

Make meetings work for you

Do you dread meetings more than Monday mornings? Do you find them boring, unproductive and far too long? Meetings are central to most organisations: people need to know what their colleagues are doing and then make decisions based on shared information and opinions. How well you present yourself and your ideas, and how well you work with other people, is crucial to your career.

RUNNING A MEETING Only call a meeting if you (and your colleagues) are quite clear about its purpose. Once you are certain of your objective, ask yourself whether it could be better achieved through alternative means, such as an e-mail. Meetings called on a routine basis tend to lose their point. It's better to wait until a situation or problem requires a meeting. If in doubt, don't waste time having one. If you're sure a meeting is the solution, circulate an invitation several days in advance specifying the time and place, objectives, issues to be discussed, other participants and preparation expected. Meetings should be held

in the morning when people are more alert, and should last no more than an hour. Six is the optimum number of participants for a good working meeting.

Involving the whole department (more than 10) increases emotional undercurrents such as, "Will my suggestions be taken seriously?" Larger meetings can be productive as brainstorming sessions for ideas, provided participants can speak freely without feeling they will be judged.

A successful meeting always leads to action. Decisions should take up the bulk of the meeting minutes, including the name of the person delegated to each task and a deadline for its completion. Circulate the minutes after the meeting and again just before the next one.

Draw out quieter members of the group. Encouragement helps create a relaxed and productive atmosphere. Do not single out any individual for personal criticism – they will either withdraw silently, upset and humiliated, or try to come with

excuses rather than focusing on the problems in hand. Save critical comments for a private occasion.

If you're talking for more than 50 per cent of the time, you're dominating the meeting.

ATTENDING A MEETING

However informal the meeting, it always pays to prepare a few key points in note form to put across or discuss. If you are unprepared, you will not be able to concentrate on what your colleagues are saying and others are less likely to listen to you because you will either waffle or sound hesitant.

Don't memorize notes or read them out like a sermon. This inhibits your natural gestures: the eye contact and body language that is essential to effective communication. If you cannot answer a question, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know but I'll find out and get back to you by...." (give a definite date). Phrase your criticisms and proposals positively. Seek to offer solutions rather than to complain.

Arrive early and sit close to the chairperson to ensure you aren't ignored. If you're late, apologise and find a seat quickly and quietly. Don't try to sneak in as if you're invisible.

	DOs	DONT'S
chairperson	1. have a clear purpose 2. 3. 4. 5. 6.	1. go on for more than an hour 2. 3. 4.
participants	1. 2. 3. 4.	1. 2. 3. sneak in if you're late