

Tip sheet: Ten tips for running effective meetings

1. The chair

The role of the chair and participants are crucial to a successful outcome, and the agenda should move the meeting towards fulfilling its aims. Always make sure you have a chair. It doesn't always have to be you as the group leader. In fact, rotating the role of chair around your team members will keep it fresh, create focus and attention, create empathy, build their leadership skills and also give you a break!

2. The Agenda

The framing of the agenda puts power and influence into the hands of its author – if an item is missed off, there may not be time for it in the meeting, and decisions may be delayed or not made at all. The author can also place items higher on the agenda, and give them more focus, time and attention. Important items are not always on top. Many agendas place routine “quick-fix” or reporting items at the top, to leave more time for the strategic issues later on. Don't be too ambitious, especially if you have big issues to discuss. Bumping items off an agenda every single meeting shows poor planning and poor time management. No meeting should try to deal with more than one big issue at a time.

A good agenda should:

- Focus attention
- Stimulate action
- Act as a reminder
- Structure the meeting
- Prompt preparation or provoke thinking

3. The purpose

Always be clear about the purpose of a meeting from the outset. The purpose of most meetings will fall into one of five categories:

1. To offer support
2. To make a decision
3. To give feedback or recognition
4. To share news or information
5. To generate ideas

Ask yourself these questions **before** you decide whether or not you need to have a meeting

- Is the purpose of the meeting clear to everybody?
- Does everybody need to attend?
- Is there a better way of addressing the issues than having a meeting?
- Are there other people who do not usually attend your meeting who might make a useful contribution this time?
- Will the meeting benefit from the use of any visual aids?
- What would happen if the meeting didn't take place?

4. Summing Up

Being able to summarise and reflect back effectively after each agenda item is a key skill which involves good listening (take a look at our [video](#) and [questionnaire](#) on listening skills).

An effective summary will:

- Highlight key issues and decisions
- Identify action points
- Help the designated note-taker to write good minutes
- Suggest future Agenda items
- Build consensus
- Avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding
- Clarify expectations

5. The minutes

When complex issues are addressed, or where you may have to justify decisions and actions at a later stage (to funders or if a complaint is made) it's important to keep a written record of meetings. It is essential for reference, action and can be used by new members of a group to catch up on long term projects.

Minutes should include:

- Date and time of the meeting
- Names of those attending
- Topics discussed
- Points made during discussion
- Actions taken or decisions made
- Tasks to be performed (with names)
- Items that are to be carried over to the next meeting

6. The structure

Have a plan and be clear in your mind:

- The precise objective of the meeting
- Why you need it
- List the subjects

Inform everyone:

- Make sure everyone knows exactly what is being discussed and why
- What you want from the discussion
- What information and people are needed (and make sure they are there!)

Prepare:

- The logical sequence of items
- Plan time for each item based on importance not urgency

7. Taking control

- Make sure there is enough evidence for decisions to be made, and that people give evidence of assertions they are making
- Stop people jumping ahead or going back over old ground
- Summarise all decisions and record who is responsible for taking action

8. Know when your meeting is stuck

Teams don't make progress in a linear fashion. The pace and frequency of progress always varies, and sometimes meetings need to slow down a little while working through tough problems or complex issues. But indicators that the group really is stuck include the following:

- No forward progress. Despite repeated attempts to move the agenda along or restart, the meeting's progress has halted.
- Denial, blame or rationalizing. These are frequent behaviours when people are confronted with difficult challenges and wish to retreat to their comfort zones. Instead of recognizing, owning and dealing with the problem at hand, meeting participants disown it, blame it on others or rationalize why they can't do anything about it.
- Tolerance and collusion. Because meeting participants can identify with each other, they may collude and be very tolerant of each other's unwillingness to challenge themselves. This behaviour may demonstrate compassion but may not be helpful at moving the group forward. Such collusion keeps groups stuck.

9. A Process for getting unstuck

Next time you're in a meeting that seems to be stuck and it's not because of difficult or uncommitted people, try this simple and natural process for getting a meeting unstuck and back on track:

1. Declare being stuck. What's worse than being stuck? Being stuck and not doing anything about it. Remember, anyone can begin the rescue operation by recognizing the problem and saying aloud "I feel like we're stuck".
2. Frame being stuck as a positive thing: "We can only get stuck if we're delving into unknown territory and that's where opportunity lies!"
3. Write up on a whiteboard the five reasons for being stuck (see the list below).
4. Recount, or tell the story of, what has happened during the meeting or task and invite the group to listen out for any of the five reasons for how the meeting got stuck. Turning it into the group's story avoids singling any one person out. Recount the narrative history of the meeting, especially how the group kept coming to the same stopping point. Invite others to recognise and call out any group denial, blame, rationalizing or collusion.
5. After identifying the reasons why the group got stuck, create new possibilities together. Generate as many new ideas as possible by asking "and what else could we do to address these sticking points and make progress?" The more possibilities that you create, the less stuck the group will feel.
6. When you get unstuck, celebrate it so that you will remember successfully rescuing yourselves and you'll be willing to do it again.

10. Five reasons that meetings get stuck

If the meeting gets stuck for reasons other than boredom, lack of commitment or difficult individuals, then look for these possible reasons:

1. Not enough information to act on
2. The problem is too complex for this meeting
3. Invisible assumptions, some of which may be shared, and some may not
4. Essential people are not in the meeting
5. Premature convergence - you collectively plunged down a rabbit hole together too soon.

Gain shared clarity about the intended outcome of a meeting so that you can always know whether the group is progressing or not.