start building it. You start by designing it, planning it and thinking about what people, equipment and processes are needed to make it successful.

In this 3M Meeting Guide, we'll outline the pieces that go into a really great meeting. These are the things to start looking for — and keep your eye on — when you desire great meetings. In other 3M Meeting Guides, we'll elaborate on these topics.

Why meet?

People meet for a variety of reasons. Generally, we meet in order to move group actions forward. We call this a task focus. To do this, participants do two things in meetings:

- They present information to others.
- They collaborate — review, evaluate, discuss, problem-solve, decide — with each other.

But people also meet for social reasons:

- The need to belong.
- The need to achieve and make an impact.
- A desire to communicate, build and share a common reality.

In planning a meeting, remember that for the task needs to be met, the social needs must be met *and* for the social needs to be met, the task needs must be met.

Is it possible to satisfy both? Yes! Just plan for both your meeting content and your meeting process. The meeting content will address task needs while the meeting process attends to social needs. And, be assured, paying attention to process ensures that tasks get done!

Meeting content: A focus on the task.

1. *Be clear about the meeting's objective.* Why is this important? Because if participants can't articulate the clear purpose of a meeting, they will make up their own. If this happens, your meeting will wander in as many directions as there are participants.

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Declaring a clear objective isn't a lofty goal and doesn't have to take an hour to do. Just be sure that the reason for coming together to present and collaborate has been clearly stated to all participants.

Here are some clear objective statements for meetings:

- To design next year's marketing strategy.
- To gain consensus on the new manufacturing process standards.

2. *Create a solid agenda.* An agenda is an outline of things to be discussed at the meeting, along with a time budget for each item. To create your agenda, first look to the meeting objective, since your agenda is a path to achieving it. Then look to the participants since they will also have ideas about what is important.

Two important tips about the agenda:

1. *Prioritize agenda items in terms of importance to most participants.*
2. *Assign realistic amounts of time to each agenda item.*

3. *Prepare in advance.* Take the time to prepare for the meeting. This may take only a few minutes to collect your thoughts and jot them down or it may take hours for a formal presentation. But advance preparation will allow the meeting to move forward smoothly, eliminating wasted time and the impression that the meeting was unproductive.

Meeting process: A focus on the people.

1. *Who will participate?* On a small project team or task force, it will be easy to determine who should participate in meetings. However, in other situations, it's not always a clear choice. These questions provide a useful filter for choosing participants:
 - Whose input do we need?
 - Who's needed to make a decision?
 - Whose buy-in do we need to move forward?

Answer these questions and you'll know who needs to be there. Doing so may also eliminate a lot of your meetings. Many meetings are held whether or not key participants are available, but then you have to meet again when they *can* be there. You can save yourself and everyone else the headache by choosing participants appropriately and scheduling meetings to accommodate key participants' calendars.

2. *What ground rules or agreements will serve the group?* A powerful way to meet the social needs of team members and keep them focused on their task is to take the most important process expectations and turn them into agreements. Why? Most participants come to a meeting with expectations of how others should act. If expectations are met, people have a satisfying experience. If expectations are violated, then people become upset or withdrawn.

How do you turn expectations into agreements? Discover important expectations and make them *explicit* rather than *implicit*. Some helpful agreements include:

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- Start and end meetings on time.
 - Hold one conversation at a time.
 - Honor points of view that are different than yours.
 - Don't interrupt.
 - Speak openly and honestly.

3. *Decision-making process.* If you want participants to be engaged in and committed to the meeting, the decision-making process should be clearly understood. Doing this will ensure that peoples' decision-making behavior is consistent with expectations. There are three basic decision-making processes:

- *Autocratic*, where a leader makes the decision.
- *Democratic*, where each participant votes and the majority rules.
- *Consensus*, where all members "consent" or agree to move forward before finalizing a decision.

Clarifying the decision-making process is important because nothing saps trust and morale from a group faster than misunderstandings about decision-making authority and process.

4. *Discussion-management process.* Because of its overwhelming importance to the satisfaction of participants, planning for discussion management or facilitation is a critical skill for great meeting leaders. Start with clarity about who is to run the meeting and whether the leader will also act as the facilitator.

The default choice — that the group leader or manager runs the meeting and calls on others to talk — isn't necessarily the best choice for all meetings. A more participative format allows for the manager or leader to set the meeting objective and then take a seat with the members while another team member actually facilitates the discussion. This format encourages all members to participate.

5. *Use of time.* People care a lot about how long meetings are and when they're scheduled. You may not be able to satisfy everyone, but some guidelines can be applied.

Look to the objective and agenda to estimate how long it will take to cover critical points. Think also about participants' schedules and preferred times. Is the beginning of the week or month better for them? Will an early or late time better accommodate the rest of their lives? Will people have to travel or meet across two shifts or multiple time zones? If you are planning a meeting that will regularly take a chunk of time out of participants' calendars, respect their time. Do all that you can to ensure the objective is clear and compelling and that the meeting time is used well.

6. *Plan, discuss and assign roles.* At least four important roles are played in any well-run meeting:

- Facilitator
- Recorder
- Leader
- Participants

Some add a fifth role, the timekeeper. Different individuals can play each of these roles or one person can play all of them. But they all have to be accounted for if the meeting is to flow well and produce results. Planning for these roles can be an ongoing process. Determining role assignments at the beginning engages everybody in the process and validates the expectations and contributions.

7. *Pre- and post-meeting communication.* The best way to create commitment to and participation in meetings is to be clear about why you'll be meeting. Involve as many potential attendees as possible in planning either the content or the process of the meeting.

Before the meeting be sure to consider the following:

- Advance agenda
- Participants
- Time and place
- Preparation of materials
- List of audio/visual equipment available to presenters
- Requests for any special needs

Capturing and reporting key outcomes of the meeting are critical for follow-up activities.

At a minimum, be sure to capture these items in your meeting notes:

- Decisions
- Action items
- Open issues

Once the meeting has concluded, arrange for the recorder's notes to be posted or distributed to all participants. Post-meeting communication provides form and closure both to participants' contributions and their social needs. A lack of clarity in meeting notes can drag unfinished business to the forefront of your next meeting and unnecessarily slow the group's progress towards its long-range goals.

Tending to both the content and process aspects of your meetings will go a long way toward making them more effective and productive.

Make the meeting.

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Related Reading

How to Make Meetings Work; Michael Doyle & David Straus; Berkley Publishing Group; 1993.

We've Got to Start Meeting Like This: A Guide to Successful Meeting Management; Roger K. Mosvick & Robert B. Nelson; Jist Works; 1996.

Helpful Hints

State the objective of the meeting explicitly so that everyone knows why they have been brought together.

When deciding whom to invite to a meeting, look for the "three C's" of participation: The committed, the creative and the competent. These are the people who will help you achieve your objectives.

For meetings where you're facing especially difficult or contentious issues, try to bring in a neutral meeting facilitator to manage the discussion. This makes it more likely that you'll come to a decision, and also allows everyone to participate fully in the discussion.

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