Managing Meetings

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The unpopularity of meetings is a cliché: over-long, ambiguous, monopolised by individuals with an agenda, inconclusive and far too frequent. This toolkit offers ways to make meetings more effective, include and engage everyone and ensure they are fit for purpose.

Meeting Rules of Engagement

To create a structure for successful meetings

To design meetings that work for the team

Much of what we consider needed for meetings can be challenged: do we need to invite everyone/do we need to attend? Does there need to be a chair or do we just defer to the most senior person in the room? Do we even need to sit around a table? Challenging assumptions can lead to improved processes and engaging originality.

I. Ask the attendees to list positive and negative formats and behaviours they have come across before.

II. Create a list of behaviours from this that all can agree to, and refer to when needed. If you need topics for discussion, consider the following:

III. When should the agenda be sent out—and if there isn't one, should you even attend the meeting?

IV. If pre-reading isn't done, then build in time for this at the start of the meeting.

V. Do presentations add anything? Can a detailed brief be better?

VI. Do you need a time-keeper or facilitator—who manages the people that "Take up the bandwidth"?

VII. Planning just to "talk" about a topic makes it unclear as to whether a conclusion is required. Use the "So What?" monitor (below) or choose one of these as an approach for each item:

◊ Inform and Advise
◊ Discuss and Explore
◊ Debate and Evaluate
◊ Decide and Close
◊ Create and Innovate
◊ Inspire and Energise
◊ Warn and Caution

IV. How should we meet? Virtually? Or should we stand to talk (the "spotlight effect" keeps contributions to the point) or should we "Walk and Talk"? Neuroscience tells us we have evolved to be active when solving problems.

Things to think about: If you don't know why you are invited, should you even attend a meeting? Or can you attend only what is needed? If not, what needs to change in the company culture?

Extrovert and Introvert Thinking

To generate awareness of different thinking styles in meetings

To create an inclusive atmosphere for contributions

Two opposite ends of the spectrum of behaviour in meetings are the people that will monopolise the time with their thoughts and agenda, and those that will remain silent despite being able to contribute, and these groups can exacerbate each other. This technique develops understanding of different thinking styles to align the dynamic.

I. Explain to the group that you feel they would benefit from understanding how each other think.

II. Explain we are not talking about extroverts and introverts, but rather how we think. It is possible to be an extrovert but still an introvert thinker, for example, as these are not fixed roles.

III. Explain extrovert thinkers prefer thinking out loud and following trains of thought—sometimes the process of hearing themselves speaking can move them towards solutions and they are happy with offering a starting point for conversation. They also may interrupt others when they have ideas.

IV. Introvert thinkers prefer to formulate their ideas before they are willing to speak. They may think better this way, or they may not be comfortable putting forward half-finished ideas.

V. Explain that neither of these thinking processes is wrong, but ask what can happen if we don't recognise each other.

VI. Draw an extrovert and introvert thinker continuum and ask the team to identify where they think they sit.

VII. Discuss how the team can best manage meetings to support everyone. "Everyone Speaks, Everyone is Heard" (below) may be helpful.

VIII. This technique also carries within in it an expectation that everyone should play a part in meetings and have something to contribute: this will motivate each person in attendance to engage with the meeting.

Things to think about: Typically women may be more introvert thinkers than men—what are the implications of letting extrovert thinkers dominate sessions for inclusion and opportunity in your team?

The "So What?" Monitor

To keep discussions focused on the team's objective

To ensure that meetings conclude with agreed actions

Meetings, workshops and retreats can create new ideas or develop new ways of thinking, but can also stray away from their original purpose or agenda. The purpose of the "so what?" monitor is to act as a check on team's discussions and ensure they result in a practical set of actions that will move the team forwards.

I. Explain to the team that the role of the monitor requires the person in that role to periodically ask a number of "so what" questions throughout the meeting.

II. Ask someone to take on this role and challenge them to be assertive throughout the meeting.

III. The "so what?" question is use towards the end of every session when a short period of time should be allowed to agree and take note of any agreed actions.

IV. At the end of the meeting, the monitor runs through the actions list so that everyone participating in the meeting has the chance to think about what is going to happen in the future and what change have bene agreed.

V. The role should be seen as supportive rather than trying to be difficult—questions should be asked to try and open up the team's thinking rather than close it down. "So What?" questions could include:

◊ So what has that point go to do with our objective?

◊ So what have we learned from that experience?

◊ So what are we going to do with that idea?

VI. The role holder helps to bring the discussion back to the needs of the meeting or the department.

Things to think about: A more advanced role may be to play Devil's Advocate: the monitor can challenge whether the team is prepared to commit to its actions and how or whether it is just talk.

Everyone Speaks, Everyone is Heard

To ensure everyone in the team is engaged and utilised

To create inclusive conditions to improve decision-making

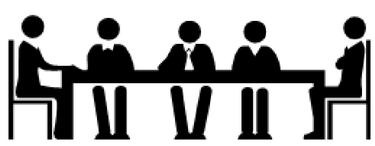
Meetings have often be dominated by power dynamics that aren't always obvious, or rather meetings can be dominated by individuals who take over the conversation, perhaps being motivated by their own agendas which can subdue other team members. This tool can create a structure for conversation in the meeting to include everyone.

I. At the start of the meeting explain that the discussion will work to the following structure:

II. Everyone is allocated three minutes to give their opinion on the issue. In that time no one is allowed to interrupt them. They do not have to use the entire three minutes but everyone is given the time and space to express an opinion. The rest of the team are required to actively listen.

III. After everyone has spoken, team members are allowed to ask points of clarification but should not express opinions at this stage.

IV. The meeting chair should now condense or summarise the pros and cons of the topic.



V. The chair now asks each team member to express their view on the potential solution one at a time without interruption.

VI. This may move the discussion to the point where a decision can be made, but if not then the process can be repeated.

VII. While this technique might seem time consuming, it can improve on the quality and speed of the decision-making by providing the less dominant members of the team a protected time to talk. When we are interrupted our response can be to become annoyed or withdraw, neither of which is conducive to decision making or generating ideas.

Things to think about: Ensuring all the team is heard is an inclusive behaviour— by hearing from all team members, the diversity of knowledge is proven to lead to better quality decision-making.

Manager Toolkits

more available at https://www.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/hr/organisational-development/leadership/managers-toolkits