

How to Run an Effective Meeting

by Bill Collier

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Have you ever participated in a meeting that rambled aimlessly and strayed from its agenda (if it even had an agenda), was boring, seemed to go on forever, and produced few if any real results?

I'm going to share some tips with you, so you can inject order and structure into your meetings, get more done in less time, and most importantly – produce real, tangible results.

If you're running the show, your job actually starts several days before the meeting. Some of the things you need to do include:

- Confirm that all invited participants know about the meeting and its purpose
- Ensure that an agenda is prepared and if appropriate, circulate it to the participants prior to the meeting
- Ensure that your meeting room is available and set up the way you need it

If someone plans to make a presentation or give a report at your meeting, find out how much time he or she needs. Do not show up at the meeting only to be surprised when your speaker has a 45 minute slideshow and you only planned on a 30 minute meeting. Remember that you're not a passive bystander. You're in charge of getting this meeting started and ended on time. So, don't be afraid to ask a speaker to cut back on the time they want. But give the presenter the courtesy of doing it well in advance of the meeting.

Get to the meeting early. Check out the room, and make sure all your materials are in place. Start on time.

Pass out the agenda and use it to move through the meeting business. Be sure someone is assigned the important task of taking minutes or keeping notes.

Almost any meeting would benefit from the use of Robert's Rules of Order, also known as Parliamentary Procedure. To some people, this may sound like something only necessary in a big-company boardroom. Not so.

If you want to efficiently resolve business issues in a meeting, this is the way to do it. If you don't believe me, try getting a bunch of hard-headed people with differing opinions around a table and try to reach consensus without some sort of tool like Robert's Rules.

It's beyond the scope of this article to go into detail on Robert's Rules I'll focus only on the best-known aspect of parliamentary procedure, and that is making a motion and taking a vote. Here is a condensed version:

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If someone at the meeting wants to take some sort of action, that person waits to be called on and says, "I move, or I make a motion, that ..." and he or she goes on to describe the proposed action. The chairperson may ask for clarification or may repeat the motion, and asks for a second. A "second" simply is an attempt to find out if anyone else at the meeting supports this proposed action. If not, the motion dies. If so, someone offers a second and then the chairperson asks if there is any discussion. Participants take turns speaking one at a time and airing their views pro or con. When all views have been heard, the chair calls for a vote. The chair may cut off debate if it goes on too long, by the way. The vote can be public or by written ballot, and is final. No further debate on the topic.

If you want more info on Robert's Rules, there are many excellent books and websites on the subject.

Here are some things the person in charge should do during the meeting:

- Stay on topic. If a person starts to stray from the agenda, bring it back on course.
- Squelch side conversations. At any given time, the person speaking deserves the undivided attention of all involved.
- Prevent anyone from monopolizing the discussion.
- Pull in participants who aren't saying much. Ask for input and opinions from each individual.
- Watch your time. Make mid-meeting adjustments if necessary.

So you get through the meeting and it's about to end. You just adjourn and leave, right? Wrong! I strongly recommend that if any important decisions were made that call for follow-up action by folks at the meeting, you recap. Restate those actions and get a quick confirmation that these folks understand that they are accountable and have a timeframe for action.

For example: "Here are the commitments from today's meeting. Jack will write his report by next Friday, and Steve will visit our top 3 accounts by the end of the month. Right, Jack and Steve?" Getting people to acknowledge accountability in front of others is a powerful way to get them to actually keep their commitments.

I urge you to establish specific follow-up actions and timeframes. If Mary says, "I will work on the marketing plan", what does that mean? Can you hang your hat on that? A much better commitment might be: "I will get the marketing plan first draft written and submitted for review by May 1st."

Bottom line: If the follow-up action isn't deliverable, if it isn't measurable, if it isn't specific – you don't really have a commitment. Insist on specific actions by specific people by a specific date, and you will see results.

I know I'm putting a great deal of emphasis on accountability. Here's why: Everyone's busy, with lots of irons in the fire, both at work and in their personal lives. Many people have good intentions, and are great at making promises but not so good at follow-through.

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You may be in charge of the meeting, but perhaps not in charge of the folks making these commitments. At work, they may be your peers. In a club or volunteer organization setting, you have no control over them.

When people know others are watching, and others are counting on them, they'll follow through. Someone's word is a powerful thing. So is peer pressure. In most cases, these may be the only leverage you have to ensure results.

Finally, I like after-meeting emails to all participants to summarize the outcome and once again reconfirm the personal accountabilities and timeframes that were assigned.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is something I didn't say directly but I'm sure you picked up on it: The person in charge has to be assertive. Not aggressive. Not a bully. Assertive. Without a take-charge person at the helm, most meetings simply will not work.

If you follow these simple guidelines, your meetings will produce better results in less time. I guarantee it.