



How to Have Effective Meetings

Does your organization, department or team have effective, productive meetings?

If not, you probably dread attending meetings or try to find ways to avoid them altogether. Our article provides some proven ideas to help you determine how to make your meetings more effective.

The Wharton Center for Applied Research published the following findings in the *Wall Street Journal*:

- The average chief executive officer spends about 17 hours each week in meetings.
- Senior executives spend an average of 23 hours a week in meetings.
- Middle managers spend 11 hours in meetings per week.
- Senior and middle managers said only 56% of meetings were productive. They added that a phone call or a memo could have replaced over 25% of the meetings they attend.

Does your organization, department or team have effective, productive meetings? If not, you probably dread attending meetings or try to find ways to avoid them all together. Following are some proven ideas to help you determine how to make your meetings more effective.

Central Elements for Effective Meetings

The key point to keep in mind about meetings is that our goal is to move a group of people through a process toward developing our common desired outcome. Thus, there are three central elements necessary to have an effective meeting.

Topic	What are we going to talk about?
Deliverable	What do we want to have when we are finished?
Process	What steps are we going to follow in order to effectively reach our deliverable?

Everyone in the meeting must have knowledge, as well as an understanding of what the three elements for the meeting will be. The effective use of these three elements will allow the group to meet, stay together, and succeed in reaching a common goal. Ambiguity on any of these items will lead to confusion and unproductive behavior.



Determining the Meeting Topic

Many times, meeting attendees are not entirely sure why the meeting was called. By first determining and then communicating the meeting topic or type of meeting, you prepare meeting attendees for a format and establish expectations. We have found three types of meetings: huddles, information sharing meetings and problem solving meetings.

Huddles:

- Brief, informal meeting. Normally lasts 5-15 minutes.
- Usually takes place at the workstation and can be called at any time by anyone.
- Purpose is to share minor issues or problems that can be addressed immediately, including making daily work assignments or discussing the day's priorities.
- Do not need an agenda, but decisions and action items should be documented and distributed.

Information Sharing Meetings:

- Scheduled, formal meetings lasting 15-30 minutes.
- Should have an agenda, ground rules and assignments for meeting roles.
- Purpose is to ensure that all members have a chance to speak up and to ask questions about the topic (otherwise, information could be communicated in a memo or email).
- Used to report progress on action items and to update meeting attendees. Should only be used when the group doesn't have major decisions to be made or problems to be solved.

Problem Solving Meetings:

- Scheduled, formal meeting that usually lasts at least 1 hour.

- Should have an agenda, ground rules and assignments for meeting roles.
- Meeting emphasis is on participation, interaction by all members, and consensus building.
- Purpose is to solve a problem the group previously agreed to work on together and to make decisions.

Meetings are much more likely to be effective if attendees know what to expect before they arrive. Determining the type of meeting and its topic helps establish these expectations. If a meeting was a problem solving meeting focusing on quality issues, participants would come prepared with ideas and to think creatively and participate. Whereas, if the meeting involved information sharing on new available software, participants would come prepared to take notes and ask relevant questions.

Determine the Meeting Deliverable

For most meeting leaders, determining the meeting deliverable—or objective—is a simple step. Ask yourself: By the time this meeting is over, I want to accomplish _____. Whatever item you fill in the blank is your meeting deliverable. If you are involved in a lengthy process, with a succession of meetings, and you only want to accomplish pieces of the process with each meeting, remind attendees of how this objective fits into the larger process or big picture.

You can inform meeting attendees ahead of time by adding the deliverable to the agenda and distributing the agenda in advance. Restate the deliverable at the beginning of the meeting, so it is fresh in everyone's minds. By informing all involved about the meeting objective, everyone will know whether the meeting was a success based on if the deliverable was reached.

Process for Effective Meetings

At Microburst Learning, we have helped facilitate meetings and have educated organizations on effective meetings for more than 12 years. During that time, we developed a high-level plan to assist

meeting leaders in holding effective meetings. If you follow the steps listed below, your meetings will be organized and productive. Remember that even if you chose not to follow this process, you should at least determine a process to use ahead of time and ensure all meeting attendees are aware of the process before or at the beginning of the meeting.

Microburst Learning's Meeting Process

Plan the Meeting

- Prepare an action agenda: State the meeting deliverable, establish priorities, and establish flexible time limits for each agenda item.
- Distribute agenda and background information in advance to all meeting attendees. Be sure you include only those people who must be there.
- Have copies of all forms as handouts available for the meeting, including agenda and action items.

Conduct the Meeting

- Start the meeting on time.
- Read the ground rules. If you are meeting with a group that doesn't have established ground rules, take a few minutes at the beginning to establish some rules by which you will conduct that meeting.
- Review the agenda and the time allotted, making sure to note the meeting deliverable(s).
- Review or appoint meeting rules (leader, timekeeper, scribe, etc.)
- Use involvement skills and processes to ensure participation and commitment, such as the Round Robin technique.
- Review the action items that were updated.

Follow-up on the Meeting

- Distribute action minutes- a summary of the decisions and commitments made- as soon after the meeting as possible.
- Follow-up on discussions and commitments.

- Check back with meeting attendees on the progress of action items before the due dates and give feedback.

By ensuring ahead of time all meeting attendees are aware of the meeting topic, deliverables and process, you can be assured it will be an effective meeting that will be more productive and pleasurable for the attendees. You will also be more organized and in charge of the meeting and its processes.

