

Get More Out of the Meetings You Attend

Meetings are so prevalent these days that it's easy to get caught up moving from meeting to meeting only to find basic participation principles get cast aside and replaced with meeting survival techniques. Good meeting manners are simple, right? So why are basic meeting participation principles often ignored?



No excuse, but people are on meeting overload and find it difficult to adequately prepare for all the interactions. Poor group dynamics and diverging opinions when not properly addressed silence and wear people down. Worse yet, participants sit watching the clock waiting for the meeting to be over only to move on to another meeting. Inconsistent participation contributes to lost productivity ultimately impacting things like customer satisfaction, engagement, revenues, and profits.

It's in vogue today to reduce the number of meetings in the spirit of being more productive. To do that, the meetings that are left need to be run effectively and efficiently. As a meeting participant you might not have control over the agenda; however, you are accountable for your meeting behaviors.

If you were to rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest, how would you rate your meeting participation? Instead of waiting for meetings to "entertain" you, it's time to play your part.

Successful meetings have a cadence and a flow. Not only does there need to be solid planning and presentation of the topics, it requires participants to contribute in the preparation, meeting discussions and follow through. Here are some simple concepts to be more effective in the meetings you attend.

Before the Meeting - Do Your Homework

Get started early and find out basic things such as, the meeting purpose, what items will be covered, what are the desired outcomes, who else will attend, and when and where the meeting takes place. This is the time to begin thinking about your role and contribution to the meeting.

When you review the agenda, think about your viewpoints on each topic. Write down any questions you have or points you want to make during the meeting. If you think a topic needs to be added or covered in more detail, let the organizer know ahead of time.

Most importantly, make sure that you know what's expected of you during the meeting, and whether there is any reading or preparation beforehand. When participants come to meetings unprepared, they can zap the creative energy of others and initiatives can easily be stalled.

If you haven't seen an agenda, reach out to the organizer before the meeting anyway, to let him or her know of any specific topics you would like to see covered.

As a presenter or topic lead, check with the organizer to reconfirm the allotted time and meeting set-up requirements. Anything you can do to send pre-work materials well in advance will allow others to prepare and will leave more time during the meeting for group discussion. Keep your presentation simple by using only a few slides with the pre-read containing the detailed backup information. Don't forget to coordinate with the organizer as to how materials and handouts will be distributed.



During the Meeting

Develop Meeting Agreements



They are called many things and appear on agendas as meeting guidelines, ground rules, team agreements, rules of engagement, or conditions for success. Unfortunately, these guidelines can easily be glossed over when organizers assume experienced meeting goers know how to interact and quickly move onto the meat of the meeting.

Don't assume everyone is playing from the same set of meeting agreements. When people know what is expected of them in the meeting, they can manage themselves and others to keep the meeting on track. Here are some commonly used ground rules to get you started:

- Show up prepared and commit to being on time.
- Turn off cell phones and use laptops for meeting purposes.
- Success depends on participation – share ideas, ask questions and draw others out.
- Seek common ground and unity (not separation).
- Respect each other's thinking. Help each other contribute. Disagree without being disagreeable.
- Be positive, non-judgmental and open to new ideas.
- Agree to listen to each other with a no-interruption rule.
- Clarify how decisions will be made.
- Speak honestly with the aim to help not harm.
- Staying on schedule is everyone's responsibility; honor time limits.
- Whatever is said in the room stays in the room.
- Use "Yes..and" phrases versus, "Yes...but" phrases.
- Volunteer for action items.
- Assist the facilitator to keep the discussion moving ahead.
- Have fun!

Once you have established meeting agreements, be sure that all participants are aware of the expectations. It helps to provide a friendly reminder at the start of the meeting. Remember to share these agreements with any new participants or invited guests. Consider posting the agreements so they are visible for all to see. They become a useful reference and participants can self-regulate their actions. If a meeting you attend doesn't have agreements, recommend the group create appropriate ground rules.

Get Clear on Outcomes

Agenda topics can be better facilitated if participants clearly know the desired outcomes and what is expected of them. If the outcome isn't clear to you, chances are others will be confused as well. Make sure each agenda topic has defined outcomes and identify whether the topic is for information sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, brainstorming, feedback solicitation, education, or planning. If you aren't clear on the topic outcomes or your role in the discussion, it's best to ask.

Contribute

Unless you are asked to be a silent observer, you were invited to the meeting for a purpose so plan to share your ideas.

Many organizers start the meeting by going over the agenda and asking the group to give input on the expected outcomes. Here's your chance to provide input. Once you have found your voice, it gets easier to contribute whether it is asking a question, making a comment or just lending support. Frame your comments to help with the overall solution versus to advance your own personal agenda.

There may be times you wish to provide specific feedback. It's generally okay to provide positive feedback to the entire group. However, save any personal constructive feedback for a one-on-one conversation after the meeting.



Share but Don't Dominate

There is a balance between talking too much and not speaking up at all. Both aren't effective meeting management approaches. Even when you have several valuable questions and comments, take care not to dominate the discussion. Talking too much can dilute your impact on the more important subjects. After you make a point, wait for others to add their comments. If one person happens to monopolize the discussion, politely steer the conversation back on topic. Use the opportunity to make a comment or encourage others to chime in.

On the flip side, not communicating makes it difficult for others to know where you stand. In working meetings, "silence is not golden." People with different opinions may stay silent to avoid disrupting the meeting. All too often these comments find their way into side conversations on breaks and after the meeting. If your opinion differs from others, politely make your comments heard. Without this perspective, a group can make the wrong decisions. As a fellow participant, encourage others to speak up. If someone hasn't provided input, ask them if they would like to add to the conversation.

Aid in Decision Making

Make sure everyone understands how decisions will be made. Is consensus required? Majority? Or does the leader have the final say? Once a decision is made, test agreement and capture it in the meeting minutes. This allows participants to leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what was decided.

Sometimes it can take several meetings before a group is ready to make a decision. It helps to understand ahead of time the decision-making process including when and how the decision will be made.

Handle Different Opinions



In search of the right solution, a group can cover a range of ideas. Take care to respect other peoples' rights to have different opinions or even to disagree. First, seek to understand and clarify the differences so the best decision can be made by the group.

Find ways to express varying ideas without the risk of damaging relationships. If you don't agree with something, try to frame your concerns in a positive way. Politely let people know how you feel, and make it known that you have no intention of derailing the conversation.

Instead of telling someone he or she is wrong, start by asking a clarifying question. This gives the person a chance to provide an explanation and covers you if it turns out you misinterpreted the comment.

For example, instead of saying, "We just can't commit to that deadline, it won't work," ask, "How can this be handled given the short deadline?" If you are respectful of other's opinions, people will see you are working on an agreeable solution and what you say will carry more weight.

Test Decisions

Just when you thought everyone was in agreement, you realize once participants left the room there were different interpretations of what happened and what was decided. The best way to minimize this problem of differing recollections is to summarize key points during the meeting and then publish accurate meeting minutes afterward. If the organizer forgets to summarize the discussion, raise your hand and recap what was decided. Additionally, after the meeting compare your notes with the meeting minutes and contact the organizer with any significant changes.

After the Meeting

Following the meeting, complete your action items as quickly as possible. This keeps the work advancing and prepares you for the next meeting. When colleagues come to meetings without their action items completed, it stalls the entire group's progress.

Let the organizer know what worked for you in the meeting. Similarly, if there were aspects of the meeting you felt could be improved, communicate the feedback in the spirit to help improve the next meeting.

If you follow the simple principles from pre-meeting to post meeting, you will find you can make effective contributions to any group you join.