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Implementation guides provide practitioners with insights and techniques for developing their projects and programmes. They take a step-by-step approach to key issues facing communicators.

An implementation guide to running effective meetings

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As teamwork and collaboration increase throughout the business world, so does the time we spend in meetings. Surveys by the 3M Meeting Network suggest that, on average, managers attend 60 meetings a month – and that many of these meetings are unproductive. Given the amount of time most of us spend in meetings, it's vital we hone our meeting management skills. Four critical elements can help ensure your meetings create meaningful outcomes for your organisation:

- 1) Actions of the meeting leader before, during and after the meeting.
- 2) Engaged meeting participants.
- 3) Clear meeting objectives.
- 4) Proper set-up and format.

Here are 10 simple steps to boost your effectiveness as a meeting leader.

Before the meeting

- 1) Identify the meeting's overall objective (eg. solve a problem, make a decision, gather input). Based on the objective, identify the topics for discussion.
- 2) Determine meeting attendees. Select the minimum number of people necessary to achieve the meeting's objective. Don't be polite and invite people whose attendance is not truly required.
- 3) Sound out critical attendees in advance when the objective of the meeting is to get buy-in. One-on-one, informal conversations with key people before the meeting may lead you to rethink your position or help build support for your ideas.
- 4) Produce and distribute a written agenda (two to three days before the meeting, if possible). Limit the agenda to issues affecting the entire group and keep it to one page. Include the meeting's logistics (time, place, attendees), discussion topics, allocated time for each topic and who will lead the discussion.

During the meeting

- 5) Start on time and begin by reviewing the agenda.
- 6) Proceed to discuss each topic. Remain focused and progress logically by:
 - stating the issue and discussing;
 - clarifying the data;
 - reaching a conclusion;
 - planning a course of action.

Be sure to review all data before reaching a conclusion, and reach a conclusion before planning actions. Stop people from jumping ahead or going over old ground. Try to gain closure once you sense an emerging consensus.
- 7) Record each agreement and next steps, including who needs to do what by when.
- 8) Conclude the meeting by briefly restating what has been decided and who will be responsible for action items. This gives

Meeting summary

Marketing group meeting to review copy test results
March 1.

Key decisions made:

- Based on positive copy test scores, produce 30-second commercial with agreed-upon revisions.
- Based on poor copy test scores, simplify 15-second copy strategy, develop new creative and re-test.
- Air 60-second commercials in third quarter.

Who	Will do what	By when
Rebecca	Develop 30-second production timeline and review with team.	8 March
Mike	Develop revised 30-second storyboards and present to team.	15 March
Abby	Work with media department to determine media plan implications of airing 30-second spot during second quarter.	15 March
Carlos	Simplify 15-second copy strategy, and get Jim's approval on new approach.	29 March

Fig. 1. Sample meeting summary document.

participants a sense of achievement and reinforces accountabilities.

After the meeting

- 9) Finalise and distribute a meeting summary to all attendees and copy interested parties. List all key decisions made and who is responsible for doing what by when (see sample meeting summary).
- 10) Follow up on all "to do" items decided at the meeting.

The role of meeting participants

Meeting participants, of course, also play an important role in the meeting's success. Here are seven steps to follow after you've been invited to a meeting:

- 1) Decide if it's appropriate for you to attend the meeting. If you don't think it is, contact the meeting leader and explain why.
- 2) Ask for an agenda before the meeting.
- 3) Show up on time.
- 4) Stay focused on the task or discussion topic. Avoid side conversations.
- 5) Be open to new ideas and try to understand all points of view.
- 6) State your ideas and views concisely.
- 7) Follow up promptly on action items after the meeting.

To meet or not to meet?

Meetings can be a very effective way for teams to achieve results – or to waste precious time. It all depends on whether a meeting is truly necessary. Think of meetings as just one of your tools for communicating and challenge yourself and others to find alternatives. Many meetings can be eliminated through informal discussions, telephone calls, conference calls, e-mail, voice mail, intranet postings or other means. To determine if a meeting is warranted, ask yourself these questions:

- Does the group need to air its individual viewpoints and reach consensus?
- Does the group need to agree on a process to achieve an objective?
- Does the group need to generate ideas, find solutions, resolve conflicts or make decisions that require multiple sources of input?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, particularly the last one, then a meeting is probably in order. If your intention is strictly to distribute information, you might be better off using another means of communication. Keep in mind, however, if the information you plan to distribute is highly complex or emotionally charged, you may need to explain it in person in order to answer questions, gauge reactions and test understanding.

If you have any doubts about the need to

meet, then don't. Try another approach and remember that you can always call a meeting later.

Running different types of meetings

While the reasons for meeting are limitless, meetings themselves fall into two basic categories: information meetings designed to advise, update or persuade participants; and decision-making meetings designed to plan initiatives, set goals or solve problems. Each type of meeting is best suited to a different approach, as described in the chart below.

	Information meeting	Decision-making meeting
Number of attendees	Any number	Preferably not more than 12
Who should attend?	Those who need to know	Those who can contribute and are empowered to make decisions
Communication process	One way from leader to participants with Q&A	Interactive discussion among all attending
Meeting room set-up	Participants facing front of room, classroom style	Participants facing each other, conference style
Most effective leadership style	Authoritative	Participative
Emphasis placed on	Content	Interaction and problem-solving
Key to success	Planning and preparation of information to be presented	Meeting climate that supports open, free expression

Source: Learnshare, L.L.C.

Why meetings matter

Although it's easy to subscribe to the popular view of meetings as time-wasting rituals, it's important to remember that they can be very productive. Meetings provide opportunities to discuss different viewpoints, resolve conflicts quickly and reach consensus. They're also a great way to involve people in a decision. So the next time you're planning, leading or participating in a meeting, consider what you can do differently to enhance the meeting's success.