Conducting Effective Meetings: A Short Guide for Meeting Managers and Meeting Participants

The Five Ps of Effective Meetings

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Summary and Behavioral Guidelines

Preparing and Conducting a Team Meeting at SSS Software

Role Diagnosis

Meeting Evaluation Worksheet

OBJECTIVES

IMPLEMENT GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING AND CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

ENHANCE THE VALUE OF MEETINGS ATTENDED
impact on our social fabric. Robert Putnam of Harvard University has developed a thesis about the decline in “social capital” in American society (Putnam, 2000). Collective activities seem to be on the decline across a wide range of organizations. One of the reasons for this decline is unorganized meetings that frustrate participants rather than help them contribute to the organization’s goals. Folks may figure they just do not want to waste their time.

Because meetings are such a pervasive activity both in and out of work settings, being a skillful meeting manager has important rewards beyond those associated with team building. Meeting groups, if properly managed, can make higher-quality decisions than individuals. The phrase “if properly managed” is the key. If not properly managed, meetings become the supreme organizational and civic time waster. They can actually set the organization back by making rotten decisions when problematic processes such as folly (Tuchman, 1984), groupthink (Janis, 1983), the Abilene paradox (Harvey, 1974), the garbage can model of organizational choice (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), or the “boiled frog syndrome” (Tichy & Devanna, 1986) come into play.

The Five Ps of Effective Meetings

Effective meeting managers know the five steps in preparing for and conducting meetings: (1) purpose, (2) participants, (3) plan, (4) participation, and (5) perspective.

1. Purpose

Purpose refers to the reason for which a meeting is held. There are three functions a meeting performs—to make announcements, to make decisions, and to brainstorm. Of these three, only the second two count as reasons for actually holding a meeting. When information can be conveyed by a memo or phone call, when people are not prepared, when key people cannot attend, when the cost of a meeting is higher than the potential payoff, and when there is no advantage to holding a meeting, no meeting should be called (3M, 1994). In short, if there are no decisions to be made, nor any brainstorming to do, cancel the meeting.

Productive meetings result from good decision making and brainstorming. A meeting should be called when one or more of the following conditions applies:
Information sharing. When all needed information is not held by any single person, when ideas will be stimulated by getting people together, and when it is not clear what information is needed or available.

Commitment building. When individuals need to become committed to a course of action and when they are involved in its planning and implementation.

Information disseminating and feedback. When many people must receive the same message in the same way, e-mail is good. However, when the real issue is not the dissemination, but gauging the reaction and allowing for “ventilation,” then a meeting is very helpful.

Problem solving. Groups outperform the best individuals in accomplishing complex tasks and making high-quality decisions where various policies or information are needed. Therefore, meetings should be called to manage complex problems and outline the options for decisions through brainstorming.

2. Participants

The second P, participants, refers to the individuals invited to attend a meeting. In conducting an effective meeting, it is important to determine the size, composition, and skills of the participants. Meetings can fail because too many or too few participants attend or because the wrong mix of people is present. If a meeting is too large, discussion may be superficial and diffuse; few people will be able to participate. If a meeting is too small, not enough information will be shared and problems will not be adequately solved. Odd numbers of participants work best because even numbers have a higher propensity of causing the group to polarize.

Meeting composition refers to three main dualistic dimensions:

- Homogeneity–Heterogeneity
- Competition–Cooperation
- Task–Process

A homogeneous group is composed of members with similar backgrounds, personalities, knowledge, or values. Homogeneous groups produce less conflict and disagreement, but their outcomes may be mundane and unimaginative. On the other hand, heterogeneous groups produce more differences among individuals, which leads to criticisms and disputes, but potentially to more novel, complex solutions to problems as well.

With regard to the competition–cooperation dimension, research on its effect in problem-solving meetings is compelling. Groups whose members are working toward a common goal and who adopt a cooperative stance toward one another perform more effectively and produce higher levels of member satisfaction than groups whose members are striving to fulfill individual needs or are pursuing competing goals. Cooperative groups also demonstrate more effective interpersonal communication, more complete divisions of labor, higher levels of involvement, and better task performance.

On the task–process dimension, meetings are more effective if they have participants who generate a balance of both task and process. Task-oriented participants are “all business.” They have little tolerance for joking or for discussions of feelings and friendships. The task is accomplished efficiently, but satisfaction may be low. Process-oriented participants emphasize esprit de corps and participation. They are sensitive to participants’ feelings and satisfaction. They may sacrifice accomplishment in favor of members’ enjoyment. (This usually turns out to be a bad choice; the greatest enjoyment comes from accomplishment.) For meeting participants, one tip is not to refrain from using your default (or usual) style (task or process) but, rather, “Do what is not being done.” If there is a lot of process going on, you can emphasize task. If there is an “all task” mind-set, then add a bit of process.

Skills address the competencies participants bring to the meeting. We can think of general and specific skill sets. In general, the four generic skill sets Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) identify should be present in the meeting at the same time. First are the problem knowers—participants who have some sense of the problem under discussion. Second are the solution providers—participants who have some sense of the problem under discussion. Second are the solution providers—participants who are creative and imaginative, but may not know the problems. Third are the resource controllers—participants who sign off on money, people, and resources needed for most decisions; therefore, they need to be in the loop. Finally, there are people called “decision-makers-looking-for-work”—the “organizational archbishops” who “bless” or affirm decisions. If all these skill sets are in the same room at the same time, and the process is a good one, the likelihood of a high-quality decision (timely, creative, participative) is great. In terms of specific skills, the particular knowledge that might be needed in a particular situation can be ascertained as one plans for the meeting, using the rule of halves, which will be mentioned later in this chapter. It is true individuals may double up—and fit more than one of these categories. That is fine. Just be sure you have them all.
3. Planning

The third phase of planning, refers to preparation of the meeting agenda. Often, the justification for a meeting is clear (e.g., we need to determine how to get fuel to troops at the front), and the appropriate individuals are in attendance, but the meeting still seems to flounder, wander aimlessly, or is unable to produce a final decision. Such meetings often begin with the leader saying, “We have a problem I think we all need to sit down and discuss.” The leader’s erroneous assumption is because a problem exists and all participants understand it, the meeting will be successful. Unfortunately, participants may come to the meeting unprepared, may be unaware of critical information, may be unclear about their specific roles, and may be confused about how to achieve the objective. Conversely, the meeting planner may try to cram too much into a single meeting, schedule too many presentations, handle too many documents, or cover too much business. Research suggests there are a number of rules for planning meetings effectively (Tropman, 1996). The following is a list of the most important:

**The Rule of Halves** All agenda items for an upcoming meeting must be in the hands of the agenda scheduler no later than one-half of the time interval between the last meeting and the upcoming meeting. If meetings are held weekly, the person constructing the agenda should gather agenda items for the next meeting by the halfway mark in the week. This allows time to sort and cluster items, handle some items one-on-one outside the meeting, and produce and distribute an agenda in advance of the meeting. It also allows for the assembling of special skills, as driven by the developing agenda.

**The Rule of Sixths** Approximately two-thirds of the agenda should be focused on current agenda items. The remaining third should be subdivided into two-sixths. One of those sixths of meeting time should be spent on past agenda items and follow-up. The remaining sixth of the meeting should be spent on brainstorming for the future. Continuity is thus maintained and agenda items don’t slip through the cracks.

**The Reports Rule** Meetings go better if the usual round of “reports” does not occur. Rather, the information that is contained in the “reports” is reorganized into specific items—announcement, decision, brainstorming.

**The Rule of Three-Quarters** Packets of information, including minutes from the past meeting and an agenda, should be sent to meeting participants at the three-quarter point between meetings. For example, if a weekly meeting is scheduled, the packet should be sent out approximately two days before the next meeting.

**The Agenda Rule** Agendas for meetings should be written with action verbs or sentence summaries, not with single words. Rather than saying “Minutes,” for example, use “Approve Minutes.” Rather than “Production Report,” use “Determine Production Schedule.” This provides clarity and impetus for what the meeting should accomplish. Figure C.1 illustrates this process.

**The Rule of Thirds** All meetings are divided into three parts: (1) a start-up period in which less difficult items are covered, latecomers arrive, and people get on board; (2) a heavy work period in which the most difficult items are considered; and (3) a decompression period in which the meeting begins to wind down. Instructional items should be handled in the first period, items for decision should be handled in the second period, and items for discussion should be handled in the third period.

**Executive Summary Rule** Reports circulated to meeting participants should always contain executive summaries or options memos. An executive summary highlights key points and conclusions of the report. An

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**Figure C.1 The Weekly Meeting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Approve Minutes</th>
<th>2:00–2:05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Announcements</td>
<td>2:05–2:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>New desks ordered</em></td>
<td>$1,000 each to your account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Retreat Location (Action)</td>
<td>2:10–2:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Key West seems best</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a. Vendor Selection (Action)</td>
<td>2:15–2:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A new vendor for gaskets would like some business</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b. Disposal of Broken Gaskets (Action)</td>
<td>2:25–2:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Trash? Sell abroad/fix?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Permission to Ship (Action)</td>
<td>2:35–3:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ship part with scratch?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Give discount?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Improving Quality (Brains)</td>
<td>3:00–3:38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Adjourn</td>
<td>3:38–3:40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: John Tropman.
options memo summarizes alternatives to be discussed and decided on. This eliminates the need to sift through many pages to find relevant information and to spend meeting time shuffling through the report.

**The Agenda Bell Rule** This rule is a more specific rule about when certain types of agenda items should be covered. Agenda items should be considered in order of ascending controversiality, then attention should be turned to discussion and decompression items. Figure C.2 shows a typical agenda bell for a meeting.

**The Agenda Integrity Rule** All items on the agenda should be discussed, and items not on the agenda should not be discussed. This rule helps ensure meeting participants do not sidetrack the meeting with items that are tangential, for which no one has prepared, or for which insufficient information is available.

**The Temporal Integrity Rule** This rule is simple: Start on time and end on time. Follow a time schedule in the meeting itself. This ensures all agenda items are given adequate time, latecomers are not rewarded by having the meeting wait for them, and people can count on finishing at a certain point.

**The Minutes Rule** Minutes of meetings should have three characteristics: agenda relevance (information recorded is related to an agenda item), content relevance (minutes should be written in a form that follows the agenda so it is easy to find pertinent material with a quick review), and decision focus (minutes should reflect decisions, conclusions, and actions agreed upon, rather than the processes by which the decisions are reached). After a brief summary of each item, skip a line and place the action or result in a box. Here is where names are named, times are timed, and so on. The key item is easy for everyone to see.

These 10 rules of meeting preparation help to ensure that when individuals arrive for a meeting and the meeting begins, a structure and plan will be in place to make the meeting productive and efficient.

### 4. Participation

The fourth P, participation, refers to the actual process of meetings and the methods used to ensure meetings involve everyone present.

![Figure C.2 The Agenda Bell](image-url)
**Provide Introductions**  Meeting participants should be introduced to each other and helped to feel comfortable together, especially if controversial issues are to be considered.

**Establish Ground Rules**  It should be made clear what amount of participation is expected, what variations from the agenda will be tolerated, and what the time frame will be. Establishing a structure for the meeting at the outset helps keep the meeting on track.

**Establish Decision Rules**  Decision rules are norms that make participants comfortable. Establish them at the beginning of the meeting. Because there are no neutral decision rules, meeting managers usually have to use several at once—a complex intellectual task. The most common are the extensive rule, the intensive rule, the involvement rule, the expert rule, and the power rule.

The *extensive rule* is majority rule. Each meeting participant votes on alternatives, and the alternatives with a majority of the votes wins. However, there are variations of this rule, which should be noted:

- **Highest total.** When more than two alternatives are being considered, none may get a majority of the votes. The alternative with the highest number of votes is adopted.
- **Straw vote.** A nonbinding vote is taken to get a sense of the participants' feelings toward various alternatives. This may happen several times before a decision is reached in order to eliminate nonsupported alternatives from consideration.
- **Weighted rating.** Meeting participants can divide 100 points among alternatives, so the strength of their support can be tallied. If four alternatives exist, for example, a participant can give 90 points to one and 5 points to two others. The alternative with the most points wins.
- **Ranking.** Alternatives are rank ordered, and the alternative receiving the highest average ranking is adopted.

If the *intensive rule* is used, those who care most win. Through discussion, rather than voting, individuals who feel deeply can share that feeling with the group. Groups will try to be as accommodating as possible. However, problems occur if the majority cares a lot, but not “most,” or if there are two groups that care deeply but differently. It requires a lot of imagination and attempts to come up with a solution that pleases the “shallow feelers” and the “deep feelers.”

In the *involvement rule*, the person or subgroup that has to carry out any action gets to pick, or has it their way. Their downstream involvement gives them a particular view, which may not always be for the overall best. Using the *expert rule*, the participant with the law or science on his or her side wins. But neither law nor science is infallible by any means. Using the *power rule* means the boss wins.

Any one of these rules can work, but quality decisions with the greatest buy-in (and hence, sticking power) usually come from consensus. Consensus, in this case, means a decision is taken that meets, and can be shown to meet, each of the rules—it satisfied the greatest number of those who feel strongly, those who must carry it out, the experts, and the boss.

Sometimes it is necessary to proceed “in principle.” Although agreement cannot be reached on all specific details, certain general principles can be agreed upon. The principles, rather than the entire proposal, are accepted. For example, you and your partner may decide in principle to have Italian food Friday night. Details (such as if you will go out, and if not, who will do the cooking) might remain unresolved for the moment while a range of details is explored.

**Use a Variety of Media**  To maintain the interest of meeting participants, use various media to present information. Handouts, overhead transparencies, slides, flip charts, videos, and blackboard diagrams are all helpful in maintaining interest and increasing the efficiency with which information is presented and processed. Participants should be able to use at least two of their senses during a meeting (for example, seeing and hearing).

**Encourage and Establish Participation**  Participation in a meeting should be equitable among participants, which does not mean everyone must make exactly the same number of comments. Those with more information or those with vested interests in the topic will participate more. However, it is important to control the overparticipator or the person who dominates the discussion, as well as encourage those who may have something to contribute but may not be inclined to share it. Equity should also be maintained among different points of view, so representatives of one side of an argument don’t dominate the discussion. Ways to promote discussion among meeting participants include the following:

- Ask open-ended questions rather than questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no.”
Ask questions using the language of the participants rather than using jargon or recondite terminology.

Encourage participants to share personal experiences that relate to the topic being considered.

Use examples from your own experience to clarify points.

Make eye contact with those to whom you are talking and summarize their points when they finish their statements.

Ask group members for their reactions to points made by other meeting participants.

When appropriate, involve others in answering a question asked of you.

Remember communication comes in a strand of two parts—the report part (information) and the rapport part (connection and feeling). Be sure to attend to both parts.

As the leader, make certain you facilitate the discussion rather than dominate it.

**Summarize** Close the meeting by summarizing the decisions reached, tasks assigned, progress accomplished, key points discussed, and what was learned in the meeting. Review action items that will be reported on at the next meeting. Help meeting participants feel a sense of accomplishment for having spent their time in the meeting. This may be a good time to anticipate the next meeting by identifying when minutes and the next meeting's agenda will be distributed and what preparation will be required.

**5. Perspective**

The last P is **perspective**. Perspective directs us to view the meetings from a distance. It means evaluating each meeting and, every so often, the decisions of and process of the meeting series. At the end of each meeting, for example, you can use KSS methodology to do a quick and simple assessment. Pass out a piece of paper to each participant. Ask each participant to respond under each of the three letters—K, S, and S. K means “keep”—What went well about this meeting that we should keep or expand. S means “stop”—What about this meeting is nonproductive and should be stopped or phased out. S means “start”—What about this meeting is not happening and should be started. You may get the usual irreverent responses (for example, “better doughnuts”), but if you look for serious patterns of feedback, you can constantly improve the meeting series. The next week, give the participants the results (in summary form) and let them know how you are using their feedback to improve the meeting.

**Suggestions for Group Members**

So far in this discussion of effective meeting management, we have focused on the role of the meeting manager—the person who calls, plans, and serves as the meeting’s “conductor.” This role is key to the success of any group activity. However, meeting participants also bear responsibility for the meeting’s effectiveness. It is important for each participant to appreciate the impact of her or his contribution, both in shaping the short-term outcomes of meetings and affecting long-term career opportunities. The success of the meeting is the responsibility of everyone present, and even those not present, in the sense that these latter folks have the responsibility to let their views be known in advance. The best meetings are those in which meeting managers and other participants each take some responsibility for meeting leadership.

Following are several pointers for contributing to the effectiveness of meeting from a non-manager's perspective.

1. **Determine if you need to attend the meeting.** Don’t attend merely because you have been invited. If you have doubts about whether the meeting’s agenda applies to you, discuss with the meeting manager why he or she believes your presence is important. Under the rule of three-fourths, you will know what is coming up in fairly specific detail. This information should help.

2. **Prepare.** Acquaint yourself with the agenda, and prepare any reports or information that will facilitate others’ understanding of the issues. Come prepared with questions that will help you understand the issues.

3. **Be on time.** Stragglers not only waste the time of other participants by delaying the meeting or by requiring summaries of what has happened, but they also hinder effective team building and hurt morale.

4. **Ask for clarification on points that are unclear or ambiguous.** Often, you will find others in this room have the same questions but were too timid to speak out.

5. **When giving information, be precise and to the point.** Don’t bore everyone with anecdotes and details that add little to your point.
6. **Listen.** Keep eye contact with whomever is speaking, and try to ascertain the underlying ideas behind the comments. Be sensitive to the effects of your nonverbal behavior on speakers, such as slouching, doodling, or reading.

7. **Be supportive of other group members.** Following the guidelines on supportive communication, acknowledge and build on the comments of others. ("As Jane was saying . . .")

8. **Assure equitable participation.** Take the lead in involving others so everyone’s talents are used. This is especially important if you know that critical information from particular points of view are not being included in the discussion. This can be rectified by encouraging those who rarely participate. ("Jim, your unit worked on something like this last year. What was your experience like?")

9. **Make disagreements principle-based.** If it is necessary to disagree with, or challenge, the comments of others, follow the guidelines for collaborative conflict management in the text. For example, base your comments on commonly held principles or values. ("That’s an interesting idea, Bill, but how does it compare with the president’s emphasis on cost cutting?")

10. **Act and react in a way that will enhance the group performance.** Leave your personal agendas at the door and work toward the goals of the group.

**Summary and Behavioral Guidelines**

Meetings are a pervasive part of organizational life, especially for managers. Few important initiatives are forged without extensive and intensive group efforts. However, meetings are one of the most maligned aspects of organizational membership. To avoid poorly managed meetings, a Five-Ps approach was presented.

1. **Purpose** Use meetings to accomplish the following purposes:
   - Decisions
     - A complex problem needs to be resolved using the expertise of several people.
     - Group members’ commitment to a decision, or to each other, needs to be enhanced.
   - Brainstorming
     - Ideas about a problem need to be explored, such as:
       - Precipitating and predisposing causes
       - What is the root cause?
   - Announcements
     - Information needs to be shared simultaneously among several people.
   - Are there more effective and efficient ways we could approach this problem?
   - What is the evidence?
   - What does the evidence prove?
   - Decisions
     - The size of the group should be comparable with the task. (For interactive groups, five to seven participants tend to work best.)
   - A balance between individuals with strong task orientations and others with strong group-process orientations should be sought.
   - Individuals should share some common goals or values.
   - All relevant experience and knowledge need to be represented.
   - The group’s composition should reflect the goals of the meeting. (Homogeneity encourages solidarity and commitment; heterogeneity fosters creativity and innovation.)
   - Be sure the general skills of problem knowing, problem solving, resource controlling, and key decision makers are on board.
   - Provide for adequate physical space, audiovisual equipment, and so on.
   - Establish priorities by sequencing agenda items and allotting time to each item.
   - Prepare and distribute an agenda before, or at the beginning of, the meeting.
   - Choose the most appropriate decision-making format structure for each item (for example, ordinary group discussion, brainstorming, or one of several consensus-building techniques).

2. **Participants** Make decisions regarding who and how many to invite based on the following:
   - The size of the group should be comparable with the task. (For interactive groups, five to seven participants tend to work best.)
   - A balance between individuals with strong task orientations and others with strong group-process orientations should be sought.
   - Individuals should share some common goals or values.
   - All relevant experience and knowledge need to be represented.
   - The group’s composition should reflect the goals of the meeting. (Homogeneity encourages solidarity and commitment; heterogeneity fosters creativity and innovation.)
   - Be sure the general skills of problem knowing, problem solving, resource controlling, and key decision makers are on board.

3. **Plan** In preparing for the meeting, be sure to do the following:
   - Provide for adequate physical space, audiovisual equipment, and so on.
   - Establish priorities by sequencing agenda items and allotting time to each item.
   - Prepare and distribute an agenda before, or at the beginning of, the meeting.
   - Choose the most appropriate decision-making format structure for each item (for example, ordinary group discussion, brainstorming, or one of several consensus-building techniques).

4. **Process** In managing the group dynamics, specify the target time length, and highlight specific tasks by doing the following:
   - Establish process ground rules, such as how decisions will be made.
   - Allow members to become acquainted (if necessary) and make them feel comfortable.
   - When critical thinking is important, refrain from expressing strong personal opinions. Also, assign the role of critical evaluator to a group member.
   - Sustain the flow of the meeting by using informational displays.
Encourage the group not to stray from assigned tasks.

Manage the discussion to achieve equitable participation.

Discourage the premature evaluation of ideas.

Prevent “social loafing” by assigning specific responsibilities and stressing the importance of group tasks.

Discourage “conceptual misers”—those who opt for the “quick fix.”

Counteract the natural tendency for groups to make risky decisions by touching base with participants prior to the meeting so discussion-induced trends can be detected. (The rule of halves helps with getting this information.)

Deal with disruptive members by using supportive communication and collaborative conflict management skills.

Conclude the meeting by summarizing what was accomplished, reviewing assignments, and making preparations for subsequent meetings, if necessary.

5. **Perspective** Evaluate each meeting using the KSS (Keep, Stop, Start) methodology by asking the following:
   - What went well in this meeting that we should keep?
   - What was nonproductive that we should stop or phase out?
   - What didn’t happen in this meeting that we want to start in the future?

6. **Group Members** Foster constructive group dynamics as a participant by doing the following:
   - Take time to prepare for the meeting, and gain a clear understanding of the purposes of the meeting.
   - Respect other group members by arriving on time and leaving personal agendas at the door.
   - Listen to other group members, be supportive of them, and clarify and build upon points made by others.
   - Encourage participation by all members.