

“Dare to be.... Boring Meetings are not Compulsory”

(10 Basics for a good meeting. 21 extra ideas to make them great)

We've all been in boring meeting that ramble on, have no sense of direction, have no end product and meander of subject. Poor meetings cost money, waste valuable time, deflate morale and often don't actually achieve anything positive.

To avoid the problem there are some universally recognised basic “rules” that are recommended and some alternative tips that you might like to consider using in your business.

The Basics

- [Have a stated purpose and an agenda.](#) Without an agenda, meetings can easily turn into aimless social gatherings rather than productive working sessions.
- [Circulate the agenda](#) well beforehand with an estimated timeline for each agenda item. Have a clear start and finish time.
- [Provide information, reports, reading materials beforehand](#) to make sure everyone is at the same “starting point” (how often do people arrive at your meetings unprepared? If you have people like this, then you need to address this problem – make this behaviour unacceptable)
- [Only invite people who really need to be there.](#) When people feel that what's being discussed isn't relevant to them, or that they lack the skills or expertise to be of assistance, they'll view their attendance at the meeting as a waste of time.
- [Being late is not acceptable!](#) Deal with people who do not arrive on time. Close the door when the meeting starts. Late comers will feel more embarrassed (and will hopefully change their future behaviour) if they are “crashing” a meeting that has clearly started.
- [Review agenda and objectives at the beginning of the meeting.](#) Its vital to ensure that everyone knows what you will cover and what you hope to accomplish during the meeting
- [Stick to the agenda timeline.](#) People appreciate someone who understands that time is important and having a reputation for being someone who starts and ends promptly is no bad thing.

- Ensure input from everyone. Make sure no one takes up too much time talking or monopolising the conversation. If necessary say something like: “We appreciate your contributions, but now we need input from others before making a decision.” Be public about it. Establishing ground rules early on will create a framework for how your group functions.
- Ban technology. People using their laptop or phone are not engaged, they won't be focusing on the meeting or contributing to it.
- Recap at the end of the meeting. At the end of the meeting summarise what has been agreed and document the details of what actions are to be taken, by whom and by when. Attendees should walk away with very clear next steps or Action Items.

Some innovative alternative ideas that you should consider:

1. List agenda topics as questions. Most agenda topics are a phrase or a statement e.g. “warehouse productivity”. Phrasing an item as a question “under what conditions should we reallocate the warehouse?” enables team members to better prepare for the discussion and to be more creative and focussed on solutions.
2. Open the meeting with a positive round. experiments have shown that the way a meeting starts, sets the tone for the whole meeting. Start the meeting with complaints, problems and mutual blame, and that's what you'll get. Start out with something positive, the rest of the meeting is more likely to be more fun. The best way to start a meeting positively, is to ask each participant to briefly (= less than 30 seconds) share something positive. Here are some ideas:
 - i. Name one thing you've accomplished since the last meeting that you've been proud of?
 - ii. Name a person who has helped you since the last meeting.
 - iii. Mention one thing you're looking forward to in the coming week/month?
 - iv. What's the funniest thing someone has told you in the last week?
 - v. Mention something interesting you've learned since the last meeting.
3. No chairs or sitting down. Great for meetings that are to communicate not solve.
4. “Call to arms”. At the beginning of every meeting state the objectives but make it more invigorating or contextualise it. The use of the company's mission statement should be used at the beginning of many meetings. Or use the current situation to provide context. “we've got great people, market leading products, but we're 3% behind our revenue target! Today's meeting is to agree 3 actions that we can undertake in the next quarter that will recover our position”
5. Use a timer Place a timer on the table with an alarm – mobile phones have this facility.
6. Deposit phones in a basket by the door to the meeting room. A very easy way to avoid interruptions.

7. Post-it notes for off topic discussions. When people raise important issues but are off topic, write the information on a Post-it note, place it on a space on the wall – Some facilitators call this “the Car Park” – to be dealt with at another time or outside of the current meeting.
8. Lose the table. There are many advantages to table-less meetings:
 - a. People are more free to move around, instead of being locked into one sitting position.
 - b. Communication flows better, because you can see the entire person, not just from the chest up.
 - c. You increase participation, because people can't simply slump down and hide throughout the meeting.
 - d. You can get people closer together. If you seat 20 people around a table, the distance from one end to the other is going to be huge.
 - e. Seating people in a circle signals that everyone is equal. It's democratic, unlike the normal meeting table, where the boss sits at the head of the table. Instead of meeting around a table, simply put the required number of chairs in a circle with nothing in the middle. If you're going to be looking at a lot of plans or papers, hang them on the wall and arrange the chairs in a semi-circle in front of them.
9. Acknowledge the body. when the body is tired and stiff, so is the mind. A very simple thing to do is to get people to stand up and stretch. It only takes a minute to do. You can do it at the beginning of the meeting, after every break or whenever you sense that people are zoning out and losing focus.
10. Use silence. The purpose of meetings is to arrive at ideas, solutions, plans. Silence can be a great tool - whilst some people can think while they're talking - most can't. A well-placed two-minute silent break is a great chance for people to stop and think; to figure out what the deeper issues are; to see the solution that is not immediately obvious; to find out how they feel about the issues being discussed: It will feel very strange the first few times but after a few times it becomes easier and less threatening. Use it:
 - a. When discussing an issue, focus first on presenting the facts without discussing solutions. Have two minutes of silence, then discuss solutions.
 - b. If discussions become heated, and it seems like no progress is made, two minutes of silence can be a great way to cool the whole thing down.
 - c. When a decision has been made, give people two minutes of silence to think about how they feel about this decision.
11. Seek input from team members. If you want your team to be engaged in meetings, make sure the agenda includes items that reflect their needs. Ask team members to suggest agenda items along with a reason why each item needs to be addressed in a team setting.

12. Don't even have a meeting. Avoid a meeting if the same information could be covered in a memo, e-mail or brief report. One of the keys to having more effective meetings is differentiating between the need for one-way information dissemination and two-way information sharing.
13. Give responsibility to different individuals for leading a topic. Appointing someone other than the formal meeting leader for leading the discussion of a particular agenda item. This is a positive way of improving input, accountability, variety and personal development. The person chosen maybe because they provide context for the topic, better at explaining data, or may have organisational responsibility for that area.
14. Only have one person responsible for an agreed action. They can involve others but only one person's name should be identified next to an action. If more than one person is named, it will lead to "Oh I thought XXXX was doing that."
15. Watch for negative body language. Be aware of the meeting dynamics, watch out those not engaged, yawning, negative body language. Make adjustments as necessary. Maybe you need a break, ask a question to the person you have concerns about.
16. Decide on the rules of meetings within your business. What is acceptable and not acceptable needs to be formally agreed e.g. acceptability of swearing, use of technology, interrupting speakers, dealing with latecomers, when will minutes be published, body language.... Agree rules and publish them. Have a laminated copy on the meeting table.
17. Recap using a white board. At the end of a meeting go around the room asking everyone individually what action they believe has been agreed and the actions they are responsible for undertaking. Document their answers on a whiteboard - you will be amazed at the different interpretations people have of what has been agreed or what their responsibilities are. This then gives you the opportunity to redress any "misunderstandings".
18. Encourage meetings with passion. Encourage conflict (not personal), encourage attendees to challenge and be challenged so that all the ideas and feelings are "on the table" and not hidden. Without everything "on the table" poorer decisions will be made. Passion make meetings great.
19. The answer is always "yes, and..." and never "no, but..." Keep things positive and ideas flowing by not shouting down initial proposals.
20. Bring solutions, not problems. Encourage positivity in meetings by focussing on solutions not the problem. Regularly ask attendees for their solution.
21. End the meeting with 2 questions. What did we do well? What do we want to do differently for the next meeting?