

How to prepare for meetings?

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If there is one activity that unites professionals from different occupations all over the world, it is meetings. Executives, managers, or software developers, they all spend a large part of their working hours closeted in conference rooms discussing issues, significant and insignificant.

But the truth about meetings is they are largely a waste of time if not organised well or not planned in advance. Here are some tips to help you get the best out of these congregations.

Time and venue

The initiator of the meeting must take up the task of sending out meeting requests to all parties who are required to attend, specifying the date, time and venue. If the meeting is a teleconference or a videoconference with participants from multiple locations, it is essential that the meeting request contain the date and time of the various time zones. This is a common mistake, as a colleague in Tokyo found out when she forgot to specify the time zone in her e-mail, which meant that disparate groups of people were waiting for her to teleconference them at different times of the day!

The initiator must ensure a discussion room or conference room large enough to hold the requisite number of attendees is booked for the scheduled time.

Material

It is also up to the initiator to arrange for any materials such as a projector, computer, slides, handouts, or even just a whiteboard and markers. A manager at a telecommunications firm narrates how a meeting he was invited to was delayed by 45 minutes because the computer and projectors were not set up, leading to senior managers walking out and requesting a reschedule.

If you are invited to a meeting for which handouts are distributed, make sure you read those notes before attending. It will keep you in tune with the discussions once you are part of the meeting, and will demonstrate

your preparedness with ideas and thoughts on the topic at hand.

Agenda

Once the time and venue of the meeting is fixed, it is vital that the initiator of the meeting decide the points on the agenda. Each of these points must be covered in detail and decisions taken on them before the meeting wraps up.

Preferably, these points can even be enumerated in brief on the whiteboard in the room, allowing everyone to be aware of the agenda and helping the initiator keep an eye on it at all times.

Minutes of the meeting

In the duration of the meeting, several points and ideas will be thrown up which, if not documented, will evaporate into thin air well before the end. It will be impossible for anyone to retain all the discussed points in memory. Therefore, it is best for the initiator or the meeting-in-charge to appoint one person to jot down notes during the meeting. It is better still if two or three people take notes just in case one misses out something important. At the culmination of the meeting, it is the duty of the person assigned to note down the minutes to create a document and circulate it amongst all attendees. Such a document typically contains the date and time of the meeting, number and names of attendees, the agenda and, against each of the points on the agenda, the action items.

The focus on agenda

Often, despite maintaining an agenda and adhering strictly to time and schedule on a few points, the discussion deteriorates into heated debates. At this point, it is the prerogative of the meeting-in-charge or the initiator to ensure an objective discussion. Also, if a member starts rambling for hours without any end in sight, he must be brought back on track. It should be made clear that although brainstorming is acceptable, digression into irrelevant territory is entirely unwelcome.

Conclusion

When all points on the agenda have been discussed to the satisfaction of all parties, the person writing the minutes or even the initiator can wrap up by briefly reading out the salient points of all that has been discussed, including action to be taken once people return to their work. The minutes of the meeting is a good starting point to follow up with team members in the following days if necessary action has been taken, as discussed.