

Mastering the art of meetings

Find out how to make meetings more effective and productive.

By Toni Ann Loftus, MBA, RN, MHA

Meetings are a powerful communication tool. They bring together people who can look at an issue from their own unique perspective and contribute to a solution acceptable to many disciplines. Generally, meetings are held to:

- discuss common issues
- brainstorm ideas for solving specific concerns
- make collaborative decisions about a shared concern or problem.

As a clinician, you may attend meetings as part of a group or committee tasked with, for instance, improving the work environment or developing best practices. If you've been asked to take on a group project, you may be the one who leads the meetings. Leading a meeting is a valuable skill anyone can learn. This article gives advice to help you get focused, stay on track, and achieve optimal meeting results.

Planning the meeting

Planning is crucial. First, determine the goal of the meeting. If group members will be held responsible for the tasks needed to accomplish the goal, develop an action plan that clearly states who's responsible for what.

Developing the agenda

A meeting agenda helps maintain the focus and structure for the meeting. The



purpose of the meeting should be the first line item on the agenda. Typically, one or two key people develop the agenda. If you're one of them, be sure to word the agenda clearly, along with actions that must occur or decisions that must be made. Agenda items should start with an action word, such as *review*, *formulate*, *select*, *decide*, or *vote*. Here are examples of complete action items:

- Decide on the best method for scheduling staff.
- Select an appropriate candidate to represent the group.
- Review changes to the policy.

Scheduling the meeting

To establish an optimal meeting time, identify the key people you think should attend. This can be one of the trickiest aspects of planning, but various strategies can make it easier. If possible, call these people and tell them about the meeting, its overall purpose, and why their attendance is important. If the budget permits, plan to serve lunch or light refreshments at the meeting.

Determining the meeting location

Once the meeting time has been decided, determine the location. Choosing the right location can go a long way toward making the meeting a success. When scouting loca-

Common ground rules

Stumped for ways to make more connections? Here are some ideas.

- Turn off cell phones.
- Treat other attendees with respect, even if you disagree with them.
- Send a substitute if you're unable to attend the meeting.
- Arrive on time.

Be sure to spell out the rules for conflict resolution. You might want to consider these:

- Have one person speak at a time.
- Make a sincere effort to listen to one another before responding.
- Agree to tackle the issues, not the person with whom you disagree.

tions, make sure the space will enable attendees to see and hear each other clearly.

Distributing meeting materials

Circulate the agenda to invitees in advance so they know what to expect and how to prepare for the meeting. If other materials will be distributed at the meeting, consider circulating these beforehand as well, so attendees have time to review them and formulate questions or prepare for discussion. (Or, when possible, direct them to an appropriate website instead of distributing paper documents.)

Provide enough information to give attendees basic knowledge. Condense it into outline format to reduce the amount of reading required. Be sure to explain how the materials or documents relate to the agenda. Don't distribute overly complex or technical data that require an expert's explanation.

The leader's role during the meeting

The leader's actions can make or break a meeting. Start the meeting at the scheduled time instead of waiting for everyone to arrive. Once people realize you start your meetings on time, they'll arrive on time.

First, welcome everyone. Allow for introductions in case attendees don't know each other. Discuss the ground rules, including those for conflict resolution. (See *Common ground rules*.)

Next, clearly state the purpose of the meeting, including desired outcomes. Review the agenda to keep attendees focused and help them understand what decisions must be made or what actions must be taken. Try not to stray from the agenda. If the meeting goes off track, redirect everyone back to the agenda topic at hand. To capture off-topic ideas, you can list them in a "parking lot" where they can be planned for and discussed at subsequent meetings. (See *Solving common meeting problems*.)

Arrange for someone to take notes during the meeting. These notes can be condensed into meeting highlights, which should be distributed to attendees as soon as possible after the meeting. At the start of the next meeting, review the highlights to refresh everyone's memory.

Getting everyone involved

For a productive meeting, all attendees must participate. To get everyone involved, open the meeting with a question everyone can answer in turn, going around the room. Make sure everyone has a chance to offer an opinion on an idea or action.

During brainstorming sessions, don't critique ideas as they're offered, and discourage others from doing this. The goal of brainstorming is to generate ideas first, and then discuss the options.

Before the discussion begins, make sure everyone knows how a final decision will be made—for instance, by a vote, majority rule, or consensus. Once a decision is made, summarize and restate it to the

Solving common meeting problems

This chart gives advice on how to solve or prevent problems related to meetings.

Problem	Solution
Key people don't attend.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reach out to key people before the meeting. Explain why you believe their participation is important.If possible, accommodate the schedules of key people when choosing a meeting date and time.
Participation is low.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Some people are naturally quiet at meetings. Make sure everyone has been introduced.Allow a few minutes of social time before the meeting begins.If the group is large, break it into subgroups to discuss various aspects of agenda items before the general discussion.
Meetings don't adhere to the agenda.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Redirect the discussion back to agenda items.If non-agenda topics arise, list them on a "parking lot" flip chart to help plan for the next meeting.Allow a few minutes at the end of the meeting to plan the next meeting.
Meetings don't end on time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Appoint a timekeeper to let attendees know when time to discuss a particular topic is almost up, and again when time has run out.Prioritize topics so the more important ones are discussed first.

group. This ensures everyone has heard and understands it. Near the end of the meeting, start planning for the next meeting by asking attendees to submit agenda items.

Evaluating meeting results

The final step is to evaluate the meeting results, which is crucial for improving the process. At the end of every meeting, take a few minutes to elicit feedback—for instance, by distributing written survey cards or engaging group members to express their comments verbally. You may want to get feedback on how well the meeting was planned, whether it met stated objectives, how well the time was managed, quality of interaction among participants, and aspects of the meeting worth keeping—or avoiding—in the future.

Most of us have attended meetings that were poorly organized, ran too long, or made us wonder why we were invited. The knowledge you've gained from this

article can help you ensure no one ever leaves your meetings feeling like that. ■

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A lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, Toni Ann Loftus is an assistant chief nurse at a combat support hospital in Massachusetts. She is also a doctoral student at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.