Effective Meetings

Idea In Short

Meetings can be incredibly effective tools for businesses to share ideas, make decisions, and collaborate. However, many meetings can be unproductive, wasting valuable time and energy. Planning and running effective meetings requires careful thought and preparation.

In today's workplace, meetings are a ubiquitous feature of organizational life crucial for businesses. People spend a significant amount of their time attending them. However, studies suggest that many meetings are ineffective, and employees often feel that meetings are a waste of their time. This can lead to frustration, disengagement, and burnout.

Types Of Meetings

Researchers at McKinsey say we need to stop thinking about meetings in terms of their content and start looking at their goals. When we shift our thinking, meetings start to fall into one of several purpose buckets. When we've identified those buckets, we can pick the one that best suits our objectives, rather than arranging a generic meeting on a particular subject.

The Decision Meeting

When you dig right down, meetings should have a single basic function: bring people together and produce a common decision. Think about a marketing team that meets once every few months to set its company's marketing strategy. Each member of the team will come in with their own ideas and suggestions—but the company can't use them all. Instead, they've got to decide which ideas to run with and which ideas to trash. While it sounds easy, these sorts of decision meetings are notoriously tricky.

Participants: <8 **Goal:** Decision Facilitated by leader

According to Robert Sutton, professor of management science at Stanford University, if you want to keep decision meetings sharp and snappy, you need to limit attendance. Between five and eight attendees is perfect. If you have more, it's difficult to guide the conversation. If you have fewer, you don't have enough viewpoints.

Decision meetings also require strong leaders. Although the goal of these meetings is to arrive at a shared decision, conversations will often drift away from the main subject. Leaders have to keep control of the discussion, guiding participants through whatever decision-making framework they have selected and, ultimately, on to a final decision.

The Discussion Meeting

Discussion meetings are for when you don't have a particular problem to solve or decision to make. They're basically the opposite of decision meetings as they're designed to be free-flowing and explore a range of ideas.

There are two main types of discussion meetings:

1. Ideation, and
2. Debate

Let's take a look at the differences.

First, imagine a brand new startup. Its founders have a business idea but little more than that. To firm up their business identity, they arrange a branding brainstorming session. The goal of this meeting is to find new company names, color ideas, logo concepts, brand voices, and so on. While the founders can chat through the pros and cons of each idea, they don't have to decide on a single idea to run with. This is an ideation meeting.

Second, consider a big construction company that wants to review a recently completed warehouse project. In this meeting, people are encouraged to dig into what went on, discussing what worked and what didn't. The goal of this meeting is to explore and evaluate ideas in more detail. This is a debate meeting.

Since you can't always predict how these meetings are going to go, it doesn't make sense to have an active facilitator who controls the conversation. Instead, participants should lead the conversation, exploring the alleys and avenues that seem most interesting. That said, it's

helpful to appoint a passive facilitator who's there to gently direct the discussion should it drift from the original theme or topic.

Like decision meetings, discussion meetings also require us to thread the needle with attendance. A discussion between two people isn't really a meeting. A discussion between 40 people is absolute chaos. It's best to aim for more than eight attendees and fewer than 18.

When you have fewer than eight participants, you'll struggle for unique perspectives and ideas during the discussion. And if you have more than 18, you'll struggle to keep everyone engaged in one large conversation and things will fall apart quickly.

Participants: <18 **Goal:** Dialogue Active conversation between attendees

The Information-Sharing Meeting

So far, we've looked at meetings where everyone plays an equal role. But with information-sharing meetings, things are a little different.

These meetings are usually a one-way dialogue with one person presenting to a large group. Think group briefings, town hall meetings, or all-hands updates. Unlike decision and discussion meetings, there's not an attendance sweet spot, although you might be limited by meeting space or technology.

Before arranging information-sharing meetings, remember that large meetings are disruptive and pull everyone off their work. If a meeting is purely for information-sharing, you're likely better off using an alternative communication channel like email or intranet, especially as people read faster than they listen.

Where these meetings come into their own is when you combine information-sharing with culture or team building.

An email might convey information faster than a company-wide meeting—but it rarely builds the same emotional connection or engagement.

If it's important for your senior executives to speak to their employees directly and cultivate

personal interactions, go for an information-sharing meeting. Just don't overuse them.

Participants: 2 to 1,800+ **Goal:** Awareness One-way communication from speaker

The In-the-Moment Meeting

Impromptu meetings often derail teams because they rarely have a set agenda and can quickly spiral out of control. But, if you're careful, you can transform them from a distraction into an effective productivity tool.

To see how in-the-moment meetings work, imagine a small design team working on a new product. Since it's a distributed team, most project communication is done via team chat so there's always a record of what was said for context. But during a particularly complicated discussion, a team lead can struggle to explain exactly what they mean via text. So it may be smart to invite everyone to a quick in-the-moment meeting.

Knowing impromptu meetings can go off on tangents, the design team time-boxes the meeting to 10 minutes and limits discussion to a single topic. If the discussion thread looks like it's fraying, the team lead asks people to arrange a follow-up meeting for those topics. With those rules in place, they can quickly jump on a call with colleagues, clarify the complicated points, and let everyone get back to work.

In-the-moment meetings only work if you have the correct technology behind them. Employees need to be able to slip in and out of voice and video calls with a couple of clicks. If each meeting requires 20 minutes of careful setup, they just don't work.

Ideally, you'll have a collaboration platform that unifies messaging, video, and phone so everything is in one place and employees can move between each channel effortlessly.

Participants: <8 **Goal:** Decision or Discussion Active dialogue by attendees

The Check-In

Our final type of meeting comes from organization and management expert, Verne Harnish, who suggests a short time-boxed check-in meeting, covering tactical issues and updates.

This type of meeting, known as a "huddle," has exploded in popularity, especially in tech companies and startups.

According to Harnish:

> The daily huddle tracks progress and brings out sticking points that are blocking your execution.

Huddles allow an entire team to get informed and aligned on the work that needs to be done, which can cut down on coordination work later in the day.

In practice, a check-in meeting usually takes place at the start of the day and runs through a fairly specific agenda. Each participant has just one or two minutes to update their colleagues on what they're working on and any challenges they're facing. Attendees have to be careful to avoid rabbit holes and must take any detailed topics or follow-ups offline.

Since the daily huddle is limited to 15 minutes, there's a practical upper limit of attendees—usually around 15.

> **Participants:** <15 **Goal:** Awareness Active dialogue by attendees

4P's Of Effective Meetings

When meetings are well-organized and productive, they can enhance collaboration, build relationships, and drive organizational success. Thus, it's essential to follow the four Ps of an effective meeting:

1. Purpose
2. Product
3. People, and
4. Process

By keeping these four Ps in mind, you can get more out of your meetings and maximize productivity.

Purpose

The first step when setting up a meeting is to ask if the meeting has a clear purpose. Determine if the meeting is necessary and what the goal is. With a clear purpose in mind, you can work towards actionable outcomes and keep the meeting on track. Defining the meeting's purpose ahead of time also gives other team members time to prepare their ideas and thoughts related to the meeting's purpose. When defining the meeting's purpose, ensure you are as concise as possible and that everyone attending understands their role and the expected outcome.

Product

The purpose of the meeting should lead to a clear and actionable product. Establish measurable end goals at the beginning of the meeting to achieve productive results. Ensure everyone brings the necessary resources and data needed to accomplish the meeting's goals.

For example, if the purpose of a meeting is to brainstorm a marketing campaign for a new product, an example of a product would be choosing which marketing channels the campaign will use and when the campaigns can start running.

People

Ensure that everyone invited to the meeting has a role and relevant responsibilities to the meeting's purpose. Invite only those who can contribute to the meeting and foster a respectful and collaborative environment where everyone is free to voice their opinions. Avoid inviting people who don't need to be there as it can lead to an ineffective meeting and waste their time.

Process

Your meeting process should outline how the meeting is structured and run. Having a clear process can make sure the meeting moves along at a good pace and maximizes the time you have. Ensure that you set your agenda and send it out ahead of time, define roles and people who will be speaking, establish ground rules for your meetings, take breaks if meetings are longer, keep track of time, avoid going off-topic, close the meeting with a recap of your discussion and the next steps, and send a follow-up with notes and the next

steps to everyone in attendance after the meeting is over.

Why Do They Matter?

The 4 Ps of an effective meeting matter because they keep meetings productive, lead to outcomes, do not waste time, and shift the attitude around meetings. When team members see how collaborative and effective meetings can be, they'll be more willing to participate and come up with better ideas. By following these four Ps, you can have an effective meeting every time.

Steps To Plan And Run Effective Meetings

Effective meetings require planning and strategy. Some strategies for planning and running effective meetings are:

Set Clear Objectives

The first step in planning a meeting is to set clear objectives. Determine the purpose of the meeting and what you hope to achieve. This will help you structure the meeting and ensure that everyone is clear about what they are expected to contribute. Be specific in your objectives and try to make them measurable, so you can gauge the success of the meeting afterward.

Create An Agenda

Once you have established the objectives for the meeting, create an agenda that outlines the topics you will cover, the order in which they will be discussed, and the time allocated for each item. Share the agenda with all participants ahead of time so that they know what to expect and can prepare accordingly. Encourage participants to suggest additional topics or agenda items if necessary, but make sure to stay focused on the objectives of the meeting.

Invite The Right People

Inviting the right people to the meeting is critical to its success. Only invite those who need to be there, and make sure that they are available and committed to attending. Be mindful of people''s time, and try to schedule the meeting at a time that is convenient for everyone. If some participants are in different time zones, consider using technology like video

conferencing to facilitate their participation.

Establish Ground Rules

Establishing ground rules for the meeting is important to keep it on track and ensure that everyone is engaged and respectful. Ground rules might include starting and ending the meeting on time, no interruptions or side conversations, active listening, and limiting the use of technology. Share the ground rules with all participants ahead of time, and remind them at the start of the meeting.

Encourage Participation

Encouraging participation from all attendees is critical to the success of the meeting. Start by creating a safe and supportive environment where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions. Encourage active listening and be open to feedback and criticism. Use techniques like brainstorming and round-robin discussions to involve everyone in the conversation. Avoid dominating the conversation yourself or allowing any one person to monopolize the discussion.

Manage Time Effectively

Time management is essential to running an effective meeting. You should allocate time for each agenda item and stick to the schedule. If a discussion is taking too long, you should cut it short and move on to the next item. You should also consider having shorter meetings as they can be more focused and productive.

Use Technology Wisely

Technology can be a valuable tool in meetings, but it can also be a distraction. Use technology wisely to enhance the meeting, not detract from it. Consider using tools like screen sharing, online whiteboards, or virtual break-out rooms to facilitate collaboration and engagement. However, avoid multitasking or allowing technology to distract you from the meeting. If necessary, establish rules around technology use to keep everyone focused.

Follow Up

Following up after the meeting is critical to ensure that the objectives have been met and

that everyone is on the same page. Send out meeting notes that summarize the key points of the discussion and the decisions made. Include action items and deadlines, and assign responsibility for each task. Follow up with participants to make sure they are clear on their roles and responsibilities, and ensure that they have the resources they need to complete their tasks.

Summary

Planning and running effective meetings requires careful thought and preparation. Set clear objectives, create an agenda, invite the right people, establish ground rules, encourage participation, use technology wisely, and follow up afterward. By following these strategies, you can ensure that your meetings are efficient, productive, and engaging, leading to better business outcomes and a more engaged team.