

Articles for Managers



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps executives and managers get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches.

Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

"Treat every meeting as an investment"

Want Greater ROI From Your Meetings? Six Questions That Will Make The Difference

by Ian Cook

First there's the suffocating volume of e-mails. That's complaint number one. But the next biggest gripe I hear from my clients is that they are spending way too much time in meetings.

Do any of these comments ring true about meetings where you work?

- too long
- no agenda (or, if there is one, we don't follow it)
- rambling, we get off topic a lot
- little is actually decided
- could have just circulated a memo
- the boss does all the talking
- no follow-through on commitments made

I can never quite figure it out? With people so strapped for time, it seems clear that excessive meetings consume a "mother load" of time that busy people today could put to better use. Why aren't we "mining" time from our meetings?

If you agree with me and want to go after some of that precious time, adopt the following fundamental mind set about your meetings: treat every meeting as an investment. Attendees' time and energy are valuable resources. When you call a meeting, always be thinking of how you can maximize the payback on everyone's investment of time.

Here are six questions to ask yourself so your meetings will be productive and satisfying for all involved...and take less time!

1. Why am I calling this meeting?

It is an unfortunate fact but the most common reason meetings are convened is to exchange, collect, or pass on information. Be careful. This can be a real waste of time. If more than 25% of your meeting's time is informational, there is probably a more cost effective way to accomplish this, such as e-mail or memo.

That said, here are some very good reasons to call a meeting. To...

- ensure that all parties have the same understanding around an issue
- surface new issues
- develop strategies and/or action plans
- address people's reaction to new information, announcements or changes in plans
- solve problems/make decisions
- reconcile differences
- assemble different perspectives and gain commitment

Be crystal clear about your overall purpose before you convene a **meeting**.



"In so many organizations, if you decline an invitation, you are seen as devaluing the meeting."

"Some people arrive physically in the room at the appointed hour but are not immediately 'present.'"

2. What specifically do I want to accomplish?

- What are the actual questions or issues to be addressed?
- What are the deliverables or outcomes?
- Will the group be making decisions or just providing input?
- Do we want to develop an action plan with time-line commitments or are we simply sharing updates on everybody's activities?

Answers to these questions will determine the agenda, how long your meeting should be and how much time should be allocated to the various items.

3. Whom should I invite?

Consider the opportunity cost for someone attending your meeting vs. the benefit from his or her presence. Challenge yourself about whose attendance is truly essential and whose is optional? Also, does everyone need to be there for the entire meeting? Usually not.

Where it makes sense, let invitees know it is OK to attend only the part where they can add—or receive—value. Further in this spirit, make it absolutely acceptable for invitees to question the need for their presence before committing to attend. In so many organizations, if you decline an invitation, you are seen as devaluing the meeting...and often, by extension, the convener of the meeting.

4. What should I do prior to the meeting?

Always send out an agenda, in advance, even if it is just several short bullets in a quick e-mail. Solicit any items others would like included in the agenda. To save meeting time, distribute questions, issues, memos, articles, etc., for pre-reading and ask people to come prepared to contribute their ideas or recommendations. Remind specific individuals of any reports or presentations they have committed to make.

5. How should I run the meeting?

Start at or within five minutes of the agreed-upon time. This immediately acknowledges the value of the participants' time and honors those who arrive on time.

It is a fact of organizational life, however, that some people arrive physically in the room at the appointed hour but are not immediately "present." They are preoccupied, mulling over things that have happened earlier or worrying about issues they must deal with after the meeting. One sure sign is if their heads are still hunched over their blackberries.

To bring people's conscious attention to this, try opening with something like, "Does anyone need to say or do anything in order to be fully present for this meeting?"

Keep your meeting moving along crisply, according to the agenda. Of course, the discussion may go off track or an item may need more time. If so, stop the conversation and bring this to the group's attention. Obtain people's agreement to deviate from the agenda.

Sometimes the group simply gets stuck, locked in a disagreement or struggling over a definition of terms. How do you recognize when it happens? The good indication—the group's energy drops off. When this happens, interrupt the conversation and describe what you are observing. Say something like:

- "I think we're stuck" or "It feels like we've run out of steam"
- "Does anyone else feel this way?"
- "George and Sally, you've been arguing this same point for the last forty minutes. We need to move on."

6. What is the best way to close my meeting?

Always wrap up with these two items:

1. “W3” – who will do what by when?
This clarifies decisions made and invites people to take accountability for implementing them.
2. Then, shine the light briefly on “how” your meeting went, with a quick process debrief: “What did we do well today? What, if anything, can we do to be more effective next time?”

If you approach your meetings with these six questions in mind, everybody will appreciate it. Your hefty investment in meetings will yield greater returns. Your meetings will take less time.

And people who attend will have to find something else to gripe about...once they are exhausted from complaining about those infernal emails.

To receive future articles via e-mail and/or to access our archive of earlier articles, please go to: http://www.888fulcrum.com/free_resources_articles.aspx

Fulcrum Associates Inc.

Call 1-888-FULCRUM (385-2786) • info@888fulcrum.com • www.888fulcrum.com
US • 1711 Pine Valley Drive • Vienna, Virginia • 22182-2339
Canada • 250 The East Mall • Toronto, Ontario • M9B 6L3

