

Running Effective Meetings in the Real and Virtual World

We spend a lot of time in meetings! Recent research by Bain & Company tracked just how much time the average employee spends in meetings, as well as our attitudes towards them. The results might or might not surprise you. This research was conducted pre-COVID 19 so we can only assume that new research would yield even more alarming results.

The research showed that:

- the average employee attends 62 meetings per month
- the average middle manager spends 35% of their time in meetings
- senior executives can spend up to 50% of their time in meetings
- 37% of meetings are considered to add no value to the organisation.

Additionally:

- 91% of us have daydreamed during meetings
- 39% of us have fallen asleep
- 45% of us feel overwhelmed by the number of meetings we are required to attend
- 73% of us do other work during meetings
- 47% of us have complained that meetings are a waste of time.



And I admit I have been guilty of all of the above.

To be a strong leader and a high-performing team member it is critical to become more effective at running and participating in meetings. Time is precious and the last thing we need is to waste 37% or more of our working hours.

The rules for running effective meetings in the real world are the same as in the virtual world but because of technology and the tyranny of distance, adherence to these rules is even more critical when meeting virtually.

Here are some of our tips to improve the effectiveness of meetings. You may have additional tools, tips or processes. Please let us know if you do – Peepcoach always loves to hear of better ways of doing things.

1. Set up and check your technology and environment.

Whether you are running a virtual or an in-person meeting always turn up a few minutes early to make sure your technology is working and the environment is set up as necessary.

Check:

- the projector is working
- you have all the materials and props you need, e.g. whiteboard, whiteboard markers
- there are enough chairs
- the room is comfortable, i.e. not too hot or too cold.

When it comes to technology:

- test the microphone and ensure that your video is working – research indicates that non-verbal communication such as body language, facial expressions and tone can account for up to 80% of our communication so it is critical to have your video on during meetings
- for greater inclusivity and connection, change your settings to gallery view, if that is a function of the technology you're using, as this allows all attendees to see each other throughout the meeting
- turn off notifications on your other media – phone, email, social media – so that you are not interrupted during the meeting.

2. Set and keep to an agenda.

There is nothing worse than being part of a meeting with no clear outcomes. Wherever possible, meetings should be no longer than one hour and ideally less, especially virtual meetings where it can be hard to focus for too long. Try changing your 60-minute meetings to 45-minute ones.

To maximise effectiveness:

- have a clear agenda that is distributed before the meeting
- send any reading materials prior to the meeting and let participants know it is assumed that all materials will have been read and understood; they should be reviewed only in exceptional circumstances
- confirm and share the objectives and outcomes required – what is the purpose and what do you expect to achieve at the meeting?
- appoint a timekeeper to ensure that the meeting runs to schedule
- establish clear next steps and confirmed actions, responsibilities and timelines before ending the meeting.

3. Determine and agree on meeting rules.

It is always important to have an agreed code of conduct or meeting etiquette, especially if this is a regular meeting. For greater commitment and compliance, it is recommended that these rules be discussed to ensure buy-in from all participants.

Rules may include the following.

- Keep to strict start and end times. Do not wait or recap for latecomers. They will learn soon enough that being late is not acceptable.
- Don't talk over each other.
- Complete pre-reading before the meeting.
- Avoid multitasking – no-one should be using phones or completing other work. Meetings are far more effective when everyone is fully present and engaged.
- If participants are not all known to one another, start the meeting with introductions.
- At the end of the meeting the scribe should confirm all actions, responsibilities and deadlines, and gain commitment.

For virtual meetings remember the following.

- All participants must have video enabled.
- Mute your microphone while others are talking.
- All participants should be on gallery view.
- If participants are in different locations, everyone needs to be on their own individual video/device, rather than multiple participants using the same conferencing equipment.
- Use the chat room to list questions. Use the chat room also for parking lot and review at the end of the meeting.
- Make sure everyone is in a quiet space so they can focus without interruption.

4. Engage all participants from the beginning.

There are a number of ways you might engage with participants as a meeting begins, including the following.

- Ask each participant their objective for the meeting. What do they want to achieve?
- If you are the facilitator, make sure you interact regularly by asking your participants for input, feedback and questions.
- Specifically engage with quieter participants to ensure they join in and share their insights and opinions.
- Research has shown that telling a funny story about yourself increases team engagement and participation, resulting in a 26% increase in productivity when brainstorming.
- If presentation slides are required ensure they are easy to read, without excessive text.

5. Clearly define all roles.

To ensure that the meeting stays on track, ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.

Roles include the following.

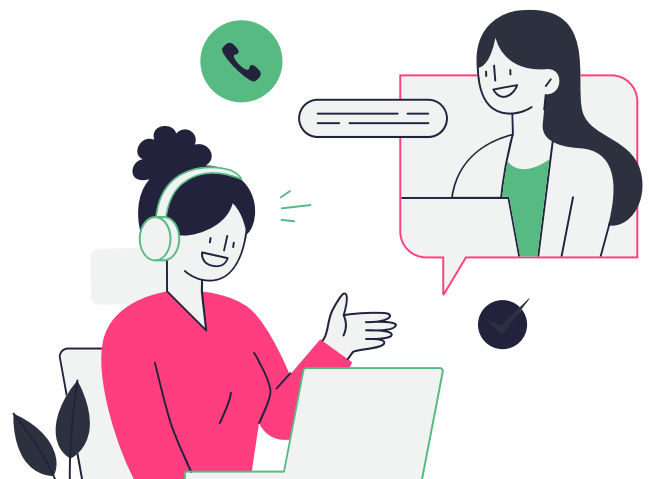
- Facilitator/chair: The purpose of the chair is to keep the meeting moving forward and productive and to ensure that the desired outcomes are achieved.
- Minute-taker or scribe: The purpose of the scribe is to take minutes and confirm actions and responsibilities.
- Tech support: The purpose of tech support is to deal with any technical issues, look after the chat room, launch polls and manage presentation sharing.
- Timekeeper: The purpose of the timekeeper is to support the facilitator/chair to keep the meeting on schedule.
- Observer: Depending on the size of the meeting you may also consider appointing an observer in the real world. The observer's role is to make sure that everyone is participating and being heard. This role is especially important in virtual meetings.

If this is a regular meeting you may rotate these roles to ensure greater team participation.

6. Avoid going off on tangents.

To ensure meetings are effective and purposeful, maintain focus on the primary objectives. If any participants need to discuss tangential issues, use the parking lot or chat room.

Ideally the scribe should manage the parking lot. The facilitator should review the parking lot at the end of the meeting. At the end of the meeting, during the summary, the group can determine if a separate meeting or further discussion is necessary.



7. Make extra effort to listen.

One of the most frustrating and time-wasting behaviours in meetings is not listening and we are all guilty of this at times.

If you are presenting at a meeting, ensure that you are doing so in a way that maintains interest.

Remember the following.

- Slides should not be too wordy.
- Excessive detail is not required for all points – include key information only.
- Keep on track and to the point.
- Don't be boring!

If you are a participant, listen, ask questions, understand and contribute to the outcome. This will make meetings and solutions more effective.

8. Confirm and agree on actions.

Research has shown that actions agreed upon during virtual meetings are less likely to be completed than those agreed on in face-to-face meetings.

To ensure actions are completed, allow time at the end of the meeting to confirm all decisions and next steps. The facilitator or scribe should read through all the actions. Ask each person responsible to confirm their commitment and timeframe – this encourages them to complete the action.

9. Ask yourself: is this meeting necessary?

The Bain & Company study on meetings highlighted that the average middle manager attends 62 meetings per month. Our need to be inclusive, and to respect hierarchy and general organisational politics and bureaucracy, unfortunately means that there are often too many people in these meetings.

To increase the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings, ask yourself these questions.

- Is this meeting necessary?
- If this meeting is necessary, do I need to be here?
- What value am I adding or gaining?
- If I am not gaining and providing any value, what do I need to do to change this?

As we change the way we work, take the opportunity to review current processes and change what is not effective. Stop unnecessary meetings and bow out if you think you are not adding any value.

10. Rate the meeting for continuous improvement.

At the end of each meeting, ask participants to rate the meeting's effectiveness and ask for recommendations for improvement.

Questions you might like to ask include the following.

- Did we achieve the meeting objectives?
- Did the meeting stay on track?
- Did everyone contribute and feel heard?
- Did the technology work?
- Are there clear actions and next steps?

Remember, time is the great equaliser. It is the only thing that we can't buy more of and is equally distributed to all people – young, old, rich and poor. Use it wisely.

Further reading

<https://hbr.org/2014/05/your-scarcest-resource>

<https://hbr.org/2017/10/research-for-better-brainstorming-tell-an-embarrassing-story>

<https://snacknation.com/blog/one-on-one-meeting/>

<https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/how-to-run-effective-meetings>