

Effective team meetings – ten tips for higher performance

Half of my time as a senior manager used to be spent attending meetings. I would wander from one meeting to next quietly quoting HG and Roy: *“too many meetings are barely enough”*. While recognising that many of the meetings were important and necessary, I know that far too much time was wasted due to the ineffective way the meetings were run.

Some of the key benefits of effective team meetings are:

- Better communication and understanding
- Greater focus on critical issues and tracking progress
- Cross fertilisation of ideas
- Improved overall performance

Effective team meetings are an important component in creating effective teams. Team meetings done well enhance team performance. They enable the team to communicate so that everyone knows what’s going on. The team meeting helps keep team members focused on what’s important and how the team is tracking against goals. It also facilitates cross-fertilisation of ideas. The sum of the whole is greater than the parts.

At Balanced Curve we recommend:

1. Hold meetings on a regular basis

To serve their purpose, team meetings should be held at a regular time, day and place. This allows your team to plan their time around the meeting. Weekly meetings are often best as they keep people focussed and balanced on delivering meaningful outcomes and should result in relatively short meetings. However, regularity will be dependent on the motivation and coordination requirements of a group’s task. Where high motivation and coordination is required, daily meetings may be necessary. In any event, if meetings are allowed to slip, they inevitably become longer and harder work.

2. Have a clear and relevant agenda

For team meetings a standard agenda makes sense. Ensure that the topics are relevant to all members of the team and that you have allowed enough time to cover the items listed. Develop the agenda in conjunction with the team and give people the opportunity to include relevant items as they see fit. Send a copy of the agenda to participants at least 24 hours before the meeting to give them the chance to think about issues and how they can contribute to the meeting.

3. Start and finish on time and stick to the allocated timings

There is perhaps nothing more frustrating for a busy manager than to be sitting in a meeting that has not started when it should have. Effective meetings start on time. Don’t allow a couple of minutes for latecomers. Just get on with it. People value and appreciate clarity and consistency.

An effective meeting will generally stick to the times allocated for each item. If a matter can't be resolved in the time allocated, defer it to another meeting or take it off line to come to a resolution.

It is just as important to finish on time. Perhaps the only thing more frustrating for a busy manager than sitting in a meeting that has not started on time is to be sitting in a meeting that should have finished. Take responsibility for ensuring the meeting finishes on or before the scheduled time. Your team will love you if you do.

The key is to be realistic about the time allocated in the first place.

4. Agree on the ground rules

Getting agreement up front on the ground rules is important. Some of the rules that are often useful include:

- Phones off or on silent
- Treat each other with respect (no destructive sledging)
- One person speaking at a time
- Straight talking – be honest and courageous in discussing issues
- Enjoy the journey (have fun)

5. Capture the views of all participants

Develop a culture of trust, respect and egalitarianism. Make sure you capture the views of all participants. Some of us are more vocal than others in team meetings. Make sure you give everyone the chance to participate and express their views before decisions are made. Sometimes you need to dig a little to find the gold nuggets.

6. Be clear on agreed actions (by who, by when)

Allocate someone to take minutes. For each item on the agenda there should be a clear action following the discussion. Ensure that you capture the agreed action and record who is going to do what and by when.

7. Keep people involved and make them accountable

One of the most powerful things about team meetings is the public accountability that can be generated. In addition to having each team member report on their key activity, it is extremely useful to require each member to specify the number one outcome they will be seeking to achieve prior to the next meeting. This should be recorded in the minutes and discussed at the next meeting as an early agenda item.

8. Celebrate success

When a significant contribution is made or a challenging assignment completed make sure that you and the team recognise the achievement. This will reward and inspire the individual and encourage other team members to do the same.

9. Always ask: How can we do this better?

Even effective team meetings get stale. Regularly review how the meeting went. Ask what worked well and what didn't? As a team, think about how the meeting could be improved. Is there something new you could do to keep it fresh? Can you make it shorter? Do you move to longer gaps between meetings? Should you change venues? Business is a race that never ends...you must keep improving.

10. Plan 'Creative thinking' meetings every three months

Weekly team meetings inevitably tend to focus on ongoing operational issues and activity. Effective teams will specifically plan strategic creative thinking meetings every three months where they can take the time to creatively explore how they can do things better in terms of systems and processes and evaluate new opportunities and ideas.

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