

HOW TO MANAGE MEETINGS EFFECTIVELY

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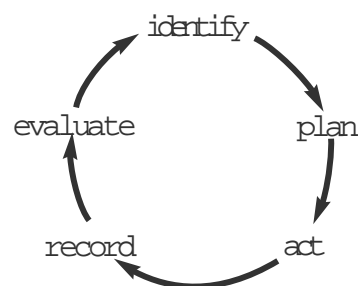
We are all sometimes invited to meetings of some sort. These could be branch meetings, meetings at work or meetings with other health care professionals on unfamiliar territory. But what if you need to hold your own meeting? This article gives some basic tips for meetings management



identify gaps in your knowledge

1. Can you list three ways of providing information?
2. How would you deal with conflict during a meeting?
3. What should be done after a meeting?

This article relates to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's core competency of "principles of management" (see "Medicines, ethics and practice — a guide for pharmacists", number 25, July 2001, p104). You should consider how it will be of value to your practice.



Meetings are a common time-wasting activity in many organisations. According to surveys the average manager spends about 17 hours in meetings each week and about 70 million boardroom meetings are held around the world every day. Often, however, no thought is given as to why a meeting is needed, or how to maximise the productivity of a meeting. In some cases meetings are held simply because managers feel it is good to talk. This is useful, particularly for people like pharmacists who feel isolated, but it can also be expensive. In financial terms (ie, the number of people in attendance at a meeting multiplied by their hourly rate) meetings are expensive, especially when the outcome does not justify the means or if other people monopolise meetings and work to their own private agendas. Additional to the possible loss of productivity is the cost of room hire, refreshments and paper etc. Some meetings are negative experiences: they waste time, they can be divisive, lower morale, create problems and divert attention away from important issues. On the other hand, good meetings can be positive experiences and can motivate.

So, what constitutes a good meeting? Depending on its purpose, a good meeting should stimulate thinking, generate new ideas or solve problems. In '20 ways to manage better',¹ Andrew Leigh suggests some features of well organised meetings as shown below:

- 1 Good preparation
- 1 Agreed procedures
- 1 Someone to lead, chair or support the meeting
- 1 A focused discussion — people stick to the subject
- 1 A clear purpose or agenda
- 1 Discussion of relevant matters
- 1 Effort to reach conclusions by consensus
- 1 A forum for everyone to contribute
- 1 Each person is actively invited to contribute
- 1 High quality listening by everyone
- 1 Time managed
- 1 Rapid publication of results and further action

BEFORE THE MEETING

Before even deciding to hold a meeting, you should ask yourself why it is necessary. Bearing in mind the potential costs, it is always worth considering alternatives. If for example, meetings are only organised

to provide information then perhaps a more efficient way of providing information could be used such as e-mail or intranet if you have them, memos and information sheets. Once you have convinced yourself that a meeting needs to be held you have to think about participants who can help the meeting achieve its objectives. Some people enjoy participating in meetings just for the sake of it and not because they have anything concrete and relevant to contribute. If the same few participants regularly dominate your meetings, you need to ask why, and also ask whether the people who attend but never participate really need to be there. Is the meeting really relevant to their work or is the chairing conducted in such a way that they feel unable to participate? There may of course, be occasions when you invite people to a meeting purely to observe rather than to participate. For example, new members of staff might be invited to attend a meeting as part of their induction programme.

If all your staff have to be present at a meeting, you will need to make arrangements for dealing with the rest of your work. For example, you might need to organise a rota to ensure that one member of staff is always available to deal with telephone calls or enquiries. This member of staff needs to be briefed so that he or she is able to address any situation in an appropriate manner. He or she also needs to be debriefed after the meeting and kept informed of important decisions.

Once the purpose of a meeting is clearly established, it will be easier to identify appropriate participants. Planning is therefore essential. An agenda needs to be set to ensure that the meeting does not descend into a rambling discussion, ie, the agenda is a tool for keeping control. This should be distributed well in advance of the meeting to give participants the chance to think and prepare, therefore increasing productivity. A good agenda will state the date, starting and finishing times, the location and the topics to be dealt with. It should also state whether items are for discussion, decision or information only. The more interesting the agenda looks, the more motivated participants will feel. A list of bland headings on an agenda can be uninviting whereas an agenda that perhaps ask questions or invites participants to prepare ideas will be more stimulating. The following summarises what you might need to do before a meeting:

- 1 Clarify the purpose of the meeting and define objectives from the outset
- 1 Book the room, audio equipment and refreshments well in advance
- 1 Identify participants who are likely to contribute most to the meeting
- 1 Try to keep attendance at the meeting to a minimum

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action : practice point

1. Review how much of your working time is spent in meetings and what this costs. Ask yourself what would happen if you did not attend. What alternatives could there be to gain access to the information distributed?
2. Make an evaluation of the next meeting you attend. Did it follow the basic tips in this article? (You could use Andrew Leigh's list as a checklist.) How do you think it could have been improved?
3. Write a plan for a meeting on a health promotion issue. Who would chair the meeting? Who would be invited to participate?

evaluate

How could your learning have been more effective?
What will you do now and how will this be achieved?

- 1 Organise and distribute a clear agenda and any relevant materials in advance
- 1 Schedule the meeting with clear starting and ending times and allocate time for each item on the agenda
- 1 Be strategic about when you arrange meetings. Meetings held just before lunch or at the end of a day are more likely to finish on time
- 1 Identify a chairman and if necessary a moderator to keep a check on time and behaviour during the meeting

DURING THE MEETING

The chairman is responsible for leading the meeting and keeping it focused on the agenda. This is achieved by preparing in advance and being clear about which participants will be contributing to specific agenda items. It is the chairman's responsibility to control the discussion and maintain order and the best way of doing this is by getting the participants to agree to ground rules for conduct before the meeting (eg, by signing a written agreement). These ground rules should include basic principles, for example, that the meeting will start on time (it will not wait for late arrivals) and agenda items will not be repeated for the benefit of those who arrive late. Another basic principle is that participants must be well behaved during the meeting and will not make personal attacks on others or interrupt when someone else is speaking.

A good chairman listens and observes. He or she will also encourage participation from silent attendees in an appropriate manner by asking direct questions such as "What do you think about . . . ?" or "Please tell us about your feelings on . . ." People often stay silent in a meeting out of embarrassment, fear or sometimes because they simply do not understand the issue being discussed. Chairmen should therefore try to read the signals and summarise or simplify complex issues for the benefit of all participants. Participation can be further encouraged by inviting all attendees to express their objections or constructive criticisms.

Making a conscious effort to encourage participation is also one way to prevent the meeting from being monopolised by dominating personalities. It sends out a message that the chairman is interested in a range of contributions and is in control. Giving a brief summary of contributions at the end of a discussion will also give a clear indication that all views are valued.

Do also be aware of non-verbal communication, which may reveal much more about participants' views and attitudes than their spoken con-

tributions. For example look out for eye-to-eye contact and signalling between certain participants, the folding of arms when a certain agenda item comes up for discussion or preoccupation with papers not pertinent to the meeting.

If action points are identified, the person responsible for the action must be designated and the action points summarised at the end of the meeting.

Dealing with misbehaviour Misbehaviour and misconduct will happen in some meetings and it is usually the chairman's responsibility to address bad behaviour if it does occur. One "anchor" that the chairman has for getting a meeting back on route, is the ground rules and it is worth reminding participants of the rules if a sensitive item is on the agenda, or if for some other reason misbehaviour by a participant is expected. If, in spite of a review of the rules, bad behaviour still surfaces the chairman should restate the ground rules and try to diagnose and resolve the problem.

It could be that two members take opposing views on an issue and angrily exchange their views during the meeting. At this year's annual Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Human Resources conference, international management consultant Dr Steven Covey suggested the following method for conflict resolution during meetings: "Allow each person to express their views without interruption. So for example person A states their view. Next, the person who takes the opposing view, person B, has to rephrase and keep rephrasing the views of person A until they fully understand and can express person A's view accurately. Then they swap and person B expresses their views and person A restates and rephrases person B's views until they can express person B's viewpoint accurately." The aim of the technique is to allow disagreeing participants to focus on the issues rather than on an individual and to reach a shared and thorough understanding of the other person's point of view.

Although Covey's suggestion might appear to be time-consuming, if a heated conflict develops during a meeting, this may be the only way to help both parties to appreciate that they both have valid views and that it is possible to reach a point of shared understanding. If the conflict is such that it cannot be resolved during the meeting, the chairman should close the agenda item and make it clear that the matter will be addressed outside the meeting. Alternatively, calling for a break can diffuse the situation. The key to handling conflict during meetings successfully is to stay calm and objective. The chairman should never get emotional or upset during a meeting and should be seen to be in control even if an extreme situation arises and the meeting has to be closed prematurely.

Minutes When writing the minutes of the meeting, the secretary for the meeting should concentrate on the key points of discussion and decisions. The minutes should be linked to the purpose of the meeting and should focus on action. Minutes should indicate the decisions and actions to be taken and by whom and when. Panel 1 shows the headings that usually appear in minutes.

AFTER THE MEETING

The minutes should be sent to everyone on the circulation list within two weeks of the meeting. It is a waste of resources to hold a meeting that produces good ideas and contributions if nothing is done afterwards. Therefore all action points arising from the meeting should be followed up. Monitoring and evaluation of the meeting should also take place to ensure that it achieves its aims and is effective.

**PANEL 1: USUAL
REQUIREMENTS FOR
MINUTES**

- 1 Present
- 1 Apologies
- 1 Confirmation of previous minutes
- 1 Matters arising
- 1 Items discussed
- 1 Any other business
- 1 Date of next meeting

REFERENCES

1. Leigh A. 20 ways to manage better. 3rd edition. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel Development; 2001.

FURTHER READING

- 1 Forsyth P. The meetings pocketbook. Hampshire: Management Pocketbooks; 1994.
- 1 Taylor J. Communication at work. London: Kogan Page; 2001.