

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS: THE FOUR “F” WORDS

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<http://www.sideroad.com/Meetings/conducting-effective-meetings.html>

Over 73 million meetings are held around the world every day, according to reliable estimates. While some of us have experienced the positive energy generated in stimulating well-run meetings, most meetings are boring, rambling and unproductive. It happens in staff meetings, board and committee meetings, team training and many others -- energy is low, valuable time is chewed up on unimportant issues and participants are frustrated. No wonder the "M" word is held in such disdain; most meetings live up to their poor reputation. Is there anything you can do to rescue ordinary meetings from disaster? The answer is yes! With a little work, any organization can start conducting meetings that are shorter, more productive and a lot more fun. The road to more effective meetings begins with four "F" words: focus, facilitation, fellowship and feedback. Let's explore each.

1. FOCUS

It is important to understand why a meeting is held. "We always get together every Tuesday" doesn't cut it. Having a focus means meeting on purpose by: - examining what you expect to accomplish - checking with participants before or at the start of the meeting to identify issues, discussion items and expectations.

The first decision: is a meeting the best way to accomplish the results? If a memo, fax or e-mail would work just as well, then don't waste everyone's time. If a meeting is best, then place each agenda item into one or more of these "purpose" categories: - exchange information - get input - generate ideas - learn something - evaluate - make decisions.

Focus the meeting further by ranking items in order of importance, using a simple dot voting (or other ranking method), and setting time goals. For example, agree that the top three items will get 15 minutes each, with all others targeted for 5 minutes. As the meeting goes along, use a timekeeper to track time spent and signal the group when allocated time is running out. Of course, it is permissible to spend more than the allocated time on an item--just be aware of the tradeoffs. When the meeting's objectives have been reached, the meeting is over.

If you run out of time and all items aren't covered, at least you have focused on the most important ones. Stop about ten minutes before the target end time, and assess what is left. Remaining agenda items may be carried over to another meeting, covered by another way (phone, e-mail, memo) or simply dropped.

2. FACILITATION

One of the best ways to ensure an effective meeting is to have a neutral facilitator who runs the meeting process. The facilitator frees everyone else to focus on the content. Perhaps you have experienced the value of a skilled facilitation in a well-run meeting. Sadly, most "ordinary" meetings do not use a facilitator.

Most often, the person calling the meeting designates him/herself as "leader." Right away, there is a conflict, because it is very difficult to run the meeting process objectively if you have an investment in the content (outcome). For example, a manager calls direct reports together to evaluate several alternatives on a key project. How can she or he possibly be impartial?

I strongly advocate a facilitator at every meeting, to work the agenda, keep the group focused and attend to group maintenance (such as encouraging everyone to participate.) The best way is to train several group members in basic facilitation skills, and rotate the assignment.

3. FELLOWSHIP

Meetings that work well share much more than information, ideas and opinions. Participants in effective meetings are able to share themselves, relating to each other on a human level. One way to encourage this is to have members "check in" at the beginning of each meeting, perhaps with a 15-30 second headline of the most exciting (or most frustrating) thing happening in their area. Allowing some unstructured social time before, during or after the meeting is another way to build a cohesive group.

The more participants know about each other, the better they will be able to understand and appreciate how and why their "meeting mates" respond the way they do. Fellowship also means having fun--who said that focused meetings have to be grim? Much of the tone is set by the facilitator. The ability to identify the humor or absurdity of a situation is a wonderful way to maintain energy and build group camaraderie. Sharing funny stories and anecdotes about work-related subjects is a terrific way to build bridges of understanding among meeting participants. Don't be afraid to experiment!

4. FEEDBACK

In effective meetings, participants are aware of how the group is doing as well as what is getting accomplished. The facilitator gets on-going feedback from participants on time issues, agenda management and group maintenance. One way to do this is simply ask, "how are we doing?" or "we're out of time on this issue--do you want to continue, or wrap it up and move on?"

Encourage group members to give feedback to content issues in constructive ways. The balanced response technique is an excellent tool to use when evaluating an issue or idea: - express two to three positives, e.g., "what works...what I like about..." - express any concerns as wishes/problems to be solved, e.g., "I wish we could find a way to...how can we..."

At the end of each meeting, a quick feedback session on the meeting process will give insights into what can be done better the next time. Ask questions such as "what did we do that worked well?" and "how can we make the next meeting better?" instead of seeking negative responses. If your group or organization is struggling to make "ordinary" meetings work, try using the "F" words: focus, facilitation, fellowship and feedback.