

3 Simple Rules For Great Meetings

By [Elizabeth Black](#)

Meetings in our workplaces are getting worse each year. They are longer, have more participants, often involve remote employees and they rarely achieve as much value as the time investment would warrant. We know that meetings are often not viewed by participants as worthwhile—at least not as worthwhile as whatever is on their wireless devices which they try to use clandestinely, but always unsuccessfully.

What is it that can make meetings more productive? We believe that there are three simple rules that can turn ineffective meetings into events that can yield business results.

The three simple rules are:

Determine the meeting goal upfront and communicate it to all participants.

How often do participants find out about a meeting they have been asked to attend only a short time before the start of the meeting? One member of a team may encounter a colleague in the corridor and tell him that he, too, was invited to the meeting which will start shortly. If the newly-informed invitee goes to the meeting, what are the chances that he will be prepared to contribute meaningfully to the agenda?

Even if the right people are invited to the meeting ahead of time, most meeting conveners who even bother to send out an agenda, make the agenda pretty sparse—generally, the topics, the time allotted and the person assigned to report on each topic. This doesn't give the participants much of a hint on what it is about the topic that will be discussed, let alone what preparation they should do to contribute to the topic.

The solution is to determine the goal of the meeting first. Why must you have a monthly team meeting? Is the goal to report on departmental performance, company business results or to induce behavior change on the part of the participants? The meeting's purpose may be to inform, to influence or to educate. In fact, a good meeting agenda will contain the goals for each topic, and it will be sent to all participants in enough time that they can review it, prepare to add their perspectives on each topic or to provide additional information that the other participants may not have. Either way, a good agenda will answer the question: What do we need to accomplish in this meeting?

Use structured brainstorming to get full participation.

One of the most frustrating things about most meetings is the dialogue that occurs amongst participants. It is usually all over the map. If the topic is reducing expenses, there could be several great ideas offered, but, generally, there is a great deal of conversation, often rambling, with little to no closure on whether everyone agrees with the idea or is willing to try it out. Great ideas that go nowhere are sometimes called "plops." Throw out an idea, hear some discussion around it, and, "plop"—it goes nowhere.

One good way to ensure that ideas are fully discussed or eliminated appropriately, is to use structured brainstorming. Most people are familiar with brainstorming where participants think through a topic and are then asked for their input. All ideas are taken with no judgment allowed and no discussion until all input is on the table. Structured brainstorming is an even better tool to ensure productive meeting dialogue.

Here's how it is done.

The discussion leader asks participants to think silently about ways to control departmental expenses, for example. Each person spends approximately 10-15 minutes silently brainstorming and writing one idea each on a post-it note. When each person runs out of ideas or the time is up, each person posts his or her post-it notes on a wall or flipchart. The group reads all the post-it notes and groups similar ideas together. They then come up with a category header for each of the groupings. Out of the exercise, there should be several ideas which could be explored further and in more detail.

Structured brainstorming gives everyone an opportunity to participate fully in the discussion and provides a structure for looking at the ideas in categories. Thus, it provides the group with the ability to select those categories which could have the biggest impact on the problem they are trying to solve.

Never let a meeting end without an action plan.

How many times have you been in meetings that have topics on the agenda that you thought had been covered in a previous meeting? Were these topics on this agenda because there was more to discuss or simply because no one took ownership for actions on the topic in between the first and second meeting?

Once a topic has been fully discussed, the meeting convener needs to ask the group what actions need to be taken to solve the issue or to make progress on the topic. Not every topic will need follow on, but where they do, it is imperative to have someone accountable for taking action, reporting it to the group and doing so by some deadline.

Having an agenda that leaves space for the action item, person responsible and due date, is a good way to ensure that each topic that warrants follow up actions will get them. Then, you must determine if the action needs to be reported out prior to the next meeting or during it. Bringing closure to items on meeting agendas will add even more discipline and structure to meetings.

These three suggestions for conducting meetings may not prevent the wireless addicts from working their phones or other devices during the meeting, but they certainly will provide an opportunity for all meeting participants to contribute as fully as they desire to help you achieve better meetings.

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