



How to Make Meetings More Productive

by Pete Harmon

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About the Author

Pete Harmon has been involved with meetings in sporting, social and business areas for most of his adult life.

Pete has always been focused on making a positive contribution to the organizations of which he was a member.

Like many other members, he found this very difficult at first. But, he worked very hard to be a more effective member.

He also slowly improved his presentation and other personal skills which helped with his club activities. He also believes that his career has been helped by this effort as well.

In the depressed economy and tight job situation, it can be a real plus when someone shows they can present their self and their point of view effectively in all kinds of social and business situations.

Pete said that he is not a professional meeting organizer or a lawyer, and he has no special talent or secret.

He learned by watching and doing.

"That's the best way, but it takes a fairly long time. And, some mistakes that I've seen people make have been costly to their reputations and their ambitions, both personal and professional."

"So, I wrote my book to help others learn from their armchair in a couple of evenings what took me years."

Pete's book will give you the basic knowledge to get better outcomes for yourself and the organizations you support as well as give you more self-confidence in all kinds of public situations.

Introduction

A lot of meetings are mostly a waste of time.

They take busy people away from their main tasks, often at the most inconvenient times.

They are seen as interruptions to the work in progress rather than a valuable tool.

Researchers have demonstrated that interruptions to a person’s workflow mean that he or she will lose more time by having to prepare for the meeting.

There is also a serious cost to the organization’s bottom line from what it costs your business to have the staff in the meeting instead of performing their regular duties!

Everyone involved also loses some productive time because they have to prepare for the meeting and travel to and from it.

They also need some time to adjust back to their normal working pattern after the meeting is over.

It’s our duty to do everything we can to ensure that every meeting we take part in produces useful results.

My book will help you to get maximum value from the meetings you attend and suggest ways to prevent you wasting time and money when you have to organize, attend and participate in meetings.

This book is not a manual on procedures.

I give you some general information on procedures and other matters related to formal meetings but the rules vary widely according to the country and type of organization. It’s an area which is often subject to laws and regulation which are specific to the area where you are located.

I have included links and suggestions for resources on procedures and other related subjects in the reference section at the end of the book.

This book is focused on information which will help you produce better results from the time and effort you invest in whatever kind of meetings you take part in.

I've included some information about how to put forward your views and the ways which I've found best to interact with people, including those whose views are widely different to mine, wherever possible.

Preparing for the Meeting

If you are given the responsibility to organize and perhaps chair a meeting, don't worry too much. My experience is that most people at most meeting will respect the Chair, even an inexperienced one provided they show they have done some preparation and do their task without bias or pressure.

When you decide to hold a meeting or are co-opted to organize one, make a list of the people who you believe may need to be at the meeting.

Then, contact them about their availability and interest in the meeting.

Keep the number of people that your meeting takes away from their regular work to a minimum. Avoid the temptation to invite everyone who might have even just a peripheral interest in the main topics to be discussed.

Support People

If you are chairing the meeting, you will need to find someone willing to record what happens at the meeting and confirm that the agenda items are attended to.

You will also need someone to look after any equipment or supplies which are required for the meeting.

Prepare Your Agenda

Give the people you contact a list of topics which you expect to discuss at the meeting and ask them for suggestions of topics which they would like to add.

Sometimes, you may get suggestions for changes to the items which you have on your initial list. Someone may have reasons for wanting more time for a particular topic.

You may even discover that some items have been dealt with.

Check with them if they can suggest other people who might benefit from being at the meeting or who could be a source of relevant information which could be helpful to the group at the meeting. This information might be supplied in written form or verbally by you if there is no other reason for the provider to actually be at the meeting.

Provide the agenda to all the relevant people in a timely manner before the meeting so that they can prepare themselves, gather relevant material and fit the meeting time into their personal schedule.

Write the agenda items in a way that makes it clear to the group how each item will be treated:

- A decision about action
- Information about current status, outstanding problems or future possibilities
- Suggestions for improvement

Providing a clear agenda in advance will help everyone concerned to decide whether or not they need to be at a particular meeting.

This can also help anyone that is unable to attend the meeting. They can contact the organizer or another attendee and provide them with relevant material.

Sometimes, you can't arrange a time which is convenient for all stakeholders but you should do your best to ensure that as many as possible are present and all are consulted.

Check that they will either attend the meeting or contact someone else who will be able and willing to offer their information and suggestions to the group.

Check records (minutes) of previous meetings for items which were to be acted on between meetings and confirm that responsible people will attend to, report and answer questions, if any.

Chairing the Meeting

Someone has to control the meeting and that role usually falls to the person that organized it.

Check that morning with the person who agreed to help you by recording the minutes. Don't leave that to the very last minute.

Instead of just waiting “a few extra minutes” for any latecomers while the people who have arrived chat among themselves, always start the meeting on time.

You can introduce yourself and then ask each person to introduce themselves with their name and what they do which is relevant to the purpose of the meeting. Pay particular attention to people that have only recently joined the organization.

That courteous formality gives you a chance to gain a quick impression about each of the people. There are likely to be people who try to dominate, become aggressive or are so shy that they need help to deliver their contribution to the group.

Ask if there are any apologies for absence from the meeting.

Give a brief outline of the purpose of the meeting and read out the agenda.

Ask if there are any comments about any of the items (some may have been settled since the agenda was prepared and circulated).

You should also ask for any other important items which anyone present believes should be added to the agenda.

Adding Items to the Agenda

The Agenda is important, but not cast in stone but flexibility may be required at times.

The chairperson will give priority to the items which were properly submitted in advance for inclusion in the meeting's Agenda.

But, they have to be ready to accept new items of business which arise between the preparation of the Agenda and the actual meeting.

The secretary or minute-taker should write them in a separate list. They can sort them according to urgency and importance so that as many as time allows can be dealt with after the main items have been discussed and actions decided.

Items which Run over Time

If any agenda item starts to take more time than you think should be allowed for it, suggest that the group agree to defer further discussion so that the more important items can be given sufficient time.

Then, give it some time, if available, near the end of the meeting or defer it to the next meeting.

If it needs to be finalized before the next meeting, suggest that a sub-committee be formed, including those with a particular interest in the matter, to deal with it.

If that is accepted by the meeting, ask the sub-committee to call on you or other members of the group for any help which they feel they might need to do so.

Wrap up Each Item after the Discussion

When discussion is over about an item, either the Chair or the secretary should give a quick summary of the main points made, decisions and the person responsible for any agreed action.

This may add maybe a minute or so to each item but it can reduce the length of discussion when people start to repeat points which have already been made.

The Time Factor



Set the time of the meeting and start on time. This is one of the most important recommendations and one that is most often ignored.

Many organizers accept that people will arrive late, sometimes for very good reason and

sometimes just because “they always do”.

But, the organizer may believe that it is both polite and practical to delay the actual starting time by a few minutes.

That will not help to encourage prompt attendance at future meetings by the latecomers. The problem with this approach is that everyone will assume that future meetings will also start a little late.

Even some of those who made the effort to be on time for this meeting will give themselves a few extra minutes to do their own work before coming to future meetings because there seems to be no advantage to arriving on time.

That is also not considering the people who make the effort to be ready at the appointed time and place. The delay rewards the latecomers and cuts into everyone else’s productive time for that day.

Give your starting time and your finish time in your agenda and stick to them both.

Emphasize this policy when the agenda is circulated. That will help to encourage everyone to be on time or even a little early.

Of course, this policy makes it very important that you get to the meeting room in good time yourself.

Show respect for the group’s other commitments by finishing the meeting on time. There is likely to be a little over-run with even the best meetings but keep it to a minimum.

Handling Agenda Items

Sometimes, an item may need more discussion than first thought. If that time is not available at the meeting, ask the group to suggest a small number of people that could deal with the matter in the days after the meeting and report back to the full group. To save time, if the group is in favor, give the smaller group the authority to finalize the matter before reporting back.

Try to gauge the time each agenda item should be given. Move less important and time-sensitive matters to the front of the list before circulating the agenda.

When you feel that the group has finished with an item, give a short review of what was said and the outcome, then ask the group to confirm, ask the group to review and, if necessary, revise your summary.

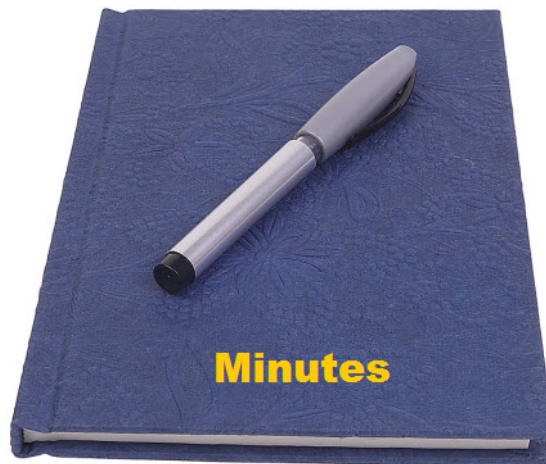
Ask your assistant, or the secretary, to record the final version of the review. Make sure that the conclusion and any required follow-up are spelled out.

Do not waste the group's time by allowing ongoing discussion of suggestions for action which are not within the power of the meeting to promote or take action on.

Some people may be involved with only one or two of the items on your agenda. Where possible, they may want to leave after those items are dealt with so that they can get back to their regular work. Let them do so where possible.

You might be able to help them further when you originally contact them about the meeting by giving them the approximate time when those will be discussed so they can reduce their time at the meeting.

Keeping a record - the Minutes



There are specific rules which secretaries and other office holders of incorporated bodies need to follow during their meetings.

The suggestions in this book are intended to help less experienced readers who are involved with meetings of community, sporting or work groups where recording and use

of the minutes are also very important but not subject to official regulation.

The minutes are a vital record of everything which occurs in relation to the running of the organization.

A summary of the minutes from each meeting should be sent to each attendee as soon as possible after the meeting. This will give the people concerned a reminder about what was discussed and decided and who is responsible for any subsequent action or other follow-up.

The summary also makes it easier for anyone to give feedback about the meeting and the contents of the summary which can be considered before the next meeting.

Get a copy of the agenda from the organizer before the meeting starts. Check if there have been any amendments since the agenda was circulated to those attending.

Record the names of those present, including any special guests, as well as apologies from people who could not get to the meeting.

The Chairperson will ask for “any other items” and there may be other topics offered from the floor during the meeting. All these should be put on a separate list.

You will need to show this to the Chairperson so that they can introduce some or all of the items during the meeting, according to their importance and the amount of time available.

Timekeeping

The secretary or person recording the minutes may also be timekeeping in some of these groups.

The group will be told by the Chairperson or the timekeeper how much time will be allowed for each person to speak about a topic.

They will demonstrate the signal which will be used to let the current speaker know when there is just one minute of their time left. This may be a small bell, buzzer, colored light or just a raised hand.

The same signal is often used a second time to signal when they should finish.

Use a stop-watch or other reliable device to see and record the time when each topic or section of the agenda begins and finishes.

Record the time the meeting finishes.

Example of Minutes

This example of a set of minutes will need to be adapted for your particular group. You might need less or more detail according to the rules set by your organization.

..... **[Organization]**

..... **[Department or Committee]**

Minutes of Meeting **[DATE]**

Present

..... **Chair**

..... **Secretary**

..... **[Other Office Holders]**

..... **[Other Group Members]**

..... **[Guests]**

All items from this point are numbered and each sub-topic is given a decimal number:

Example:

4 Proposed Picnic Saturday October 5th 2009

 4.1 Report from Sub-Committee

5 Visit to Fartown Branch Office

1) Apologies

Apologies received before the meeting and those offered from the floor are recorded here.

2) Minutes from Previous Meeting

The Chair will move for someone to move that they be accepted.

Proposer

Seconder

Minutes Accepted **[Signed by Chair]**

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