Practical Ways to Make Your Committee Meetings More Effective

More Effective Meetings

Making Meetings More Effective

Meetings, like them or hate them, are central to success in business and professional life. Therefore, participation in, and especially managing meetings is a core communication skill for any professional.

The purpose of a meeting is to develop ideas by utilising the collective experience of a group and to provide the motivation and impetus to take action. Leadership is about making change happen and so performance in a meeting, either as the Chair or a participant, leads to judgements being made, consciously or unconsciously, about the capabilities of individuals. This has the potential to influence career progression and meetings therefore have an importance far beyond the matters under discussion at any particular time. Accordingly it is essential to take them seriously and be well prepared to participate effectively.

Objective of Meeting

The first question is why have a face to face encounter at all? The time set aside for a meeting is much greater than the duration to meet because of the amount of preparation and travel involved. Meetings are expensive, not just in terms of finance but also of time. Consequently any meeting needs to you need to make sure any meeting you attend is justified in terms of the three P’s of a clear purpose, involving the right people who are thoroughly prepared.

The first decision must therefore be whether a meeting is actually necessary, particularly if the relevant information can be transmitted and decisions made in other ways, for instance by phone or email. Once there is a decision to meet, consideration has to be given to the desired outcome so that there are clear criteria for success from the outset, with specific objectives which the committee has the authority to meet.

The Chairperson

Central to the success of any meeting is the leadership role of the Chair. A leader is someone who can bring about change, either by themselves or through others. In the context of meetings, the leader or Chair must be able to motivate, negotiate with, persuade and control the group to help it move forward. The Chair must have a clear understanding of the remit of the group as well as the extent of the group’s authority and the lines of accountability for the group as a whole and to each individual’s organisation. They must have a clear vision of future direction and be able to make a “re-vision” of that future when necessary.
Once the Chair has been appointed the next step is to choose members who will have a commitment to the group and the necessary knowledge and expertise to achieve its objectives. The role of each member should be explicit and numbers kept to the minimum necessary to get the job done. Members do not necessarily have to get on with each other but it is a distinct advantage if they do.

**Organisation of a Meeting**

The date, time, venue and likely direction should be agreed with all the group members at the earliest possible opportunity. The meeting room is an important piece of theatre and can set the tone for the whole session. Comfortable, well lit, heated and well ventilated surroundings are perhaps more important than is generally recognised. Refreshments should be available at the beginning if members have travelled some distance and in the middle if the meeting is scheduled to last beyond 90 minutes. Since some meetings can last several hours, refreshing watery drinks are particularly important to aid concentration over prolonged periods.

If the Chair is seeking a distillation of the collective wisdom and creativity within the group, utilising their knowledge and experiences, an open discussion with a round table format works well. If the meeting table is oblong, the Chair should sit in the middle of one side. In larger meetings or more formal situations, the Chair should sit at one end as this is a more closed format and helps the Chair to manage the discussion. In particular the closed format limits the potential for emotional reactions to contentious issues.

**The Agenda**

The agenda should be drawn up by the Chair and circulated well in advance, along with appropriate papers, information and references to enable members to apprise themselves on the issues prior to attending. Members should be afforded opportunity to suggest additional items for the agenda and provide relevant information through the Chair so long as this is made available prior to the meeting.

The first item on the agenda is to take apologies for absence. It is important to formally note apologies, especially for committees who meet regularly as it gives an indication of the commitment of members. Frequent non-attenders, no matter how expert or politically active, show a lack of commitment to the group and its objectives and their continuing membership should therefore be reviewed.

The second item is to agree the previous minutes. Members would be expected to have read these minutes and as far as possible have addressed any queries through the secretariat before the meeting convenes. Any matters arising from the previous minutes, which are not already tabled in the present agenda, should then be discussed. It is imperative that the discussion around matters arising is carefully managed by the Chair so that this does not dominate the meeting.
“Any other business” (AOB) should be taken next. It needs to be discussed at an early stage so that any member wishing to table a new item has time to put their case to the rest of the committee. The Chair and the committee decide, whether it is appropriate for that item to be discussed by the committee at all, whether the item is of sufficient importance to be discussed “cold”, or if it should be deferred to another meeting when it can be properly placed on the agenda along with the relevant briefing papers. Raising issues under AOB is a tactic used by some to ambush a meeting with their own agenda and generally should be robustly resisted unless the issue is urgent. It is normally inadvisable to allow an extra item to be added if members have not been adequately informed and prepared for a discussion. Under normal circumstances the Chair will have allocated sufficient items on the agenda to fill the time allotted. Therefore, by definition, anything extra will extend the meeting past its time and actually shows a lack of respect for the commitments of members if not agreed with them up front.

If it is decided that the new item is of sufficient importance then decisions must be made at the outset as to what other items should be deferred to another meeting so that the business of the committee finishes on time. A weak Chair runs the risk that committee meetings drag on beyond their useful life, particularly in terms of the ability of the members to fully participate.

The rest of the agenda is fairly easy to construct. It is advisable to have an easy item early in the meeting so that the committee is seen to make progress, which is psychologically important to members. It is best to finish with an easy item and if possible to sandwich difficult and easy items in between. Time limits for discussion on each item should be set at the outside with breaks built in as necessary.

**Conduct of the Meeting**

Right from the beginning the Chair should remind a new group of its remit and authority. Members should introduce themselves and include something specific about their role and relevance to the agenda of the committee/group. Sometimes members will leave and new members join during the life of a committee. In order to ensure the continuity of the group and project in hand, new members must be formally introduced. Some times members will leave and new members join during the life of a committee. While this is sometimes inevitable every attempt should be made to ensure the continuity of the group and project in hand. If new members join they must be formally introduced to the group.

When dealing with individuals, the Chair must recognise that each member is influenced by factors outside the meeting and therefore will have their own agenda. To a lesser extent, this is influenced by their likes and dislikes, their knowledge base on the subject and their previous voting patterns along with their understanding of and relationship to previous power blocks within the group. Some people like to try and dominate a meeting, and, if not kept on board they can become frustrated and bored, either withdrawing from participation or causing disruption. The Chair needs to encourage everyone
to contribute positively by emphasising their individual roles and the contribution they can make to the group to which they have signed up.

Certain items can be contentious and there are likely to be different perspectives. The Chair needs to separate problems from people to keep the meeting as impersonal as possible. People’s attitudes, values, ethics and beliefs are all emotional issues and do not always respond well to logic. The Chair must help members to profess what they believe, listen to what others are saying and value their input so they can discuss and resolve issues using the collective knowledge and experience of the group.

Individuals can only focus on six or seven significant chunks of information at any one time which means that different people in the group will be thinking about the topics from varying standpoints. Uncertainty and possibly conflict is therefore inevitable as people focus on what they know and challenge other people’s perceptions.

It is important to understand how individuals react in group situations. In general terms members of a committee want to actively contribute and do not like to feel they are simply “rubber stamping” decisions already made. They therefore have a natural tendency to react in some measure against new information which is presented to them. Whilst allowing for free discussion, the Chair should understand this dynamic and close down discussion as early as possible if it is not compatible with previous decisions or takes the group away from its objectives. If not properly managed, the net result can be that the only agreement which can be made is the lowest common denominator and may not be the best decision.

Within any group some members will appear to contribute more than others. Those who are quiet may feel overshadowed by more vocal members. It is important that everyone’s opinion is heard and that the Chair must be sensitive to encouraging their contribution. Others simply dissociate from the discussion but are likely to vote anyway perhaps based on previous biases. The content of the discussion has to be kept on track with the Chair, on behalf of the group, separating factual information from individual beliefs or opinions.

Finally, groups will take more risky decisions than individuals due to a feeling of safety in their collective responsibility. The Chair must be careful that unnecessary risks are not being taken as the result of group momentum.

**Finishing the Meeting**

Good Chairmanship should ensure that the agenda is completed in the allotted timescale so that the meeting ends promptly. The minutes of a meeting are extremely important but it is rarely necessary to keep a verbatim record. Instead, after each item the Chair and the committee should agree the decisions made, the action to be taken and by whom. At the end of the meeting it is advisable that these are checked with the group so that no disputes arise after everyone has gone. This means that the minutes can be
produced within a couple of days and circulated to the membership for verification.

The last item is a decision on the date, time and venue of the next meeting if this has not been previously agreed. It is advisable to confirm these details in writing with the minutes of the present meeting so that participants can ensure it is in their diaries. It is also important to notify any non-attenders the arrangements for the next meeting.

Your Role as a Participant

When you participate in a meeting judgements are going to be made about you and your abilities. It is therefore important that you are clear about your role whether acting as the Chair or as a committee member.

Passive participants in committee waste not just the committee’s time but your own. You must decide how you can best contribute to a meeting. You need to have come to some conclusions about the various items and have a clear agenda of your own prior to the meeting. If not you need to ask why it is necessary for you to attend in the first place. Committee members often represent their organisations or departments and it is important to be well briefed as to the organisation’s aspirations. It is also essential for participants to be clear on the extent of their authority to commit resources or time or to take decisions on behalf of the body they represent.

You need to be engaged, focused and in particular listen actively to what is going on. You need to prepare well in advance and, particularly need to contribute early and above that which would be expected.

It is important to arrive early and perhaps have discussions with others before the meeting to get to know other participants, understand the politics and the desired outcome. If you wish to achieve an outcome which you know may be in opposition to other members you will need to identify others who will be allies in the discussion. Try to bring at least some fresh information to move on an item on the agenda but don’t introduce too much new information or the Chairman of the committee may rightfully ask why it was not provided in advance.

Conclusion

Committees are vital to getting things done in any business or professional setting, and therefore need to be carefully managed. The Chair and participants need to have a commitment to the objectives of the group and to each other. By following a few simple guidelines and understanding group dynamics, committees can work more efficiently and effectively to the benefit of all concerned.

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