

How to Keep a Meeting On Track

Keeping thorough meeting minutes ensures a gathering is effective and prepares the organization for future risks

by Alan Manly | February 18, 2016



Meetings often become a work-based social function on company time and at company cost. The thought of socializing with fellow staff and being paid at the same time is sure to keep meetings a popular distraction to lonely work routines. Many companies have a tendency to gravitate toward their objectives by the sheer momentum of the organization, with or without the meetings. To assess the quality of a meeting, go no further than the official minutes: Agenda items are loosely worded. Action items are carried over from one meeting to the next. The most obvious element

missing in such meetings is leadership.

So, how can you turn meetings from a cost into a company asset?

1. Set the Agenda

Meetings need a reason. That's why issues to be discussed are listed as items on the agenda. If you are running a meeting, put all the issues that you want discussed on the agenda. Don't be afraid to itemize every issue that you want discussed. It will give you and others in the meeting a firm guideline of what is expected to be discussed. You will also sleep better if all the news -- good and bad -- is aired in the meeting. Others of course may sleep less when they see the agenda. Finally, stick to the agenda. Exercise leadership. Suppress your random good ideas. Being smart and quick-witted may work against you in your meeting. Boring is good!

2. Know Who is Where

Monitor who is in attendance. This sets the tone that the meeting is serious. Apologies need to be recorded along with late arrivals. If anyone excuses themselves from the meeting for any reason, the minutes should record the time of leaving and returning.

3. Timing is Everything

Start the meeting on time. It's not the five or 10 minutes that you are focusing on, it's the leadership reflects. Either you are leading or following. Start on time and let the others learn that they will fall behind if they are late. Then move in for total control of the meeting. Items on the agenda must be given serious consideration and be shown to have been considered. Each item on the agenda should be run as if it were a separate meeting.

4. Know the Agenda

Have each agenda item assigned to a meeting member who is able to speak to the issue. Insist that each speaker has a brief paper or at least prepare notes of what they are going to discuss. Bullet points will do. This not only assists the speaker to stay on message, it does everyone a favour, including the secretary who will have a skeleton to build on the meeting discussion.

5. Review the Previous Meeting's Minutes

This is a serious risk management issue. Once the minutes are accepted, it is what you agreed to. Make sure you understand the intent of the agenda item, key points of discussion, and what was finally decided upon. You may have read in the media of company directors in court, reflecting unsuccessfully on what was discussed in a meeting five years ago. The better the minutes, the better your memory. Have minutes that really make sense to a stranger or a regulator or the tax man or -- heaven forbid -- a judge.

By following these guidelines you will achieve desired outcomes which ensure that your meetings will not be a memory test or an office bun fight. The leadership shown in the minutes will repay the investment many times over.

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