

Better meetings

– broaden your thinking

WHITEPAPER





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Introduction

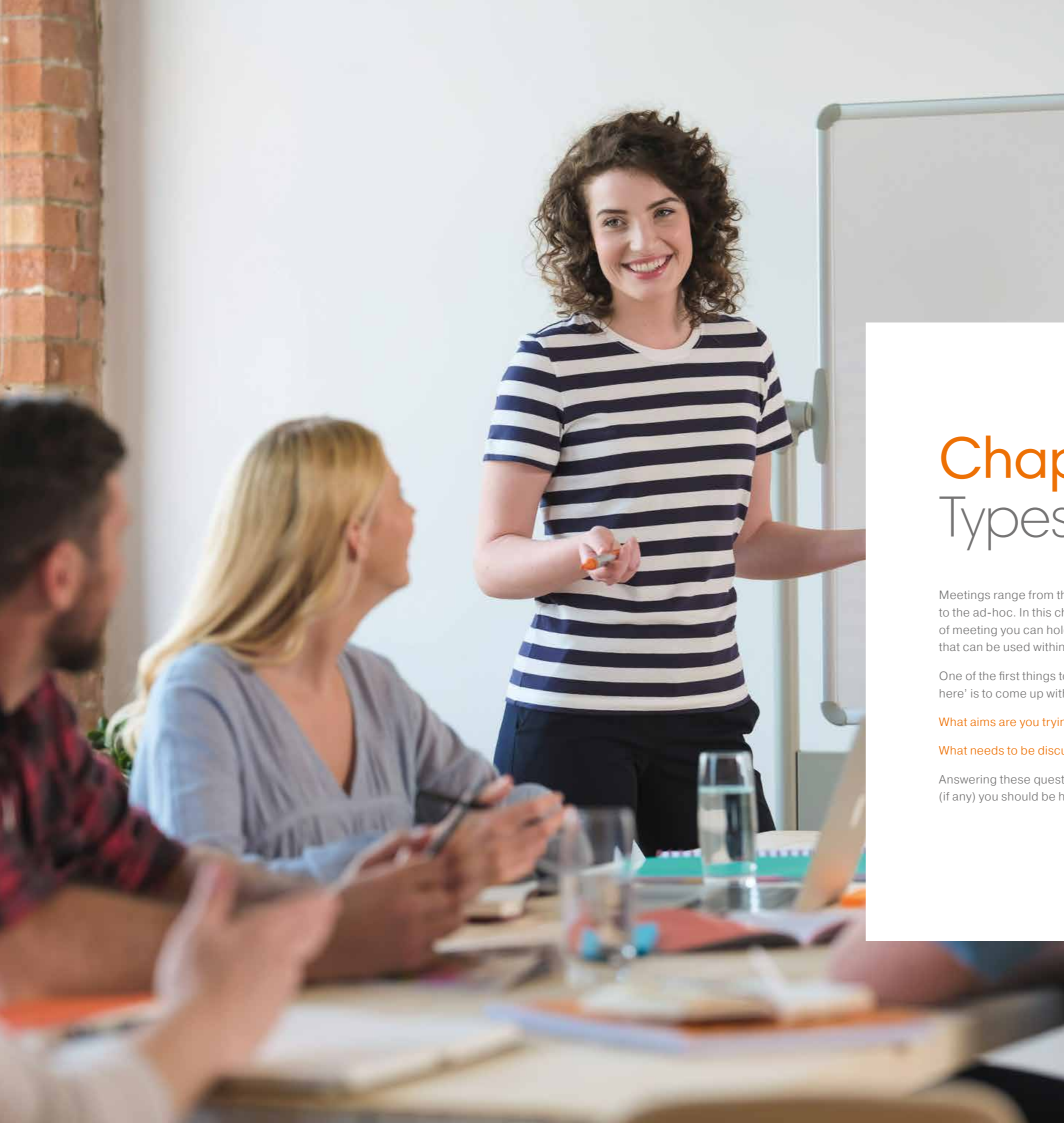
Meetings are an integral part of every business. They are where the planning, direction and decision-making involved in running an efficient and smooth operation takes place. But the image of the stern, suited CEO commanding the troops from the head of a long table is no longer the reality. And it shouldn't be!

Collaboration and creativity are the future of business. Well-run meetings that challenge people and make them think and innovate are essential to growth.

Time is money! A 2014 Harvard Business Review article cited one large company where employees spent 300,000 hours a year just supporting and providing information for the weekly executive committee.

Business meetings provide opportunities to network and build strong working relationships and a sense of camaraderie within a group. They are occasions for expressing and implementing company values, vision and mission; where all members of the team can see how their contribution matters. It is collaboration and creativity that drive the successful businesses of today, and a well-run, well-planned meeting should reflect that.

Research by MIT Sloan Business School suggests that the average employee spends 24 hours a week in meetings - more than double that of the 1960s! This has to be time well spent, so this paper will attempt to provide a framework for how to conduct more inspirational, creative, fun and productive meetings.



Chapter 1

Types of Meeting

Meetings range from the formal to the informal; the structured to the ad-hoc. In this chapter we will look into the different types of meeting you can hold and some of the techniques and exercises that can be used within them.

One of the first things to do in order to know 'what we're all doing here' is to come up with a clear focus.

What aims are you trying to achieve?

What needs to be discussed and in what depth?

Answering these questions will inform what kind of meeting (if any) you should be holding.



Formal meetings

These meetings lend themselves towards a more formal and structured approach. Generally regularly scheduled, they are often (but not always) predictable in their outcomes.

Examples of formal meetings would include:

- Management meetings
- Board meetings
- Project reviews
- Pitches and tenders
- Sales negotiations
- Job interviews
- Committee meeting

These are where decisions are made and the crucial governing of the business happens.

They are often limited to the more senior members of the company; partners, board members etc.

But as mentioned previously, they don't have to be rigid and boring just because they are 'formal'.

As with much of today's business world, the formal and informal meeting types are starting to converge. One modern example is the 'Scrum meeting', named after the scrum in a Rugby match when the teams huddle in the centre of the pitch.

Like other formal meetings a scrum meeting will happen at a specific time and on a strict rota (usually daily), however they take a much more modern approach in their execution.

A fun, collaborative version of the regular 'morning team briefing' where progress is reviewed, and targets are set and delegated. They are kept as short as possible, usually with a maximum of 8-10 people. With good use of a whiteboard, they can engage the team and enable a sense of pride in delivering on target. As well as some much-needed direction.

Informal meetings

Where formal meetings are often finalisations of tasks and decisions that have been arrived upon over the course of a project or work week, informal meetings are the day-to-day problem-solving, energetic and collaborative efforts that lead up to them.

Truly informal meetings are 'one off's' and not part of the day-to-day business routine, they are less structured, more democratic and give everyone a chance to have their say regardless of their role within the company.

They provide the crucial step of allowing those who may feel marginalised to have a voice and feel confident and empowered. A business thrives on a healthy, happy and collaborative workforce!

Informal meetings often require a more creative and personal approach and there are many techniques for making them fun and engaging as well as profitable and useful. Here are ten effective techniques and exercises that modern businesses use to achieve just this:

1. Mind mapping

When tackling a problem, a team often finds that the solution involves tackling lots of smaller problems that stem from it. Mind mapping is a great way of visualising this 'battlefield' so that everyone can get a picture of the situation:

- First, the central goal or problem is written down in the centre of the whiteboard.
- Looking at this problem, it will become clear that there are certain things that need to be done to go about solving it. These, you can write around the central problem in branches.
- These branches then become their own 'central problems/goals' with branches of their own.

While this may sound like a daunting process, it helps to give everyone on the team a clear sense of strategy. The work required to achieve a main goal can be separated and compartmentalised into more manageable and focused tasks.



2. Brain writing

A good team is alive with ideas, some of which are at risk of going unheard. It's often not the most obvious, serious or conventional idea that will win the day. Brain writing is a great way to ensure that no stone is left unturned. It is also an effective medium in which team members can share their own knowledge and expertise.

- It's best to have the team arranged in a circle for this. Each team member individually brainstorms ideas and writes them down on their own flipchart. A page per person is ideal.
- The flip chart sheets are then passed around the circle in a clockwise/anti-clockwise direction. Each team member looks at the new flipchart of ideas from the person next to them and writes down any ideas that spring to mind from them.
- Keep cycling round until everyone has their own sheet back in their possession and then a live brainstorming session can be had on the all the inspiration that has been gleaned.

This is a great way of structuring a group discussion and making sure that everyone is able to contribute equally.

3. Resource availability

This is another way of ensuring that no stone is left unturned. As well as being ridiculously fun, it's a great way to promote creativity. The trick is to get everyone thinking as wildly, unconventionally and unrealistically as possible. Get everyone to generate ideas under the assumption that there are no obstacles in the way; as if money, resources, time and even the laws of nature and physics are not an issue!

This may seem counter-productive and a huge waste of time but the funny thing is that looking at stupid ideas often makes it easier to identify good ones. It's a sort of 'what NOT to do' exercise.

4. Reverse thinking

Here's another 'what NOT to do' exercise:

The idea is to try and think of ways to actively sabotage the business. Instead of thinking of ways to improve something, think of how you can make it worse. Instead of thinking of ways to solve a problem, think of ways to make that problem even bigger!

Write all of these ideas onto a whiteboard, just... don't get TOO carried away on this one!

Similar to the previous technique, looking at ways of making things worse not only highlights the ways to go wrong so that you can avoid unconsciously going down those paths, but also serves to reveal the ways to make things better.

5. S.W.O.T analysis

S.W.O.T stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

You may have heard the saying 'every problem is an opportunity in disguise'.

- Firstly, write down the four SWOT headings on the whiteboard and create four columns underneath them.
- Get the group to brainstorm examples of all of these. The strengths and weaknesses of the business/team, the opportunities they have and the threats that are posed by the problem you are tackling.
- From here, it's just a case of finding ways to use your strengths and opportunities to overcome the weaknesses and threats.

6. S.C.A.M.P.E.R

S.C.A.M.P.E.R stands for Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify/Maximise/Minimise, Put to another use, Eliminate, Reverse.

If there is a problem that is difficult to identify or if one part of the business doesn't quite seem to be stacking up, it can be useful to think in terms of whether certain things can be Substituted for something else, Combined with something else, Adapted, Modified etc.

Simply write down these headings and brainstorm as many ideas as possible for each one. Can this product be Adapted? Could this wing of the company be Put to another use? etc.

7. Group sketching

Chances are you'll have played something similar to this at school while the teacher wasn't looking. Now it's time to play it at work:

- The first person draws an image associated with the task, problem, goal or concept at hand.
- The next person (and so on) draws an image inspired by the previous one.
- The group ends up with a visual representation of what they are facing.

You'll be surprised at how much this visualisation technique can generate ideas and inspiration.



8. Word storming

Another game you may have played before:

This is essentially 'Word Association' with a professional twist. Simply write down a word that strikes you as being central to the issue at hand. Put it in clear view of everyone present and have the team come up with as many words as they can that relate to it.

This is similar to Group Sketching but lends itself to a team which may be more word-oriented than visual. Try both. The idea is to open the group up and produce a flow of ideas.

9. Role playing

This is something that actors do all the time. An actor's job is to get into the mind of a person who may be completely different from him or her. This can also be very useful in a professional arena where there is a constant risk of narrow thinking.

- ▶ Get every team member to choose a role for themselves. Depending on what is useful for the situation. This could involve getting everyone to adopt the persona of a different member of the team, or even to transform themselves into a film, television or book character that inspires them.
- ▶ Go all out and get everyone to adopt a different accent or rhythm of speech even! The more you can encourage people to get out of their own heads, the more chance you will have for pure inspiration!
- ▶ Play around with getting different people to act out different scenarios (they don't even have to be business oriented) to get them into their new roles.
- ▶ When everyone seems to have embodied their new identity, get them to brainstorm ideas while still in character.

Role playing is a very effective way of getting people to think 'outside of the box' as well as losing their inhibitions. And this goes for all of these exercises: if people are relaxed and having fun, they will be at their most creative.



10. Mood board

This exercise can be seen as - and utilised as - a combination of all of the previous ones, particularly Group Sketching and Word Storming. It is an opportunity to get the team to really let loose creatively.

In case it still needs to be said, creative thinking is at the very heart of problem solving and generating ideas for winning schemes. These sparks of innovation can be the things that make a successful business!

Get each member in turn (perhaps after loosening them up with some Role Playing) to contribute drawings, words, phrases, ideas, quotes ... whatever comes to mind, onto the whiteboard. A mix of different coloured marker pens can help to promote true creativity.

What you should come up with is a collaborative work of 'modern art' which helps everyone to make sense of the task at hand.

All of these exercises may seem almost childish at first glance. But if you can encourage the team to let go and commit to them, wonderful things can happen. As already mentioned, meetings do not have to be stern, boring or intimidating. A good business meeting can (and should) be a fun, inspirational, collaborative and creative occasion, rather than something to dread and get out of the way.

Whether you're chairing a formal meeting of senior board members or leading an informal problem-solving session, it is important to facilitate it in a way that gets everyone involved, engaged and at their best. In Chapter 3, we will explore in more depth how to do this. But first we need to get into the technicalities of planning a meeting.



Chapter 2

Planning a Meeting

There's a lot more to a business meeting than just getting the relevant people into a room and waiting for the magic and ingenuity to happen.

As with anything, it requires good planning.

Have a meeting checklist

Having a checklist is the first step towards making sure a meeting runs smoothly and stays on track:

Key areas to consider are:

1. Purpose/focus of meeting:

What is the meeting about? Be very precise about what the objectives are and whether or not the decision-making could be conducted in another way.

2. Who should be present?

It's very important that the right people are in the room and that no one is there who doesn't need to be. As mentioned before, there's a time and money cost to all of this. It's useful to think in terms of what everyone's role is.

At the very least there should be a leader and a person in charge of taking - and circulating - notes.

Also bear in mind that in the age of video/ audio conference technology, not everyone need necessarily be there in person.

3. How often should the meeting be held?

Is this meeting a one-off troubleshooting session or is it part of a regular sequence of meetings? If the latter, does it need to occur with the frequency it has done in the past? Is it appropriate to the work calendar?

4. Time and date

Make sure everyone knows what time they're arriving, on what date and how long the meeting is expected to last. How long will depend on what is being discussed, how many people will be involved and also which people are involved. Some senior company members may prefer long and thorough discussion of topics. If you are using video-conferencing, factor into the equation that this may involve some participants being on different time-zones.

5. Venue

Make sure the venue is accessible to all and is of the appropriate size. Too large a space can be intimidating, too small a space can be cramped and debilitating. Make sure that the venue can support the technology that you require.

6. Equipment

At the centre of every meeting should be a good quality whiteboard. Flipcharts are also ideal for recording ideas. Make sure that you have a good supply of quality marker pens, erasers, pencils and spare flipchart pads. Make the meeting visually engaging and stylish!

7. Refreshments

Particularly if the meeting is to be a long one, you will want to make sure that tea/coffee and biscuits, or even lunch are provided. If lunch is required, contact participants in advance to confirm any special dietary requirements they might have ie: vegetarian/vegan, gluten-free, nut-allergy etc. It may be necessary to consult a dietary guide for some requirements. This WILL be remembered in the feedback!

8. Set up in advance

Ask attendees for any items they may require and inform members of any documents to be tabled. Make sure the agenda (more on this in a bit) is circulated amongst everyone. Also send a polite reminder to all attendees asking for confirmation of their attendance.

9. Dress code

Still important, even in the 'smart-casual' age. It's good practice to make things clear so that no one feels under or over-dressed.

The agenda

The importance of an agenda for any meeting is second to none! It provides much of the crucial information discussed above to all of the attendees.

An agenda should concisely state why the meeting is happening and what the desired outcome is. It should also contain a schedule allocating a time frame to each point of discussion, allowing you, the host, and participants to plan and stay on track. It will allow you (the chair/host/leader of the meeting) to guide the operation smoothly and to manage the time spent on each item.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly it is a document that you can look back on to determine whether it was a successful meeting: where the objectives on the agenda met? Do any topics need to be carried over to the next meeting?

It can also be useful to circulate the agenda well in advance of the meeting so that, if necessary, it can be changed or updated based on feedback.

Briefly, an agenda should contain:

- Purpose/objectives of the meeting.
- Items for discussion.
- List of attendees and their proposed roles.
- Date/time/timings.
- Any background reading required in advance.
- Details for following meeting.



Chapter 3

Meeting Leadership and Facilitation

As we have explored previously, meetings can be energetic and fun. But fun can quickly turn into an unproductive free-for-all if the leader (you) isn't keeping a handle on the proceedings.



Here are 5 useful techniques for refocusing the group if things start drifting off-topic:

1. Ask a question

Asking a pertinent or relevant question will help bring people back into a discussion. Getting people to contribute is often a more effective way of engaging them than simply demanding their attention. Writing the question down on a whiteboard can help to focus everyone in the room.

2. A quick break

A 5-10 minute break can help to re-focus and re-energise people while preventing fatigue. It can also be a chance for them to discuss things amongst themselves over a quick cup of tea or coffee.

3. A group activity

Any of those previously discussed both in this chapter or back in Chapter 1.

4. Humour

If you're making people laugh then the chances are that they'll listen if they hear you talking. Used sparingly, a joke, funny story or amusing bit of body language here and there can help to bring attention back to you.

5. Music

Nothing activates the brain so extensively as music
– *Oliver Sacks, M.D; neurologist.*

Taking the lead

The leader needs to provide structure and keep everything on track as well as making sure that the preparations and planning (covered in the previous chapter) are airtight.

But this doesn't mean reverting back to being stern and intimidating. Because...then it's not fun anymore.

Luckily, an equally effective way of keeping everyone on track is by keeping them engaged and entertained. Just like any mode of entertainment, the first few minutes really set the tone.

Good ways to start a meeting are with an interesting quote or news article or an amusing anecdote about a former success that you and another team had; think of something that is relevant to what will be discussed in the meeting that you can use to lead into it.

Alternatively, with the use of a whiteboard you can try engaging the group in an 'ice-breaker' activity where they can have fun, loosen up and familiarise themselves with each other.

Get them to find out facts about each other and relate them to the group, or simply just get everyone to express how they are feeling with a word or a drawing. Also, asking the group what they hope to get from the meeting or what they hope to discuss can be a useful way to both gauge the feelings of the group and make everyone feel involved.

Now that you've got everybody on board, you have to make sure that they stay there. Holding everyone's attention and keeping them engaged is a challenge and takes a lot of skill.





Make sure you have the right equipment

The use of visual aids, communication tools and recording devices, such as whiteboards and flip charts are an essential part of every meeting. As we have discussed, good meetings are collaborative, and good equipment helps to focus group participation.

Working from a checklist of equipment ensures that you are never without something you and the group may need, be it marker pens, flipchart easels or erasers.

Make sure you have the right sized whiteboard for the room you are in and the size of the group. Widescreen whiteboards give a great visual representation, encouraging people to use all the space available to record ideas and brainstorm.

They are available in a variety of surface types, including Melamine, Nano Clean, Steel and Enamel. Enamel Widescreens are the ideal choice for frequent everyday use but are equally suitable for large gatherings in corporate meeting rooms.

Enamel whiteboards are extremely resistant to ghosting when maintained with a good quality eraser and cleaning products. You never know if the people in meeting before will have erased their notes, so having a cleaning kit ordered in advance helps make sure it looks good as new.

If the best looking design as well as performance is important in your business the brilliant white glass whiteboards are the optimal solution. As well as being aesthetically the best looking whiteboard solution they also give the best results in erasability, durability and resistance to ghosting.

Essentially, they look better and last longer.

Flipchart Easels are also available with a glass surface and are very handy as a mobile tool for facilitating small-group breakout sessions.

Finally, other accessories such as a sufficient supply of Flipchart Pads, Flipchart Markers and Dry Erasers across a range of vibrant colours are essential to a productive meeting.

What makes a good leader?

Here is a list of personal qualities and attributes as well as some basic facilitation skills and techniques that help towards being an effective meeting host.

This is by no means exhaustive:

- Excellent communication skills
- First-class organisational ability
- Punctuality and time management
- Precise attention to detail
- Conflict management skills
- A talent for problem-solving
- Decisiveness
- Group management techniques
- Flexibility and adaptability



Be personable, approachable and charismatic; often this is best achieved by just being yourself. If you are well-liked by the group, they will be a much more co-operative audience as well as a more productive team. The idea is to move away from the image of the boring, droning, despised, corporate team leader. Part of this is cultivating a sense of quiet calmness, even if you are feeling anything but calm and collected.

Remain alert and attentive and be conscientious about inclusiveness and showing respect to everyone in the group. Ultimately, the role is to provide a fair and democratic environment where people feel confident enough to be creative, communicative and collaborative.



Chapter 4

Good Meeting Manners

There are really no hard and fast rules for this. Etiquette and manners themselves can change depending what country you're in or even what kind of company it is.

But a basic framework can be a useful tool.

Here are some good pointers

- ▶ Follow the dress code. If you've told everyone to come in smart casual, don't show up in a three-piece suit.
- ▶ Allow everyone to speak and finish their points. Do not interrupt and be mindful that everyone is able to have their say.
- ▶ Show up on time and keep to the time limit. Everyone has places to be!
- ▶ Be brief and concise. Stay on topic.
- ▶ Be an attentive listener and an active and positive participant.
- ▶ Be sure that your tone and body language is not communicating boredom.
- ▶ Make a concerted effort to remember everyone's name, address them as such and get the pronunciation right.
- ▶ Allow for frequent coffee and restroom breaks. If participants can pop off to the toilet in the break rather than having to ask to use the restroom in front of the whole team then it will probably be appreciated. Generally a 10-15 min break every 1.5 hours is deemed appropriate.

After the meeting

Be sure that you learn from every meeting; both what worked and what didn't. If there were technical issues or problems with equipment, make a note to get them fixed ASAP!

For big meetings with lots of people who you don't necessarily know very well, send out a brief online survey to gauge their reactions. For smaller, more informal sessions, ask at the end for some quick feedback from each member.

Conclusions

Every meeting is different. Objectives, participants, culture, venue or content are all changeable factors that mean there are few, if any, hard and fast rules for what makes a good meeting, merely suggestions and guidelines to bear in mind.

Running and facilitating meetings requires the right amount of preparation, leadership ability and tools to successfully fulfil the role. Make it your mission to run the best meetings you possibly can and the best ones in the company!

Collaboration and creativity are the future of business. Well-run meetings that challenge people and make them think and innovate are essential to growth.

As a market leading brand in visual communications materials for business meetings, Nobo is all about making sure ideas are effectively recorded and implemented. Ultimately, we want to help you create the best meetings possible and make the best use of your time with top-notch whiteboards, flipchart easels, pads, pens and a whole range of other office products.

We can't run the meeting for you, but we can provide the highest-quality materials to help you do so! Check out what we have to offer at www.nobo-europe.com/en-gb/

Further Reading

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