

Three powerful rules to make every meeting productive

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Virtual, in-person or hybrid, meetings have always been, and continue to be, the bane of one's existence. Statistics abound showing that meetings consume time and energy with a dismally low rate of return. Almost everyone reports attending at least one meeting from hell. The complaints run the litany – no structure, too long, nothing gets accomplished, boring, irrelevant, adversarial. The list goes on. Yet, despite our shared aversion to meetings, we continue to click the “Accept” button when the invitation arrives on our desktop. And then we collectively continue to moan about the time wasted in meetings.

But meetings can accomplish great things – elevate communication, generate new ideas, further morale, establish goals, build strong teams, and so much more. But ... they must be managed skilfully. Productive meetings are actually straightforward to realize – it only takes three rules. But it requires resolve and persistence to act and follow through.

Rule 1: Always work from an agenda

Without an agenda, your meeting has no structure, and it is doomed to disaster before you even start. So always issue an agenda at least 48 hours in advance of your meeting.

But not just any agenda. For it to be useful, it needs to contain these four critical components, most easily implemented using a four-column table format.

- The agenda item.
- The name of the person responsible for leading and/or facilitating the agenda item.
- The required outcome for the agenda item. So, for example – information, update, decision, action, consensus, group discussion, Round-Table reporting, or something else.
- The allotted time for the agenda item. Pro tip: Make sure that the total of the allotted times does not exceed the total time set aside for the meeting.

For an unplanned or emergency meeting, use the first 10 minutes to develop a four-column agenda on an electronic whiteboard or flip chart, and don't move forward until you have agreement on it.

Rule 2: Assign three key meeting roles

For every meeting, assign different people to the three roles of chairperson,

timekeeper, and minute-taker. If you hold recurring meetings, consider rotating the three roles. You'll help others develop strong meeting management skills, and increase their awareness and respect of the challenges that come with keeping a meeting on track. This rule applies to emergency or unplanned meetings as well, otherwise these too can quickly become a waste of time.

The chairperson is responsible for facilitating the meeting, making sure that all relevant input is solicited and gathered, and smoothing over rough spots as necessary.

The timekeeper's role is paramount – to let participants know when the allotted time for an agenda item is up, and to be firm so that everyone stays on track. But there are items that crop up that really do require additional discussion beyond the time allotted in the agenda. When that happens, the chairperson has two choices – either get agreement to adjust the agenda by reducing or eliminating another item, or send the item being discussed to the “parking lot.”

The parking lot is a designated list where outstanding issues are logged, with an understanding that they will be tabled as agenda items at future meetings. A parking lot is an effective way to keep a meeting moving while still respecting the points of view of others.

The minute-taker's role is exactly what it sounds like – to produce a written record about key aspects of the meeting ... which leads us directly to Rule 3.

Rule 3: Issue action minutes within 48 hours

If there is one rule that most people balk at, it's this one. But that's because no one wants to be responsible for writing up a lengthy painful narrative of what happened during the meeting. But minutes don't need to be long or complicated. A very effective and efficient approach is to record action items only. “Action minutes” are not only easy, but they have the added benefit of accountability built right in. Use a three-column table format as follows:

- The action item.
- The person responsible for the action item.
- The deadline.

At the end of the meeting, the chairperson should ask the minute-taker to read out the action minutes to everyone to ensure agreement. If you've sent any items to the parking lot, don't forget to record them in the action minutes so they will be scheduled for future meetings. At your next meeting, the first order of business should be to review the action minutes from the last meeting. Ergo, accountability.

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