

Ten tips to achieve better meetings

BY PAUL KOSAK

Most people will agree that meetings are essential to conducting business. However, there is often frustration over their frequency and overall effectiveness. Most people also know when they are sitting in a good meeting or a bad meeting.

The following tips are designed to help leaders increase productivity from meetings and conference calls. The tips are cumulative and are arranged to build on each other, starting with the fundamentals and increasing with technological complexity. A teleconference, by example, still requires the basic elements of good meeting preparation.

Face-to-face meetings

1. Purpose. Think carefully of the need for the meeting, the expected outcome and the role of each participant. Is there another method to achieve the desired results without bringing everyone together? If there is no need to meet, don't.

2. Agenda. An agenda is your best friend for meetings. It helps you prepare, communicate your expectations and provide a mechanism to control the flow of the meeting. A good agenda:

- Identifies the time (remember time zones), date, place, participants and any conference call information
- Describes the meeting's objective
- Tells participants how to prepare
- Sets the time limits and priority of topics to discuss
- Includes planned break times for longer meetings
- Is distributed in advance.

3. Logistics. Basics are critical to ensure attendance and participation. Has a room been reserved and will it be set up to your needs? Has special equipment, such as video equipment, LCD projectors and flip charts, been reserved? Will catering be required? Do remote participants have all their conference call information? Have participants been notified in advance and provided necessary preparatory materials?

4. Control. Be in control of the meeting

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by being prepared. This starts with having an agenda to keep you on track but also includes using a flip chart. This lays out the agenda but can also be used to record brainstorming ideas, group decisions and action items so that everyone can see and be on the same page. Some Web conferencing programs also have this functionality.

For large or important meetings, get a facilitator. This person is solely focused on guiding the meeting toward its objectives and not involved with content discussion.

5. Review. Was your objective accomplished? Why or why not? Circulate meeting notes with decisions and action items promptly after the meeting. Also ensure that action items are not forgotten. Make participants believe that your meetings result in action and not just talk.

Audio conferencing

6. Quality. Many variables contribute to a well-heard audio conference call. Pick a quiet room without any disturbances and use a handset phone whenever possible instead of a mobile phone or speakerphone. The conferencing service is equally important to ensure all callers are heard, aren't dropped off the call and have access to an operator if required.

7. Features. Understand the conferencing features that are important to you. There are many features and types of audio conferencing today.

Use a reservationless service whenever possible because it's cost-effective and convenient. Operator-assisted service is good

for larger calls or ones that require monitoring such as questions-and-answers or polling.

Other useful features include recording, streaming, group mute, individual mute, roll call, security and integrated Web portals for scheduling and monitoring. Use these features to control the call and improve audience participation.

Some features may be distracting or cause unexpected results — for example, caller announcements when the conference is in progress — so understand what features are activated or available before conducting a conference call.

Web conferencing

8. Testing. The Web provides an added visual element to your voice, however there are many components involved with real-time Internet events and subsequently many points of potential failure. Walk through the presentation software and the agenda instructions exactly as they were sent to participants to make sure everything works as planned.

9. Assistants. Web events add an extra layer of complexity to running a meeting. An assistant can control slide movements and field Web-based questions while the leader focuses on speaking and managing the meeting.

Also, you may have the assistant logged into a separate computer as a participant so that you can see exactly what and when slides appear for participants due to Internet lag time.

Videoconferencing

10. Appearance. Video is the most personable form of interaction aside from a face-to-face meeting. While this can be beneficial to creating a human experience, be aware that the camera sees everything: side conversations, facial expressions and body gestures that would be otherwise hidden on an audio or Web conference call.

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