

The Comprehensive Checklist For Staff Meetings That Work

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If you've ever wondered if your meetings could be more effective, they can. As we work with hundreds of companies and churches, I'm amazed at how few actually excel at running effective meetings. And it's no surprise to me that as we talk to thousands of pastors and leaders, they consistently tell our team how boring their meetings are.

The good news is, as we travel the world working with some of the best churches and ministries on the planet, we've had a unique bird's eye view of the best practices of effective and efficient staff meeting.

Below, we have created a punch list of those practices. Print it out, use it in your meeting setup, and let us know if you have additional thoughts!

1. Purpose

a. Is the meeting necessary?

If this meeting didn't happen, would the mission of your church or company be adversely affected? Would anyone notice? In my experience, many meetings start out as a good idea, but when times change and the meeting is no longer necessary, nobody kills the meeting. So before you do anything else, ask this question (and be ruthless in your answers): Is this meeting necessary?

b. What is the stated purpose of the meeting?

Even if it is a weekly check in meeting, it should have that stated in the agenda (and yes, you'll see below that an agenda is necessary). Can you tighten the focus of the meeting? Think about what you want to get done in the meeting, and then build your stated purpose around that. You're not publishing meeting titles, so it's fine to have a short meeting with the title, "Building a plan for shortening the announcements time in the worship service." Not a palatable title, but it's definitely focused.

c. Have you assigned action items from the meeting to specific people?

This is the death knell of the majority of meetings. If you look at effective companies like Google, Apple, or Facebook, you'll see a commitment to having only necessary meetings that are highly action-oriented, and before the meeting is over, a person is named (in the room) that will own the completion of whatever task(s) comes out of the meeting.

2. Time

a. Have you defined a start and finish time?

So much of having a great meeting is about respecting the people you're meeting with. For more people than you might imagine, that begins and ends with how you respect their time. I have a mentor that taught me that beginning and ending on time is much deeper than punctuality - it is a matter of integrity. Consistently treat your people's time well, and your meetings will become more effective.

b. Can you finish the meeting in half the allotted time?

If you've travelled much, you've probably heard the old adage, "Before you leave, lay out on the bed all the clothes you are packing. Then put half of those clothes away." The same is true for meetings. Most meetings can go quicker than you would expect. And if you don't cut the time, the meeting will not end earlier than expected. Meetings are like gas, filling whatever size container you give them. Give your meetings a smaller time-slot, and see what happens.

c. Can you agree not to go over 90 minutes?

Ever wonder if your meeting is going too long? If you're running it and you're wondering that, then it's going too long. In my experience, if you haven't accomplished your stated meeting purpose in 90 minutes of meeting time, it likely won't get done. True, there are some meetings that take a long time. But the vast majority of them should be under 90 minutes. The old saying is true: "The mind will only tolerate what the seat can endure."

3. Agenda

a. Are you ready to share the good, the bad, and (only sometimes) the ugly?

So many meetings I have attended are run by either Tigger or Eeyore. Either the leader only shares the bright, cheery news (which we all want to hear, but we know that there's always other news) or the leader focuses solely on the depressing, downcast, problematic news (which we all know happens, but it doesn't exactly motivate the team). If you're running the meeting, balance what you're sharing with both inspiration and reality.

b. Are you leaving times for stories and fun?

While meetings need to be short and effective, they also need to have room for storytelling and spontaneous conversation. Nearly every effective staff meeting I've seen has time for someone around the table (at least one person - and not the facilitator) to tell a story of how they have seen the organization work well since the last meeting. When permission to speak and celebrate is expected, creativity will flow and more will get done. For many teams, deskwork consumes the day, and meeting time is the only time that community and fun can be expected.

c. Have you incorporated emphasis of your mission/vision/values into the meeting?

In our staff meetings at Vanderbloemen, every meeting has (at the front end of the meeting) a time where someone is assigned the task of saying, "This week, I saw our core value of _____ modeled by _____ when _____ happened." We love that part of the meeting.

It's a very small time investment with a huge return on culture and morale. Company values are hammered home through repetition and story.

d. Have you scheduled time to talk big picture and small picture?

Every meeting should drive back to the big picture of what your organization is trying to accomplish. Congregating people and not talking about the long-term vision and goals of the company is a wasted meeting. Additionally, effective meetings identify the key "urgent and important" items that need to be dealt with by the whole group.

e. Do you have room for brainstorming (and guidelines for brainstorming)?

The best meetings I see leverage the creative power of the group, and that almost always means leaving room in the meeting for brainstorming around a topic. Brainstorming is not to be confused with problem-solving. Brainstorming is free form thinking about a problem, with no answer being "wrong." Allow time for bursts of creativity and the overall productivity will go through the roof. Be sure, however, to outline guidelines for the brainstorming to prevent it from being ineffective or prevent any one person from dominating the brainstorming time.

f. Have you scheduled time to follow up on the previous meeting?

When decisions are made at a meeting and tasks assigned to a specific person, there should be a report on what has happened at the next meeting. By affording your team time to tell what has happened, you create space for them to celebrate a win or to turn to the team for help with any obstacles.

4. Miscellaneous Pointers

a. Can you cut the invite list?

One temptation, particularly in churches, is to invite too many people to a meeting. This usually comes out of a desire to include everyone, but it's mostly shortsighted (and really expensive!).

One of the biggest complaints about meetings that I hear is, “I’m not sure why I have to be there.” Often, you can up your meeting’s effectiveness and efficiency by shrinking the room. As your staff grows larger, you will need to become more and more vigilant about keeping numbers small.

b. Do you really need technology at the meeting?

News flash: Power Point is passé. Particularly in meetings. News flash #2: Phones, tablets, and computers often dilute a meeting’s effectiveness. When brainstorming or planning, use a flip chart or whiteboard. They don’t need wifi (at least most don’t), and you can snap a picture of everything after the meeting for reference (Evernote, and many other note taking apps, allow for OCR technology so that you can search the written words on a picture). Encourage your meeting participants to leave their phones and laptops at their desks to minimize distractions.

c. Is there a note taker?

While not everyone needs a computer in the meeting, always assign someone the task of recording what was discussed and decided, with some level of details underneath. But don’t get too detailed here. People who feel that their exact words are being recorded are usually less creative than those who feel free to speak.

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- _____ Have you scheduled time to talk big picture and small picture?
- _____ Do you have room for brainstorming & guidelines for brainstorming?
- _____ Have you scheduled time to follow up on the previous meeting?
- _____ Can you cut the invite list?
- _____ Do you really need technology at the meeting?
- _____ Is there a note taker?

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