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Meetings ? – you need a management angel

Most people would agree that meetings are a necessary function of the workplace. Communication is the lifeblood of an organisation and what better way to communicate than through a well planned and properly lead meeting. Effective meetings enhance understanding, create an environment for innovation and creativity and provide a great opportunity for team building.

If this is so, why do many people dislike, even loath, the thought of attending a meeting? Why do so many believe meetings are a waste of time and a waste of money? When was the last time you left a meeting feeling positive, inspired and focussed?

It's a fact that organisations spend literally hundreds of thousands of pounds on their annual meeting spend. How much do you spend?

An expenditure item of this magnitude would never escape the eagle eye of your company accountant or Financial Director. You would never spend this amount of capital and not expect a good rate of return yet meetings seem to escape financial scrutiny. Badly run, poorly thought out meetings represent a loss of productivity that would rarely be accepted in any other area of business activity. Imagine a situation where a 25% loss of production would remain unchallenged. Absolutely unthinkable. The purpose of this booklet is to provide some helpful tips and ideas – all tried and tested - which will help you re-evaluate and re-think how you use meetings.

Put the tips contained here into practice and your meetings will become the professional effective business activity you know they should be. If you want to save pounds, Euro's or dollars as well, contact us on 0191 230 8014 to discuss our © Management Angel meetings package. Can you afford not to do so?

Brenda Kilgallon

Start The Way You Mean To Go On.

Ask yourself the following question:

Is the meeting necessary?

Think carefully about this. Is holding a meeting the very best way to handle the information or purpose of the communication? What are the alternatives?

Decide who needs to be there, and who doesn't.

Is it necessary to have more than one person from the same department present? With regular meetings, can attendance be rotated?

If you have any choice in the matter, decide whether you, or a colleague, is the best person to be there.

Can you delegate to someone else? Would this serve the best interests of the meeting? Put the meeting on trial, as you would any other time consuming activity.

Decide what you want to get out of the meeting.

This should be linked to the key purpose of the meeting (see Planning and Preparation). What measures will you use to see if the meeting has achieved this?

Know why you, and your staff, are attending the meeting?

NEVER attend not knowing the key purpose of the meeting and understanding your motive for being there.

Always evaluate the purpose of the meeting, including regular meetings, as it/they relate to your work role.

Avoid getting into the habit of attending simply because 'you've always gone to the Monday meeting'. It may be that your work role and the reason for the meeting have moved on; not necessarily in the same direction.

If the meeting is a regular event; is the regularity appropriate?

For example; if a meeting is held once every week, could this be reduced to once every other week?

Planning and Preparation – Not So Much Necessary As Essential.

Establish the key purpose of the meeting.

This is by far the most important tip in this booklet. Here are some examples of key purposes:

To inform	To gain deeper understanding
To influence	To generate new ideas
To persuade	To increase sales
To achieve consensus	To improve customer service
To solve a problem	To share good practice

Your key purpose should be constantly referred to at both the planning and running stages of the meeting.

This keeps the group mind focussed and helps evaluate success and progress. All those attending the meeting need to know what the meeting is trying to achieve.

Find out what others want from the meeting.

Prior to the meeting (at least two weeks in the case of most meetings) canvass for ideas and suggestions. **ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT TO ACHIEVE.** Frequently this question is left unsaid. What do people want to have at the end of the meeting that they didn't at the start (hopefully not a headache). If you want to involve people this starts during planning and preparation.

Decide on the venue.

In house or off site.

If in-house, make sure that the environment is suitable.

For example, enough space, adequate lighting, comfortable chairs (unless your meetings tend to last no more than 10 minutes; in which case chairs can usually be dispensed with*) and refreshments to hand. Try to minimise disturbances/interruptions.

If held off-site.

Check the suitability, accessibility, parking and likely distractions/interruptions.

**Obviously in case of any special needs, common sense should prevail.*

Decide a suitable room layout.

This will be determined by the number of people, the purpose of your meeting and the available space. Round tables are usually best as everyone can clearly see each other and any hierarchal issues can be diminished. If the meeting is to generate ideas, consider more informal layouts.

Decide on the time of the meeting.

This decision should take into account those attending. For example, if people have long distances to travel, is it feasible to start at 9.00am? If the meeting is to generate new ideas and act as a teambuilding exercise, perhaps a morning meeting followed by lunch would be appropriate. Always start on time.

Decide on the finish time of the meeting.

Yes, that's right. Have a finishing time and stick to it. One major frustration is meetings that drag on causing those attending to lose concentration.

Decide how long the meeting will run for.

This is dependant on the agenda items. A professional business meeting should have a realistic timeframe and a chairperson with the skill to manage the time frame. Many meetings are far too long and cause the early successes of the meeting to be lost or diminished because the subjects are thrashed to death or unnecessary detail is repeated.

Write a clear agenda.

Include venue details, start and finish time, agenda items content/and running order of the agenda? Include approximate timings of each agenda item.

Preparing a professional agenda.

Include the expectations of each person present at the meeting. For example, who is expected to deliver a short presentation or summarise key findings. If you expect every person present to make a comment or submit a solution – THEN SAY SO. A productive meeting is one where everyone contributes. Those attending need to know what is expected of them so that they can fully prepare and feel they have contributed.

Distribute the agenda to all relevant parties at least a week before the meeting.

It is unprofessional and unfair to participants to hand out the agenda the day before.

Carefully consider the use of 'Any Other Business' (AOB).

Do you really need to include AOB? Why are items under AOB not already on the agenda? If you feel you must have AOB cover them at the start of the meeting to get them out of the way. Never allow more than ten minutes to cover AOB.

Decide how you will evaluate the success of the meeting.

This does not mean waiting until the end of the meeting and asking them. You can't be sure people will be totally frank and you run the danger of starting a brand new discussion, thereby destroying your carefully prepared timeframe. Part of the evaluation process will involve using the agenda. A simple single A4 sheet with key questions can be a useful device. This is circulated at the end of the meeting and everyone given a deadline for completion.

Meeting Roles and Responsibilities for Attendees

Always endeavour to be an active participant rather than a passive recipient.

If you aren't prepared to contribute ask yourself why.

Ask for support.

If you lack confidence in public speaking – and MANY people do – ask for support. There are many training and coaching programmes available.

Earn the right to be there.

Make sure you prepare in advance. Read any relevant material prior to the meeting and if you are asked to provide specific information or make a short presentation, take the necessary time to do so.

Take preparation seriously.

This demonstrates commitment and integrity.

Arrive five minutes early.

To ensure you are relaxed and mentally prepared.

Be in the room.

Concentrate and don't keep half your mind on other matters. When in the room, be in the room.

Switch off your mobile 'phone.

No but's, remember – be in the room.

Consider where you will sit.

If you have a difficult relationship with someone and/or they are likely to have an opposing view to yours, don't sit opposite them. This will reinforce any feelings of confrontation.

Be prepared to get involved.

Don't sit back and expect others to speak up. Be involved in the proceedings.

Be concise.

Say what you need to say and then shut up. Much time in meetings is wasted with irrelevant and often long-winded 'speeches'.

Challenge Constructively.

A meeting is an excellent opportunity to exchange views and opinions. However, make sure you challenge others using appropriate language. It's perfectly acceptable to say, "I hold a different view to you", whereas "that's rubbish, I can't believe you think that", will only antagonise.

Lose your ego!

This is particularly important for managers who may not be challenged due to their position or perceived status. The meeting is not a platform for you to demonstrate your wit and wisdom. Keep the key purpose of the meeting to the front of your mind at all times.

Respect others.

Allow people to have their say – even when it is in direct opposition to the views held by you.

Communicate clearly.

Avoid jargon, overly technical terminology (except when in a meeting with technical people!) and in-house jokes and stories only shared by a few.

Be authentic.

Don't use the meeting for your own agenda. Be honest, straightforward and keep your focus on the meeting objectives.

Leading the Meeting

A meeting is an excellent opportunity to exchange views. Leading, or chairing, the meeting is without doubt the most important meeting role upon which the success of the meeting will rise or fall. Never underestimate the role of the leader to maintain focus, harmony and direction. Chairing a meeting is essentially having the ability to maintain a fine balance between using the agenda, as a control and evaluation device, and managing the various personalities and overall group dynamics. It's a combination of technical know-how and interpersonal skills. Not everyone has this ability.

Ensure you understand the key purpose of the meeting.

This will keep the meeting on track.

Circulate the agenda in advance.

Give people time to plan and prepare.

Prioritise the order of agenda items carefully.

If you are going to include AOB why not deal with it first and get it quickly out of the way. If there is a difficult or contentious item, don't deal with it first as this may start the meeting off badly or create a negative atmosphere.

Use time wisely.

Important items require more debate and therefore more time. Don't fall into the trap of giving all agenda items equal time. Ensure the agenda includes suggested time allocation. You may need to give more time but you still need to provide time guidelines.

Always stick to the agenda.

The agenda is a control and evaluation device. It helps you achieve the meeting objectives and assess how successful the meeting has been in achieving the objectives.

Be innovative.

Think of ways to involve everyone. This could be presentations from those attending, success stories or more creative ways of dealing with information. This is particularly important with long meetings.

Invite a guest speaker or someone from another part of the organisation who will bring a fresh perspective.

Arrive at least five minutes early with all relevant material/information to hand.

Chairing a meeting requires a professional and efficient approach. If you are late and/or missing essential documents you are creating an unprofessional image which will not inspire confidence.

Start the meeting on time.

This is a must. Even if a key speaker is delayed with other items until they arrive.

Start the meeting positively and enthusiastically

This will set the tone for the meeting.

Introduce the meeting clearly.

Welcome everyone. Briefly state the key purpose, introduce newcomers or key speakers and explain any different or unusual agenda items.