

Setting an Agenda

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Preface | 5 |
| | Introduction | 6 |
| 1 | The Purpose of an Agenda | 7 |
| 1.1 | Decision Tool for Invitees | 8 |
| 1.2 | A Guide to Aid Attendees to Prepare | 9 |
| 1.3 | Provides a Structure for the Meeting | 10 |
| 1.4 | An Aid to Controlling the Meeting | 10 |
| 1.5 | A Measure of Success or Failure | 12 |
| 2 | Designing an Agenda | 13 |
| 2.1 | What Should an Agenda Item Look Like? | 17 |
| 2.1 | Scheduling Meeting Breaks | 18 |
| 2.3 | Agendas for Short Meetings | 19 |
| 3 | Summary | 22 |
| 4 | References | 24 |

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PREFACE

An agenda represents far more than simply a list of items that need to be discussed. In fact, a well-planned agenda is the foundation for a productive meeting and has five distinct purposes, each of which has implications for organizational efficiency and for maintaining good relations with your co-workers and team members.

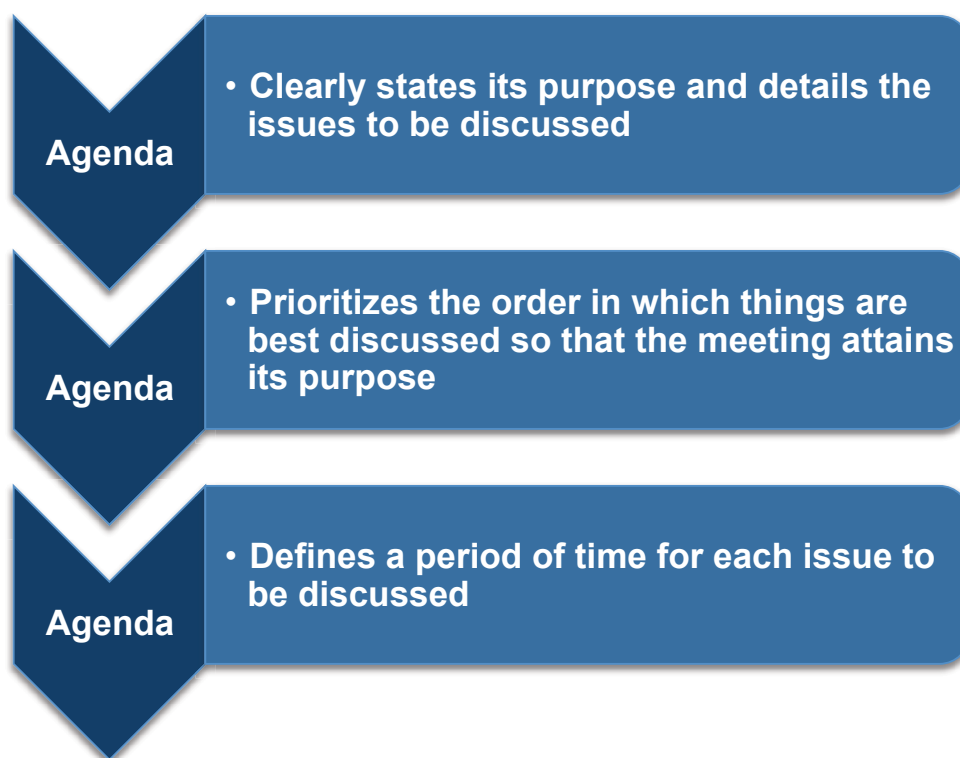
You will learn:

- Why you should always insist that a meeting is run to an agreed agenda.
- The five distinct purposes that are served by a successful agenda.
- How to incorporate all of these into any agenda that you develop.
- How to arrange individual items and allocate realistic timescales.
- How each item for discussion should be specified.

INTRODUCTION

The best way to ensure that those attending your meeting are clear about its purpose is to send them an agenda in advance. Your communication should demonstrate that the focus of the meeting is for a specific reason and not just a broad general discussion.

Your agenda should state which issues are being discussed, in what order, and for how long. It suggests the outline for the meeting minutes and to some extent predicts the results of the meeting. An agenda should be short, timed, simple, and clear.



An agenda is usually defined as ‘a list of items of business to be considered and discussed at a meeting.’ Whilst this definition is technically true it obscures the fact that agendas actually serve a variety of purposes and are not just lists of things to discuss.

1 THE PURPOSE OF AN AGENDA

Your agenda should be more than just a list of discussion items to those you send it to. It performs five separate functions:

1. Allowing invitees to decide whether or not they need to attend.
2. Acting as a reference so that attendees can prepare for the meeting.
3. Providing a structure for the meeting.
4. Giving the Chair a tool they can use to keep the meeting under control.
5. Representing a standard by which the meeting can be judged a success or failure.

Each of these has implications for organizational efficiency and for maintaining good relations with your co-workers and team members, as well as achieving the objective of the meeting.



1.1 DECISION TOOL FOR INVITEES

This is a function of an agenda that is frequently overlooked and is key to ensuring that you have the right people coming to the meeting. With the 'right' attendees you can achieve meaningful discussions, with everyone present making a valuable contribution and the meeting objective being attained.



One of the main reasons why people have negative feelings about meetings is that they resent being made to sit through them unnecessarily. Many technical people resent spending time in meetings as their contributions are often confined to some technical or factual input, which could just as easily be delivered by an essential attendee who they can brief.

Others may feel that their input adds little or no value to what is already being contributed so feel frustrated at attending when their time could be more productively spent elsewhere. It is not always easy for you to discern whether someone should simply send their recommendations to the meeting or attend in person. You need to ensure that all invitees feel that their contribution is respected whether they attend or not.

Your best solution to this type of problem is to send a copy of the agenda asking attendees if they would prefer to attend the meeting or make their recommendation in some other way. You need to ensure that your key decision-makers recognize the need for them to attend and contribute to the meeting otherwise you will not be able to attain your meeting objective.

There are a variety of ways in which someone can contribute to your meeting effectively without having to attend. An individual may feel that their personal contribution can be effectively delivered via an email to other attendees or by providing a single-page overview that summarizes the key points that can be distributed at your meeting.

They can also brief another invitee who can include the person's contribution as part of their discussions. Another option is to make a recommendation through their manager on the understanding that they will be available in person or on the phone if further clarification is needed.



As a manager, you should do everything you can to protect your staff from being made to sit through meetings that they feel are a waste of time, as this will have a positive effect on morale and thus the productivity of your team.

1.2 A GUIDE TO AID ATTENDEES TO PREPARE

Another function of the agenda is that by detailing what is to be discussed at the meeting, it encourages attendees to prepare properly for it. This preparation may involve simply taking along facts and figures or perhaps something more complex like preparing a short presentation or single-page summary.

In either case, the agenda positively encourages all of the attendees to prepare for the meeting properly. The timed allocations set aside for each item clearly indicates to attendees that they must have their arguments well thought through and prepared if they don't want to appear disorganized and unprofessional.

Your agenda needs to be sufficiently detailed and clear for people to be able to use it as a tool to prepare properly. It is important that any amendments or additions to your agenda are communicated quickly to all attendees. A poorly put together agenda can lead to ill feeling if attendees feel that it has not given them sufficient information to prepare properly.

A political tactic sometimes used is to keep one or more attendees deliberately in the dark about some aspect of the meeting so that they can be outmaneuvered due to their lack of preparation and 'bounced' into agreeing to something that they would not otherwise have agreed to.

This tactic is highly unprofessional but can work well provided that the party doing the 'bouncing' is prepared to forego any future trust. That individual would have to live with the consequences of such an underhand approach, both for themselves and their organization.

1.3 PROVIDES A STRUCTURE FOR THE MEETING

Your agenda performs the vital role of keeping the meeting on track; it is extremely difficult to achieve this without one. Attendees often have their own views on what is important and these may be different to those of the organization as a whole or not conducive to the meeting's purpose.

When this is combined with the fact that some people simply like to talk, then it is not surprising that meetings can take up a lot of time and achieve very little in the absence of an agenda and a Chair who is prepared to enforce it.

1.4 AN AID TO CONTROLLING THE MEETING

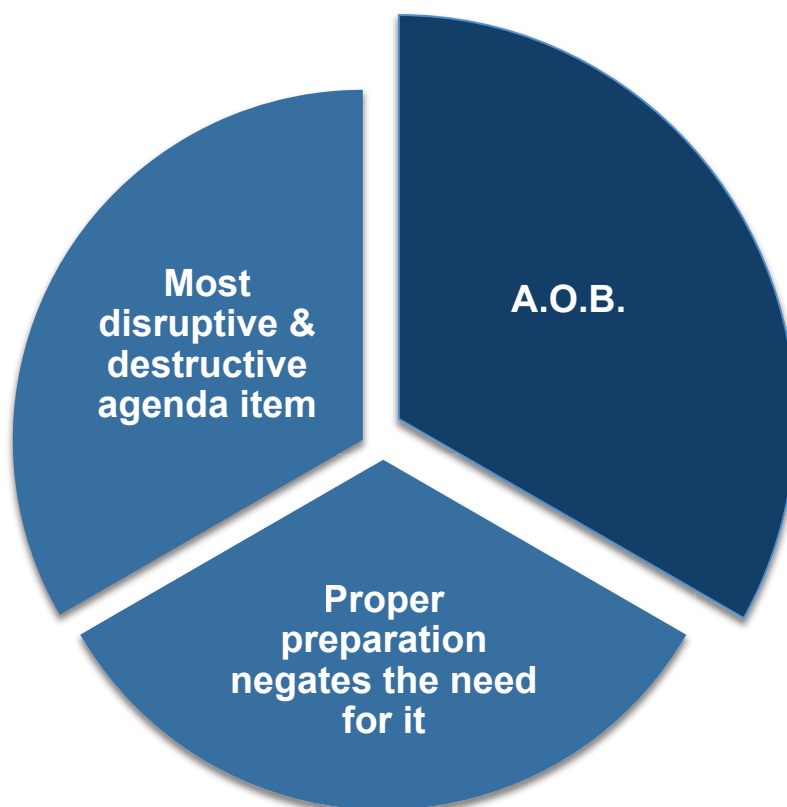
This point is subtly different to the previous one. Very often the Chair in a business meeting is at the same organizational level as the other attendees and cannot rely on his or her seniority to ensure that others comply. So the Chair will use the agenda as the device that ensures he or she has the control needed to keep the meeting flowing and to make decisions.

Without a timed agenda it can be difficult to stop determined attendees from hijacking the meeting to suit their own purposes. This is one reason why the agenda should specify the scope of each item as well as an allocated time for dealing with it. When this time limit has been reached, the Chair has control over the meeting's proceedings and has the power to draw the discussion to a close, summarizing actions and conclusions as required.

If you wish to retain control of your meetings then it is highly recommended that you never have 'Any Other Business,' commonly referred to as 'AOB,' at the end of your agenda. This single item is the most disruptive and destructive thing that can happen to your meeting. 'AOB' gives anyone the opportunity to hijack your meeting and destroy all that you have achieved up to this point, completely derailing your strict time control.

Some Chairs like to use this item as a way to control and focus discussions by using the line 'let's cover that under AOB.' Whilst this does prevent going off on a tangent during the meeting it only prolongs the diversion and will significantly extend the meeting beyond its timeframe!

Many attendees may have to leave the meeting on time due to other commitments so will leave before AOB discussions start, missing the key part of the meeting: the Chair's summary. If you have let this occur you have to ask yourself, has the meeting still been a success?



If you have prepared your agenda properly and from a knowledge-base you do not need to have such an item because all pertinent issues have been itemized and any issue outside the purpose of the meeting has been addressed by another meeting or in a more appropriate manner.

1.5 A MEASURE OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE

The creation of an agenda is not an exact science. You will need to use judgment based on experience in order to specify exactly what should be covered and how much time each item is likely to need to allow a full discussion. The extent of your own preparation into gaining information so that you have a thorough understanding of the purpose of the meeting will greatly assist you in this task.

If the meeting did not succeed in addressing every item on the agenda successfully then you should ask yourself if the agenda was too optimistic or the timeframe too short for a full discussion of all necessary facts. On the other hand, you may decide that more could have been covered and that decisions could have been made in less time than was allocated.

Your success may also be dependent on who the actual attendees were. If a key expert or decision-maker was absent then this could greatly hamper your ability to succeed.

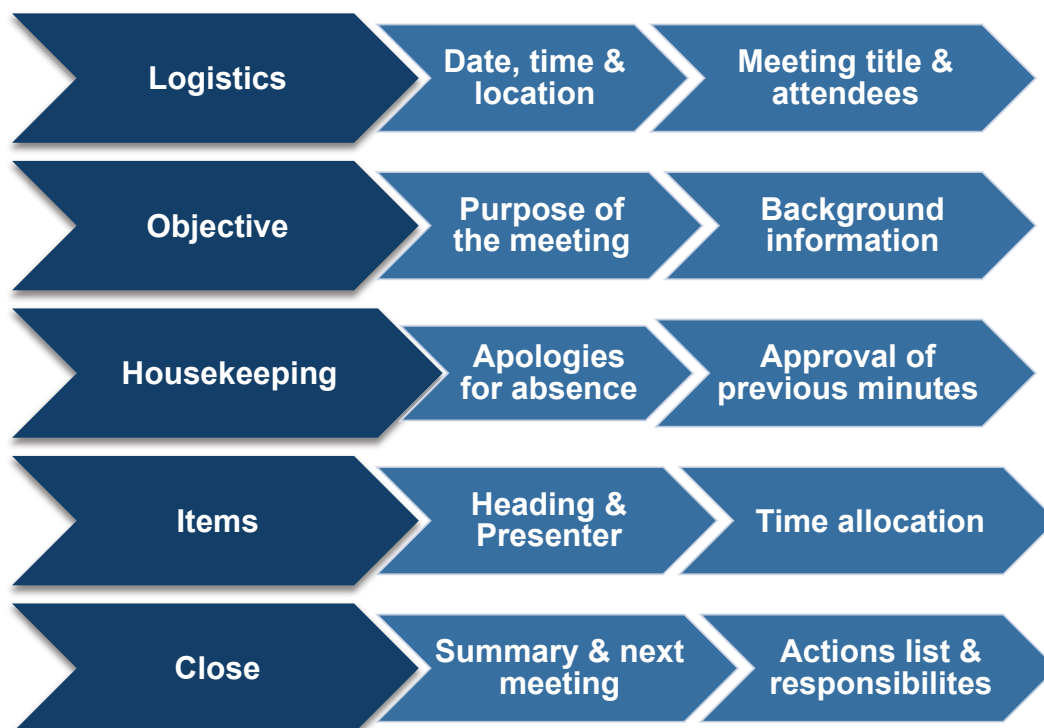
Key Points

An agenda:

- Allows invitees to decide whether or not they need to attend.
- Acts as a reference so that attendees can prepare for the meeting.
- Provides a structure for the meeting.
- Gives the Chair a tool they can use to keep the meeting under control.
- Represents a standard by which the meeting can be judged a success or failure.

2 DESIGNING AN AGENDA

To ensure that your agenda attains its five purposes it should broadly follow the lines recommended below.



Logistics

Your agenda should have a meaningful title as its heading, followed by the date, time, and location of your meeting. Below these details you should list the confirmed attendees.

All these details inform everyone when and where they need to be and why they will be attending.

Objective

Next you clearly state the objective of the meeting so that no one is in any doubt as to what the meeting's aims are. You will also motivate them to attend because they see a true purpose to the meeting. By prominently positioning your objective attendees can clearly see why they have been invited to attend and what preparation is necessary for them to make valued contributions.

This logical statement enables attendees to understand the reasoning behind the agenda items and is persuasive in gaining their agreement to come to your meeting. Without it, your list of discussion items would appear haphazard and lacking logic.

To add further substance to your objective your agenda should detail any background documents that form an essential part of the discussions, and where necessary you should attach them to the agenda.

It is vital that this documentation be summarized information or an overview of a certain aspect forming a key support to all attendees. This information must not be an onerous burden; all items must add value in terms of the understanding they would bring to the reader. Ensure your Chair brings sufficient copies of the final agenda and previous minutes so that all attendees have sight of a copy.

Housekeeping

Your agenda will then detail other obligatory details: firstly, a list of all those who have sent their apologies or who have named an authorized stand-in. If any of these individuals have feedback on any particulars relating to the last meeting they will be made known to the meeting when the Chair formally asks for approval of the previous meeting.



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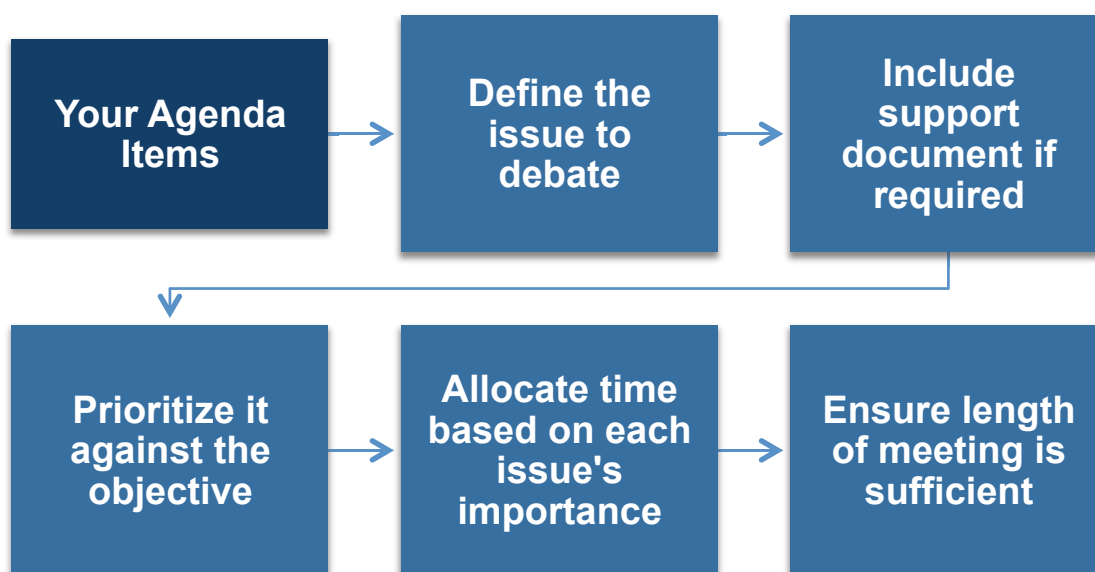
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This formal process details any amends, which are accepted or rejected by all those present as an accurate representation of that meeting. The Chair and any other required personnel will officially sign the previous minutes and a copy is filed according to the legal requirements of your organization or industry.

Items

Your agenda items must be numbered so that people can see the order of discussion and follow the logical process drawn out so that the meeting objective can be attained. The Chair, who offers a short overview to ensure all attendees are working at the same level of understanding, should present each item. The Chair will also introduce any speaker as required in this introduction.

As part of the introduction the Chair should formally remind everyone of the allotted time for the items as shown on your agenda. You will share out the available meeting time between your items in terms of their importance and priority in terms of the meeting objective and your organization.



This is one of the most important mechanisms the Chair will use to control the flow of the meeting discussions. It also discourages attendees from spending too much time on trivial or non-contentious items.

Close

Finally the Chair will summarize the decisions and list of actions that have been agreed during the meeting. This item is a vital aspect and will indicate how well your objective has been achieved. It is an excellent way to ensure that all key resolutions have been noted as part of the minutes.

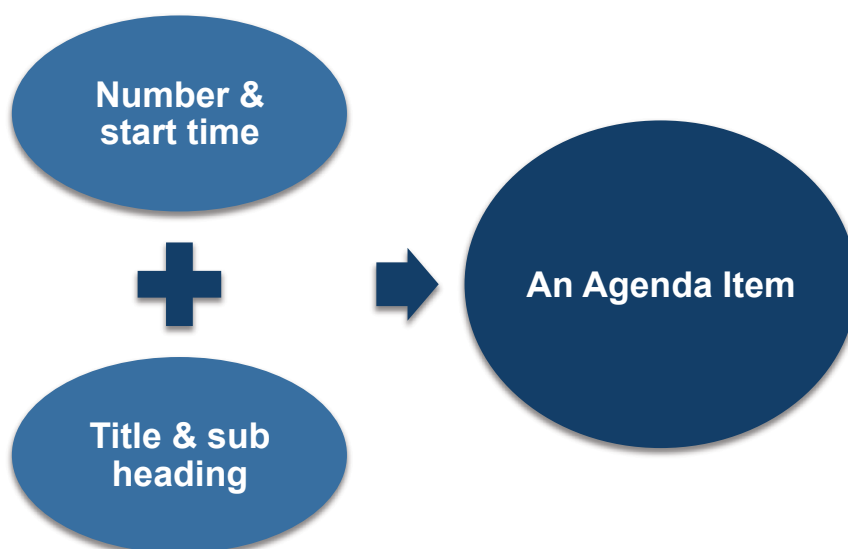
The Chair will thank everyone for their contribution and let them know when they can expect to receive the minutes, formally closing the meeting. This must be done swiftly so that those with actions have sufficient time to perform them.

Key Points

- Your agenda should be headed with a title, date, time, the location of the meeting, and a list of expected attendees.
- By clearly stating the objectives of your meeting at the top of the agenda, attendees are more likely to prepare properly and less likely to resent being asked to attend.
- The expected length of your meeting and each item's allocation of time must be shown on the agenda.
- It is usual to number each item on the agenda and for the Chair to formally introduce every one.
- Aim to make your agenda as informative as practical; it should encourage participants to turn up and play as full a role as possible.

2.1 WHAT SHOULD AN AGENDA ITEM LOOK LIKE?

Each of your agenda items should have the following characteristics:



Item number

This allows everyone to refer to that item on the agenda during the meeting.

Start time

This time enables the Chair to control and manage discussion time and to reaffirm the allocated number of minutes available to discuss this issue. (The start time of the next agenda item is also the end time of the previous one.) This timeframe helps participants to self-regulate and use the time more effectively.

Title and sub-title

Each agenda item should be clearly specified and meaningful to the attendees. If an item has several aspects to be discussed then each of these elements should be listed as sub-headings, each with its own specified time limit.

This is illustrated by the Croeso Project in the following example.

Items for Discussion

1. 09:30 – **Croeso Project**
 - i. 09:30 Database Update Schedule
 - ii. 09:45 New Staff Contracts
 - iii. 10:00 Review Support Contract

2. 10:30 – *Break*
3. 10:45 – **Disco Project** Progress Report – P Khan
4. 11:05 – **Summary**
5. 11:15 – **Close**

When compiling your agenda there are certain important considerations you must take into account:

- Will everyone who is at the meeting understand what is meant?
- Is it clear whether action is required?
- Is it specific enough to limit the scope of the discussion?
- What outcome are you expecting from this agenda item?
- Is it short and simple enough to fit into one or two lines?

In the example above it is clear to all attendees that for Item 3 (The Disco Project) P. Kahn will lead the discussion and not the Chair as with all the other items on this agenda. If this individual is unknown to attendees then a short resume of their expertise should be included with the necessary background information.

2.1 SCHEDULING MEETING BREAKS

If your meeting needs to exceed 45 minutes, it is advisable to include breaks in your agenda to ensure that participant concentration is maintained. It also refocuses the mind-set of the attendees to the current item in a more positive and productive manner than before the break.



There are also some less obvious benefits of including breaks in your agenda. For example, they offer a small number of individuals the opportunity to chat through and reaffirm their standpoint on an issue, as prior discussions may have highlighted a new or different perspective that they had not assessed the implications of. This can avoid tensions arising, because no one feels comfortable having these conversations as part of the main body of the meeting.

This ability to seek clarification is also offered to the Chair who can use scheduled breaks to informally discuss any issue that may be contentious and assess how best to handle the next item in order to arrive at an informed decision.

Your Chair also has the ability to use the scheduled breaks to accommodate extensions of certain discussions. This will enable the meeting to arrive at more informed decisions.

Key Points

- An Item number allows everyone to refer to that item on the agenda during the meeting.
- Specifying timings will help the Chair manage and the participants self-regulate the time used for the discussion.
- Adding one or more sub-titles to a main title can help to limit the scope of the discussion.
- The agenda should make clear who is responsible for leading the discussion or presenting new material for each agenda item.
- Meeting breaks enable participants to return to the business in hand with a more positive and productive mind-set.
- They can provide the Chair with useful buffer zones, which can be used to extend or shorten a meeting should circumstances require it.

2.3 AGENDAS FOR SHORT MEETINGS

All meetings should have an agenda, even if it just an objective and a list of items to discuss. You may find yourself in the situation where you need to call a meeting at very short notice to discuss one or two items with a couple of other colleagues.

The temptation is to treat this short meeting as a chat or exchange of ideas and not bother to have an agenda. Your reasoning may be that it will take longer to sort the agenda out than it will to just have the meeting, as it'll 'only take five minutes.'



In reality, producing an agenda for this type of meeting would only take you a few minutes and can quickly and efficiently be sent by email or text to the other attendees. By taking these few minutes to prepare properly you will avoid others coming to your meeting unprepared and wasting everyone else's time whilst they scratch around trying to pull together key facts and figures.

There is a general expectation that meetings should last about thirty minutes or more, so people will often talk for at least that long, or longer, even if a substantive agreement was reached in the first ten minutes. This is because even when a ten-minute debate achieves the meeting's purpose, people's expectations are that they will not be able to start their next task for another twenty minutes, so they fill the time allocation discussing topics beyond the original objective, or are happy to use the time in social chit-chat.

If you are asked to attend an ad hoc meeting, always request an agenda. Attending a meeting without an agenda could leave you vulnerable to being 'bounced' into agreeing to something as opposed to preparing properly and making an informed decision.

As a manager, you have a team of 'technical' experts who advise and inform you of implications and dependencies that relate to their area of expertise. Without the opportunity to consult with them prior to the meeting you could find that the time and resources that you have allocated to solving a problem are completely impractical.

For example, you could be asked:

‘Can one of your guys take responsibility for migrating the sales database by Monday week? It’s only a ten-minute job.’

If you agree to requests such as these it could have unknown and serious implications on your other projects, as your technical team member has the up-to-date knowledge of what is actually involved regarding the technical skills needed, the timeframe required, potential risks, and implications such a request would involve. Some of these may be unavoidable but with preparation you would not get any nasty surprises.

Key Points

- Even short ad hoc meetings benefit from an agenda as it gives a meeting purpose and focus.
- Discussions will fill the time the meeting is expected to take.
- Attending a meeting without an agenda could leave you vulnerable to agreeing to something that you later regret.

3 SUMMARY

An agenda is essential if you want your meetings to be successful. Creating an agenda forces you to consider why you are having a meeting and if it is the best way to achieve your purpose. It makes you reflect on what you want to accomplish and who needs to attend for this to be attained. Finally, it gives you an indication of how long each discussion needs to take for an informed decision to be reached.

By having an agenda it is much easier for you to keep a record of what decisions were made at the meeting and what actions resulted from these, as well as which ones are the most important for you to follow up. It presents you with a logical sequence of how decisions were arrived at and offers you a way of measuring the meeting's success.




By following the process of creating an agenda you have also maximized the contributions of your attendees because you gave them sufficient time to prepare any information or documentation required. It enables teams to send one well-informed representative rather than several individuals who each have very specific areas of knowledge. This ensures productive use of teams' resources.


Your agenda also sets your attendees' expectations of how long your meeting will be, and any necessary data provided as part of these proceedings provides a common knowledge-base for all attendees. In creating an agenda you had arranged the items logically so that each issue was discussed once, avoiding the trap of repeatedly covering the same ground.

By following such standards in preparing for your meetings you will illustrate your professionalism and demonstrate to colleagues and third parties that you desire others to conduct themselves in a similar manner too.

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