

Leading Effective Meetings



A Guide for School Leaders

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1 Introduction

In schools, meetings are a frequently used method of:

- *sharing information;*
- *developing ideas and policies;*
- *solving problems and making decisions.*

In the course of a school year, a considerable number of meetings take place. Since time is one of the scarcest resources, it's important that meetings achieve their objectives in a minimum amount of time, to the satisfaction of all participants. Here are some tips for school leaders to ensure that meetings are effective and achieve their intended outcomes.

2 Is a Meeting Necessary?

The first consideration is whether or not a meeting is required.

- Many issues can be resolved by a letter, an email, a telephone call or a simple conversation between 2 people.
- Sometimes 5 minutes spent with 6 people separately is more effective and productive than half hour meeting with them all together.

3 Planning and Preparation

- The key to achieving an effective meeting is thorough planning and preparation.
- The objective of the meeting should be clearly communicated beforehand. Key outcomes should be anticipated.
- The participants should include those with the authority to decide, those whose commitment is needed, and those who need to know.
- The timing of the meeting can be important. Most people are able to contribute more in the morning as opposed to late in the day. Very few meetings achieve anything of value after 2 hours - 90 minutes is enough to allocate for most purposes.
- The Agenda is a key document. Properly drawn up, it has the power to impose and maintain a structure during the meeting which underpins the effectiveness of the meeting. (See next section)

4 An Effective Agenda

- The purpose of the agenda is to provide structure and discipline to the meeting and to enable the group to remain focused on the issues under consideration.
- It is the job of the Chair to determine the agenda items.
- The agenda should be distributed at least 3 days in advance of the meeting.
- The agenda should contain details relating to the venue and also the starting and finishing times.
- It is a common error to select too many items which results in rushed discussion and decisions taken without adequate consideration.
- The order of items on an agenda is important. Items which are urgent or important or require an urgent decision should come before those which can wait till the next time.
- The early part of a meeting is usually more lively and productive than the later part. If an item requires bright ideas and clear heads, it may be better to put it early on the list.
- A common fault is to dwell too long on trivial but urgent items. This can be remedied by putting on the agenda the time which will be allocated to each item and sticking to it.
- It is also helpful to place against each agenda item a heading which says “*for discussion*”, or “*for information*” or “*for decision*” so that those at the meeting know what they are supposed to do when they get there.
- Listing “*Any Other Business*” on the agenda is an invitation to waste time. The Chair can leave time if required for general unstructured discussion at the end of the meeting.
- Circulating background papers or proposal papers beforehand is often a good way of saving time and helps to formulate ideas, questions and considerations. The papers should be brief, or a short summary.
- Tabling papers at a meeting is often counter-productive. If it is necessary, the paper should be brief and simple - supporting and illustrating the verbal points.

5 Leading the Meeting

- The Chair should never dominate a meeting or impose his/her will on the proceedings. The most effective Chairs are those who see themselves as the servant of the group rather than its master. The Chair's function at meetings is to:
 - assist the group towards the best conclusion or decision;
 - to interpret and clarify;
 - to move discussion forward;
 - to confirm action to be taken.
- The Chair should ensure that the meeting starts and ends on time. Delaying the start to enable latecomers to arrive wastes valuable time and gives the message that it's okay to be late.
- The Chair should be familiar with all meeting papers.
- The Chair should make sure that all the members understand the issue and why they are discussing it. If there is doubt, the Chair should provide a short introduction with some reason as to why the issue is on the agenda; the story so far, the present position, what needs to be done, the arguments on both sides, and so on.
- One of the most common failings of Chairmanship is the failure to stop discussion early enough. Another is that Chairpersons frequently close discussion by taking a decision when it is inappropriate to do so. A discussion should be closed when:
 - (a) more facts are required before a decision can be made;
 - (b) it's clear that the meeting requires the views of persons not present;
 - (c) members need more time to consider or to discuss with other colleagues;
 - (d) there is not going to be enough time to go over the subject properly;
 - (e) it is becoming clear that 2 or 3 members can settle the issue outside the meeting and not take up the time of others during the proceedings.
- The Chair should ensure that everyone contributes to the discussion whilst ensuring that no one person dominates.
- When an agenda item is concluded the Chair should:
 - clarify the decision taken or outcome
 - confirm any points of action and persons responsible
 - ensure that the decision and actions are recorded

- Making a decision by taking votes should be a last resort - the aim should be *consensus* as far as possible. When it is clear that the majority of members at the meeting are coming down strongly in favour of a particular course of action (despite the disagreement of a minority) the Chair should acknowledge that this is a mandate for a decision, without resorting to an unnecessary show of hands.

6 Closing a Meeting

Close the meeting by summarising the outcomes, and list action that requires to be taken.

- The Chair must always thank the members for their time and their contribution
- Key decisions should be restated briefly
- Everyone should be clear about what has to be done and by when
- Dates and times for follow up meetings should be set
- The Chair should take a moment to evaluate what the meeting has achieved

7 Follow Up

- The Minute should summarise the key decisions and action points.
- Minutes should be as brief as possible and written in a manner that would be clear and helpful to someone who was unable to attend the meeting. Minutes should record:
 - The date and time of the meeting, where it was held and who chaired it.
 - Names of all present and apologies for absence.
 - The Agenda items (and other items) discussed and all decisions reached.
 - Agreed action and recorded against it the name or initials of the person responsible for the assignment.
 - The date, time and place of the next meeting.