



HOW TO PLAN A MEETING THAT'S A BIG SUCCESS

by **Suzanne Bates**

Meetings can go awry for all sorts of reasons. They go on endlessly. One person dominates. Two people get into it. Side meetings begin. Those situations make meetings intolerable and more importantly, unproductive. Consider that most of us have multiple meetings on our schedule every day, and you can see why it is absolutely essential for those who lead meetings to learn how to get people into the room and get things done.

What's at stake? Your success as an organization! Meetings are where a lot of work gets done. You cannot make decisions by telephone chains or email trails. Making decisions requires getting people in a room, hammering it out and agreeing to next steps.

Like any other communication skill, learning to lead effective meetings to get decisions made is hard work, and requires some trial and error. It also helps to understand some of the tried and true principals of leading good meetings, which include how you plan. What you do before the meeting can be even more important than what you do in the actual meeting.

Taking charge of the pre-meeting planning is a matter of setting aside time and thinking it through. In the long run you'll save time by avoiding long meetings that go nowhere. Not only will you increase your chances of success in getting decisions made and people on the move, you will send a message to others that you are serious about the meeting and they should be too.

Here are five tips that will help you take charge and demonstrate meeting leadership.

Five Tips for Pre-Meeting Planning To Get Things Done:

1. Decide who should attend the meeting

To begin, ask yourself the following: who needs to participate and why? What viewpoints, groups, and important constituencies should be represented? Nothing derails consensus faster than inviting the wrong people, or not having the right people in the room.



2. Determine influencers and stakeholders

Prior to sitting down, determine who the influencers in the group are, and sit down with them individually to talk. It's especially important to find out who might have a negative impact on the meeting, and why. It's also helpful to know who might have a positive impact. What you learn in advance and how you handle that information will often determine whether you can build consensus.

3. Send the agenda in advance

Respect each participant's schedule, and don't waste their time. Everyone attending the meeting must be fully prepared to discuss and debate the issues at hand. This includes reading and reviewing materials in advance of the discussion.

You can't have an informed conversation if people come unprepared. It may sound like a no-brainer, but you wouldn't believe how many meeting leaders don't prepare agendas and send them in advance. The best corporate boards require their people to come to meetings having reviewed all the materials beforehand.

4. Take charge and lead

Mentally prepare to lead the meeting. Think through how long you want to discuss issues and what you want the outcome to be. Take ownership; plan how you will draw people out in the discussion. You can even use triggers or devices. One group we heard passes the stone around the room. When you have the stone, you have the floor. If you plan these activities you'll vastly increase the odds of having a productive meeting where everyone participates.

5. Come In Understanding Your Job: to Synthesize and Summarize

As the leader, your role is to listen and articulate what you are hearing so you can redirect the conversation and move it forward. Practice listening very closely. Repeat key words and phrases in conversation; check for accuracy. Synthesize as people are speaking. When you go into the meeting you'll have honed this skill and will be able to easily capture the spirit and big concepts. The goal of the meeting leader should be to pull it all together. If you practice these skills all the time, it will take your meeting leadership to a new level.



Final tip:

Building consensus amongst your team is possible when you clearly define the issue, narrow the options, ask the important questions at hand, and openly discuss any conflicting opinions. Use the five tips above to showcase your ability to effectively build consensus and make your meetings the ones everyone wants to attend.