

Enhance Your Business with Connections

Fifteen Minutes to Better Meetings: Agenda Planning



Do you start every meeting with a long list of discussion topics—and end with only a couple of them completed? Does it seem like you talk and talk and don't get anything concrete done?

Just fifteen or twenty minutes spent setting your agenda will result in a more effective and efficient use of meeting time. The examples used here come directly from actual organizations with which I've worked with identifying information altered.

When I began working with one board, the meeting agendas were basically a long laundry list of topics and issues. The participants started discussing the first item on the list; talked about it until they ran out of steam; and continued down the list until the meeting time was up. Often several of the items never got discussed. Does this sound familiar?

Look For Outcomes And Set Priorities

As you go through the following steps, it can be helpful to use a table or grid format. A longer version of this article, including an easy-to-use template and examples, is available on my website at http://www.erisweaver.info/15_MINUTES_TO_BETTER_MEETINGS.pdf.

Step one in your meeting upgrade is to look at each topical item and determine the desired outcome. Why is this on the agenda? What action is needed? Do you need to make a decision? Create a list of ideas? Or are you just disseminating information? Dissemination of information is often not the best use of face-to-face group time. Put it in a memo or newsletter, and spend your meeting time doing what groups do best—creating solutions, brainstorming ideas, evaluating options, making decisions. If you do need to report information, do it briefly and quickly.

As you clarify the purpose and desired outcome for each item, think also about its importance and priority to the over-

all mission of your organization. Also consider its time sensitivity—will something bad happen if we don't do this now? Number the items in order of priority, with "1" designating the item that most needs to be handled in this meeting. If you are unable to cover every item in the time allotted, you can drop items off the agenda starting from the bottom of the list, knowing that your most crucial actions have been taken.

Different Formats For Different Outcomes

Once you know what you are trying to accomplish, you can choose a format or activity that will help you get there. The tools for generating ideas (e.g. brainstorming, visualization, etc.) are different from those useful for evaluating and prioritizing those ideas (ranking, binary comparisons).

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Add the chosen formats to the template. Guesstimate how much time each one will take and add it to your template. (Hint: Most things take longer than you might imagine!) If you have more items than time, leave out the least important items, or add them at the end under the heading "If Time Allows."

Clarify Roles And Responsibilities

Note who will be in charge of each section of your meeting and what their roles will be. Is there information that needs to be presented? It is usually good to have one person make the presentation and a different person

facilitate questions and discussion.

Putting It All Together

By now you should have your template filled out. To create the final agenda, rearrange items in priority order and leave out those that didn't make the cut. You may want to send out a version with slightly less detail, but make sure your facilitators have the detailed version and that all presenters know their time limits and what they're supposed to do. Be sure to include information on meeting time and location.

It can also be helpful to add at the top of the agenda any notes about things meeting participants need to do in advance to prepare for the meeting—documents to review, questions to research, calls to make, etc. Having it all in one easily accessible place increases the likelihood that folks will actually do it all!

After a fifteen-minute explanation of this template, the board group I gave as an example earlier in this article, adopted it as their standard agenda planning method. Their meetings have become far more efficient and effective!

by Eris Weaver

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