

Business Meetings

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will consider the range of in-person and virtual meetings in real time. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. **Effective and Ineffective Meetings**
2. **Leading Effective Meetings**
3. **Effective Participation in Meetings**

1. Effective and Ineffective Meetings



Have you ever participated in an exciting meeting where the ideas were flowing and everyone was engaged in fruitful collaboration? What about a meeting that seemed to be a waste of everyone's time, or where the information shared could have been more easily and usefully conveyed in another format? The difference between an effective meeting and an ineffective meeting sometimes can be attributed to the agenda, the composition of the group, or other factors outside the control of participants. But much of the time, the success of the meeting boils down to the quality of communication that occurs in the meeting.

In this tutorial, you will learn about **internal meetings**, which include both scheduled and ad-hoc meetings among an organization's staff, such as all-staff meetings, work team check-ins, and collaborative working sessions. This is in contrast to external meetings, such as meetings with clients, customers, and external stakeholders, which may have a different set of expectations from internal meetings and will be discussed in Unit 4. Internal meetings can take place in person, virtually via web-conferencing software like Zoom or Google Meet, or in a hybrid model—the principles of good communication in meetings are the same whether you meet around a table or on a screen.

Internal meetings bring together team members with diverse skills and roles to plan and complete projects that could not be completed by any one person alone. An effective meeting improves motivation, settles conflicts, and ensures that everyone on the team understands their role and tasks; it may also generate team support for difficult tasks, improving morale and motivation.

Regular meetings are also one of the key ways that relationships can develop among staff. The minutes before and after the meeting are often spent with casual, off-topic conversation. These informal communications help build team cohesion and make the meeting and the team more effective.



Yet many people complain about meetings, and may describe them as a waste of time. Tolstoy famously wrote that all happy families are the same and all unhappy families are unique. But if Tolstoy were describing business meetings, he might reverse his aphorism and say that all ineffective meetings are the same, and all effective meetings are unique. An effective meeting feels like nothing could have taken its place; an ineffective meeting, some may moan, could have been an email.



THINK ABOUT IT

What happens when you find yourself in an ineffective or irrelevant meeting that's hard to pay attention to? You might be tempted to zone out or look at your phone, but that will only make things worse. What are some tactics you can use to keep yourself engaged when a meeting is a drag? Some people find that keeping their hands occupied, such as through doodling or knitting, is a good way to keep their brain focused on the meeting. In fact, research shows that doodling correlates to higher cognitive functioning.

Others take notes to force them to engage actively with the material. What are tactics that work for you? There are many ways that meetings can become an unpleasant and unproductive blight on a work calendar. You don't usually have the luxury of picking who you are going to work with on a team; dealing with different personalities and personal agendas is a common challenge in meetings as each person tries to steer the meeting toward their interests. Other common challenges include poor leadership, a lack of focus, dominant personalities, bad communication, groupthink, and social loafing. The key to combating these challenges is to be able to identify when they are taking place.

- **Poor Leadership:** A common challenge that hinders good meeting dynamics is poor leadership, such as when the meeting's leader fails to ensure clarity of purpose for the meeting, or keeps the meeting bogged down in details that are only relevant for a few participants. In a moment, you will discuss a variety of methods for effectively spearheading a discussion or work session.
- **Lack of Focus:** Lack of focus can make a meeting not just ineffective, but frustrate employees who want to get back to work. Keeping the meeting focused takes constant effort by all parties.
- **Dominant Personalities:** Dominant personalities are difficult to deal with; the loudest voice doesn't always have the best ideas. Sticking to an agenda, establishing protocols during meetings, and having an effective leader can be used to combat strong personalities.
- **Bad Communication:** Bad communication is a quick way for a team to be unproductive and ineffective. By using a note-taker to document decisions, action items, and next steps, a team can be kept up to date and in the loop. An effective team leader will make sure that next steps and action items are not forgotten.
- **Groupthink:** Groupthink is a term for the psychological phenomenon where members of a group go along with a decision that they don't necessarily agree with, because they wish to avoid conflict. The appearance of consensus may scare dissenters away from speaking up. Groupthink can also be the result of a group talking itself into a decision that doesn't fit the facts. Some meetings may already have a devil's advocate who sees the potential flaw in every plan. In fact, that person might drive everyone else crazy! But it's good to have someone think about the potential problems with any decision. Some teams even appoint a person to be "devil's advocate" so groupthink doesn't occur.
- **Social Loafing:** Social loafing is when one or more group members fails to make fair contributions, cruising through every meeting without more than a few words, perhaps dividing attention between the meeting and their phone or planner. Several causes exist for social loafing. A member may not be motivated by a

goal and may not want to work to achieve it. Or a member may feel that their contribution to the team will not be recognized, so the member is not motivated to contribute. Both of these causes are more pronounced in large groups. A good team leader will monitor the group to make sure everybody has had a chance to speak up and is prompted to do so.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A regular meeting of the telephone support team at a software company is almost always ineffective. The team leader and de facto leader of the meetings, Dan, is often unprepared due to a busy schedule, and the meeting is frequently interrupted because, as the support team, they still have to answer calls that come in during the meeting. The meetings are further derailed by the conversation frequently turning to the most abusive or foolish callers. One staff person in particular tends to bring these into the conversation and give detailed recounts of the calls, mimicking the voices of customers. Dan doesn't like to interrupt these stories because he feels the team needs the support they receive from sharing the most frustrating experiences. However, the meetings run long and they still run out of time for other important issues. Which of the above issues can you identify here?



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever participated in a meeting where one person dominated the conversation? How did the meeting leader handle it? How did other participants respond? What was the impact of the person's domination of talking time on the success of the meeting?



TERM TO KNOW

Internal Meetings

Regular or ad-hoc meetings where everybody present works for the same organization, often as part of the same department or team.

2. Leading Effective Meetings

The first job of a meeting's leader is to have a clear sense of purpose for every meeting. Many teams schedule regular team meetings to address the issues and challenges that accumulate each week in the course of regular business. However, if no such items come up, the team should be willing to cancel the meeting. Too many times the meeting is seen as a commitment and team members look for ways to fill the time, instead of letting the purpose come first.

A good method to keep meetings focused is using an agenda and distributing it prior to meetings. An **agenda** is a list of the activities or topics of discussion that will be included in a meeting, listed in order and often including timing estimates. An agenda can get people on the same page and encourage participants to prepare for the topics under discussion. All functional and mature teams should have meeting agendas and planning documents in order to be sure no one is making assumptions about the meeting's purpose.

Crucially, the leader of a meeting must also ensure that the agenda is followed! A well-planned agenda won't do anyone any good if topics are introduced out of order or the intended focus of the meeting is ignored once everyone is in the room.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Antonio is leading the weekly team meeting, based on an agenda he shared in advance. At the start of the meeting, he quickly runs through the agenda so that his teammates are reminded of their objectives for the next hour. When the group is discussing the second agenda item about the new sales reports, Finn begins to share an extended anecdote about a conversation he had with someone from the sales team. As soon as Antonio realizes that Finn's anecdote has the potential to set off a cascade of similar sales anecdotes from their team members, Antonio politely interrupts Finn and reminds him of the agenda. If there is time at the end of the meeting once all the agenda items have been covered, Antonio might then invite Finn to share his anecdote.



HINT

Your agenda should not just list topics for discussion or tasks, but the estimated time for each. Make sure these times are realistic, and don't add up to more time than you have. You should also organize the agenda with the higher priority items on top so they are dealt with first.

Another strategy for making a meeting successful is to assign meeting-specific roles. Everyone is responsible for brainstorming, problem-solving and offering their experience and knowledge, but there are three meeting-specific roles that no meeting should be without. None of these need to be permanent roles, but can rotate among team members.

- **A facilitator:** In the event there is no clear chain of command, a team must be prepared to assign the role of leader in each meeting. A leader can keep the team focused, mediate conflicts, and ensure that individuals are held accountable. The facilitator should ensure that the agenda is followed and be prepared with prompts and questions that will keep the discussion on target.
- **A note-taker:** The note-taker will keep meeting minutes, which you'll remember is a type of internal report that features a detailed summary of a group conversation. The note-taker doesn't have to write down everything people say, but they will keep track of decisions made, lessons learned, action items and next steps. The note-taker should read back the key takeaways at the end of each meeting to make sure there is consensus, and email it to the participants soon after. By documenting and distributing the minutes from each meeting, the note-taker can keep all members of the team equally informed.
- **A time-keeper:** The time-keeper makes sure that time is being used strategically in the meeting, putting people back on track if they devolve into off-topic discussions or pursuing a discussion too long that will not be resolved in the space of the meeting. A time-keeper can recommend that a conversation be tabled, or taken up separately by key individuals, and they can track the need for breaks. Project managers sometimes fulfill the role of time-keeper.



HINT

Regular meetings are one of the key ways that relationships can develop among staff. The down time before and after a meeting are often spent with casual, off-topic conversation. These informal conversations help build team cohesion and make the meeting more successful. While spontaneous conversations might arise about weather, travel, or holidays, you can kick things off with a planned off-topic question like, "What's a movie you love that other people haven't seen?" or, for virtual meetings, "Show us something in your home office that's interesting."

IN CONTEXT

Recall the earlier example of ineffective meetings of the telephone support team at a software company. Dan considers how to improve the effectiveness of the team meetings by assigning new meeting roles. He decides to appoint Rosa, a well-liked teammate with the capacity in her schedule for meeting planning, to be the meeting facilitator. Rosa identifies many of the issues that are cropping up: bad leadership (at least for the meetings), lack of focus (at least on the priorities), dominant personalities, and frequent distractions.

Rosa decides that for each meeting she will set an agenda with time limits and priority items at the top, appoint a timekeeper, and make sure the group keeps to the agenda items. She recognizes the importance of the sharing stories about difficult callers, and indeed she sees it as such a crucial opportunity for staff development that she decides to schedule it as its own, optional meeting at a different time—now, when the conversation turns to discussing individual callers, Rosa redirects team members to save these stories for the separate caller grievance meeting.

Rosa also appeals to management to make exceptions to their company policy and let calls go to voicemail during the weekly meeting time, so that everybody on the team can fully participate. They compromise by having the meetings early in the morning when call volume is low. Finally, Rosa, with Dan's support, privately asks the dominant personality to keep her comments brief during the meeting,



TERM TO KNOW

Agenda

A list of the activities or topics of discussion that will be included in a meeting, listed in order and often including timing estimates.

3. Effective Participation in Meetings

Much of the tips you have learned so far have been for the leaders and facilitators of internal meetings. It's true that a lot of the responsibility for the success of a meeting falls to its leader, but effectively participating in a meeting that you are not leading is also a crucial skill.

Remember the guiding principle that all communications are part of the relationships you are building and maintaining with your colleagues; meetings are an important part of these relationships. Indeed, meetings might be the primary time you interact with some of your colleagues, and your best chance to improve—or undermine—those relationships.

The following are tips for effective participation in internal meetings. But be aware that all of these tips are subject to the specific culture of your workplace and team.

- **Be on time:** Be respectful of other peoples' time and make an effort to always arrive before the meeting begins. It's disruptive to have people entering once a meeting has begun, and you might miss important information, or important opportunities to build relationships with informal communication.
- **Be attentive:** Practice active listening with each person who speaks. Take notes, even if someone else is the official note-taker, and ask questions when appropriate.
- **Be prepared:** Read the agenda ahead of time and make sure you are familiar with all agenda items that relate to your role or projects. Be ready to give status updates, and do any background work necessary to be well informed to contribute to the general conversation.
- **Contribute productively:** Share your thoughts and ideas when appropriate, particularly when another participant requests input. Bring your expertise and experience to the topics at hand, while deferring to those who have greater expertise or experience. Don't dominate the conversation, interrupt with jokes, or disengage completely.
- **Try not to use your phone or multitask:** It can be tempting to check your phone or tend to other work while sitting through a meeting where you don't have an active role, but it also sends a message to your colleagues. If you have trouble staying focused, volunteer for a role in the meeting, like taking notes or writing down key ideas on the white board.
- **Don't be a distraction:** Follow the norms of your workplace around eating and drinking during meetings, particularly outside of lunch time. (Of course if you bring snacks for everyone, you might be deemed a hero!) If you have focus habits that might distract others, such as tapping your fingers, try redirecting your habit towards something less distracting, like doodling. If you need to deal with a personal matter or are having a strong emotional reaction, excuse yourself and step outside or turn off your camera.
- **Support leadership:** Help the meeting facilitator to lead by following their cues on the agenda, the meeting's focus, and the pace of the conversation. There are few things more frustrating than being in a meeting that is poorly run when you feel powerless to improve it, but supporting the meeting's leadership is crucial even when they are flailing. If the leader trusts you, you may be able to influence decisions by suggesting alternatives. If the poor leader did not assign a time-keeper, for example, and tends to dominate time himself, suggest assigning a timekeeper during a team meeting and explain why you think it would be beneficial. Once the time-keeper is in place, he or she can cut off the leader without it feeling personal or worrying about the next performance review.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Roy hates meetings, and used to play on his phone to get through them. His supervisor mentioned in his performance review that other people noticed and found it both distracting and disrespectful. To keep himself engaged Roy instead plays the role of “black hat” or “devil’s advocate.” This is sometimes misunderstood as being antagonistic, but when done right it means asking the right questions to make sure all the bases are covered, or simply asking for clarification or examples. Many meeting leaders assign this role. When the plans for the company picnic are given, Roy is the one who will ask what will happen if it rains. If the picnic includes games and activities, Roy asks if there will be a first aid kit on hand. Roy also helps the meeting leader or other presenters by asking questions others might not have considered. When their tech lead describes new software, Roy asks if the training will be recorded for later viewing or how to get online support. He finds meetings more tolerable if he can keep his mind active, and his colleagues no longer feel disrespected by him.



BIG IDEA

The success of a meeting depends on the communication skills of all participants. The greatest responsibility falls to the meeting's leader, but all participants have responsibility for keeping a meeting productive and focused.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about practices that lead to **effective and ineffective meetings**. Like all communications, being an effective meeting participant means being an engaged participant. This includes such things as being on time, showing respect for others, and avoiding distractions. You also learned practices for **leading effective meetings**, some of which are related to group dynamics and some which are entirely within one's own control as a leader. You also discussed **effective participation in meetings**, and how your behavior can lead to effective or less effective meetings if you don't have an active role.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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