



What Makes a Great Meeting?

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(We are grateful to Ray Lu, Summer Fellow, who contributed to this post.)

What makes a great meeting? The best of them leave us focused and energized because the purpose of the meeting was clear; attendees felt engaged; and the process was smooth. Not-so-great meetings, on the other hand, drain energy, and lower morale.

To help you set the stage for meetings that are strategic, outcome-oriented, and productive for all, we've pulled together some tips.

1. **"Begin with the end in mind"** (Covey): Before you schedule a meeting, it's useful to share what you hope to achieve with those who will be attending the meeting. There are three basic reasons for meetings: decision-making, information-sharing, and "idea-floating." Information-sharing and idea-floating meetings can often be streamlined with an advance email that contains background information. Circulation of a "pros and cons" memo, shared in advance of an idea-floating meeting, can help focus the discussion and spark ideas to overcome barriers to implementing a good idea. If the goal of your meeting is a decision, be sure that those with the power to move an idea forward are present and well-briefed so the question presented at the meeting is "ripe" for a decision. Think hard whether a face-to-face meeting is necessary. There is no question that in-person meetings are most effective for reaching consensus. Meeting in person also offers the ability to draw out feedback in greater detail and with more nuance than is possible through email or webinars. But if the purpose of the meeting is mainly to exchange ideas, (i.e., information sharing and idea floating) consider alternatives to sit-down meetings.

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meetings, **stand up meetings** are good for a quick exchange of ideas that leads to a clear decision. Because everyone is on their feet, they are less likely to settle in or ruminate in detail on the issue at hand. **Off-sites** are good for out-of-the-box thinking because being in unfamiliar surroundings can break old habits and release energy leading to fresh ideas and deeper thinking. **Meeting at a round table** is conducive to peer-to-peer exchanges and encourages less senior staff to speak up, because there is less hierarchy when no one is sitting at the “head” of the table. **Rotating offices** periodically to meet in a different team member’s office shows respect for all and offers everyone the opportunity to “host” a meeting. **Walking meetings** are good for one-on-one conversations, head-clearing, and trust-building.

- 3. Agendas:** Circulating a proposed agenda in advance can help the meeting planner identify whether any topics need more preparation before they are ready for discussion or presentation. Agendas that clearly identify who is leading each component, and how much time each component is allocated, help those attending prepare and focus on the topics at hand. Keeping the meeting to the stated time reinforces that being respectful of everyone’s time is valued.

Be outcome minded: To move your meetings toward the outcomes you seek, try framing agenda items as a statement of the best possible outcome. Here are two ideas for designing agendas so they are strategic and promote outcomes, instead of roundabout discussions. **Include a reference to your nonprofit’s strategic plan in the meeting agenda:** You can group action items and issues for discussion according to the strategy they support. This helps build momentum around forward-looking actions, rather than miring the meeting in lengthy reports and updates. This is especially useful for building agendas for board meetings because by doing this you are reinforcing the nonprofit’s strategic priorities which should be front and center when board members are making decisions. Second, use a [consent agenda](#) to promote strategic thinking by clearing the way for substantive, action-oriented discussions.

Meetings as leadership lessons: Even if you are not the meeting planner or facilitator, you can still be a leader in a meeting by modeling excellent listening skills (one of the hardest skills for many people!) and by showing respect for everyone attending the meeting, such as by putting away your cell phone to signal to others that you are fully present. Often overlooked is that meetings can be tools for leadership development. Asking different team members to plan and lead meetings deepens the leadership bench. Assigning roles can also keep everyone engaged, whether as “timekeeper,” note taker, or “white board wrangler.”

Better Meetings Checklist

Is this meeting essential?

Is there a decision to be made?

Who needs to be there?

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