Preparing for Team Meetings

As part of a team, you will be involved in many team meetings. Team members share the responsibility for making each meeting effective and productive. What follows are some tips on how to manage your team meetings so that they will contribute to your team’s success. These guidelines will help increase the effectiveness and efficiency of your meetings.

Establish Meeting Objectives: As a team, agree on the specific objectives of your upcoming meeting. What do you plan to accomplish at the meeting? This makes it easier for everyone to come prepared, and it can prevent you from holding nonessential meetings.

Prepare an Agenda: Preparing an agenda in advance of the meeting is an important step toward making the meetings run smoothly and efficiently. The agenda enables team members to properly prepare for the meeting, and helps to keep the discussion focused and on track during the meeting. A good agenda can establish clear expectations for what needs to be done in advance of the meeting, and what should be accomplished during the meeting. Setting clear expectations allows the team to hold members accountable for doing the work required, and it sets productive team norms.

For a project team, it is often a good idea to ask all team members to identify items that they would like included in the agenda. After collecting the suggestions of team members, a facilitator should prepare a written agenda. Whenever possible, distribute the agenda to team members in advance of the meeting (e.g. email). Team members should then review the agenda to prepare themselves for the meeting.

If you do not prepare a formal written agenda for distribution, do not begin the meeting without discussing the agenda. Better yet, at the meeting, write the agenda on a flipchart or white board so that it is visible to all participants.

Robbins and Hunsaker\(^1\) identify several important attributes of a useful agenda, including:

- Identify the purpose of the meeting.
- Sequence items so they build on one another, if possible.
- Sequence topics from easiest to most difficult or controversial.
- Keep the number of topics within reasonable limits.
- Avoid topics that can be better handled by subgroups or individuals.

- Separate information exchange from problem solving.
- Define a finishing time as well as a starting time.
- Schedule breaks at specific times when they will not disrupt important discussions, and indicate the time allotted for each break.
- Identify the estimated time allotted for each discussion item.
- List the desired outcome for each item, such as: list of ideas, decision or recommendation, action steps.
- Include a “meeting evaluation” as the closing item.

**Appoint a Facilitator:** The team should assign a facilitator for each meeting. The role of the facilitator is to keep team members focused on the agenda, and encourage all members to participate. At the end of each meeting, consider selecting another teammate to be the facilitator for the next meeting.

Even when using an agenda, discussions can move in unanticipated directions. If this new direction is not crucial to the topic at hand, the facilitator should direct the discussion back to the agenda. However, if this new direction is critical to the success of your project, the facilitator could interrupt to state how much more time will be allotted to the discussion. When that time is up, the team must decide whether to postpone the new topic for later or whether to eliminate some of the planned agenda items in favor of the new direction.

When topics and/or ideas come up that are relevant to the project, but not critical, team members may want to “park” those ideas (i.e. write them down on a scrap of paper) in the team “parking lot”. Place the scraps of paper in the center of the meeting table for later discussion. By using this technique, relevant ideas are not forgotten and the discussion stays on track.

**Meeting Etiquette: What Works and What Doesn’t**

*What works:*

**Begin the Meeting on Time:** Establish a norm of beginning the meeting at the scheduled time, rather than waiting for everyone to arrive. If you set a norm of waiting for everyone to arrive, you set a norm that says deadlines are not important in your team, and you waste the valuable time of those members who arrived on time.

**Review the Agenda:** Begin by reviewing the meeting agenda and objectives in order to allow members to ask questions and offer suggestions. This approach focuses team members on the tasks that need to be accomplished, and calls the meeting to order.

**Manage the Process:** Discussions should focus on facts and ideas, and on understanding points of disagreement. Do not allow the team to focus on
personalities or unrelated issues, no matter how important they may seem. Be aware of the level of participation of team members and make sure that all members have a voice in the discussion. Allowing one or two team members to monopolize the conversation prevents others from voicing their ideas, and defeats the purpose of having a team. You can prevent this from happening by involving everyone in the discussion. Ask team members who participate infrequently for their input. Remember that it is always a good idea to check that everyone is in agreement before ending the discussion.

**Stay on Track:** When the discussion moves to irrelevant topics, a simple reminder to focus on the agenda items may be sufficient. Periodically summarizing the team’s decisions, and using the “parking lot” to track ideas that are important but not immediately relevant to the discussion, are useful techniques for keeping the discussion focused.

**Close the Meeting:** Closing the meeting involves reaching consensus on important decisions, and developing specific action plans. Be sure to explicitly summarize those decisions and the action steps that will be taken. This is also the time to schedule the next meeting (time and place) and to solicit agenda items for the next meeting. Take the last five minutes of the meeting to discuss the meeting itself. Talk about how the meeting went—Was it focused and productive, rambling and unproductive, organized? Was everyone involved? What could be improved next time?

**What Doesn’t Work**

- Schedule a meeting by leaving messages on e-mail and voice mail, hoping people will respond.

- Wait for people to show up. Decide if everyone is here who is going to be here.

- Decide what the meeting is about at the last minute.

- Begin the discussion. Get sidetracked on an unimportant issue. Run out of time. People begin to leave. Meeting ends, no specific plans are made for next meeting. Or,

- Meeting goes on forever and nothing gets accomplished. Everyone leaves frustrated and unsure of what to do or when next meeting will be held. Everyone hopes the next meeting will be more productive.

**Reaching Consensus**

It is important that teams are able to reach consensus for key decisions. However, reaching consensus often takes time. The process of reaching consensus is certainly not as quick as using a majority vote to make a decision. However, it often yields better results because team members are more willing to follow through on decisions when they have had an active role in making those decisions. Participation builds commitment, and in a team setting, getting team members to buy in to the decision is often as important as the
decision itself. It can be helpful to view the process of reaching consensus as a series of steps that include: presenting an idea, checking for understanding, asking for input, and inquiring about agreement.

Teams often resort to voting because it is quicker and seems easier than the process of reaching consensus. This is especially true when teams get caught in a cycle of arguing: present an idea, counter the idea with a different idea, repeat the initial point (louder this time), repeat counterpoint (louder still), etc. The discussion seems to go on endlessly with each side advocating its position until everyone is frustrated, and someone calls for a vote. If this is the case on your team, try breaking this cycle by asking questions. Quite often, the two sides get so caught up in advocating their respective positions, they fail to gain a full understanding of either point of view. Inquiry into each point of view can yield a couple of advantages: all team members gain a greater understanding of the issue, and the team member presenting the idea feels that the team is actually listening, considering, and understanding his/her viewpoint. When a team member feels that the team has really heard his/her point of view, he/she is less likely to feel the need to repeat that point.