



# BUILDING GREAT AGENDAS



Getting  
down to  
business

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## **3M** Meeting Network

Picture this: a new project and a new team. You've been asked to lead the first meeting since you've worked with all the players. The meeting time arrives. Everyone shows up. You open with a description of the challenge you face together. Everyone's excited about the possibilities. . .

Sixty minutes later, you check your watch again while Robert repeats the same point Susan made half an hour ago. There are over 20 possible approaches scratched on three flip charts. The room's full of hot air, and that's about all that's clear.

We've all been to meetings that lacked focus. You can save yourself and others this frustration by setting and following a practical agenda. Think of an agenda as a roadmap that will ensure your meeting serves its purpose.

### **Where do you find agenda items?**

The measure of a great agenda is its relevance to the meeting's objective and its importance to the participants. To anticipate and plan for relevance, ask three questions:

1. To achieve our objective, what do we need to do in the meeting?
2. What conversations will be important to the people who attend?
3. What information will we need to begin?

### **Agenda items can be:**

- Set by the group leader.
- Developed from prior meeting minutes.
- Standardized for periodic meetings of a work group (i.e., old business, new business, status review).
- Determined by a structured group process for planning or decision making.
- Submitted in advance by meeting participants.
- Proposed by participants at the beginning of the meeting.

## When do you create the agenda?

Conventional wisdom advises that agendas should be created and distributed in advance. For formal meetings and meetings requiring preparation, this approach still makes sense. However, for informal meetings or for those called in the midst of change, building the agenda at the start of the meeting is an effective strategy. In this case, you'll poll participants for items they think should be covered, build the agenda, prioritize and budget the meeting time.

## Six items to consider:

Not every agenda has to be built from scratch. Some activities recur at effective meetings:

1. *Check-in.* To begin promptly and dive immediately into the meeting content, invite participants to check in by reporting whatever immediate concerns they need to set aside mentally in order to be "present" with each other and to focus on the task at hand. A five-minute go-around helps people gather focus and get down to business.
2. *Meeting Objective.* Participants look to meeting leaders to state the purpose of the gathering and let them know what results are expected.

3. *Roles.* Announcing and coordinating roles early in the meeting lets participants know who's responsible for what. You can declare a meeting-specific leader, facilitator, recorder, time keeper or any other roles you think you'll require.
4. *Agenda Review.* If an agenda has been prepared in advance, review it with the group for its relevance to the meeting objective and its importance to the participants. Be flexible, adding new items that the group thinks are relevant.
5. *Summary.* The next-to-last agenda item for most meetings is a summary to review decisions made, actions agreed to or assigned during the meeting and any open issues.
6. *Meeting Evaluation.* To improve your meetings, end them with a two-minute discussion of what went well and what participants would want to be different in the future. Record comments and address them in future meetings.

## Use it or lose it.

Agendas are terrific tools to keep meetings focused — but only when they are diligently managed and followed.

*Make the meeting.*

## Related Reading

### How to Make Meetings Work;

Michael Doyle & David Straus;  
Berkley Publishing Group; 1993.

## Helpful Hints

Involve team members in creating the agenda. Doing so helps to create a sense of shared ownership of the meeting.

Prioritize agenda items to make sure the most important things get discussed first.

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78-6970-7813-3 (05850.0)CSI

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