

Productive Meetings – the Golden Rules

Let's take a look at nine golden rules for **keeping meetings productive** in your business:

Compelling Reason – the first and most important thing is to make sure that you really need to have a meeting at all. There are only four good reasons to have a meeting – to give or receive information, to build engagement, to develop options or to make decisions. From this list the first two often have credible alternatives. Having decided that you do need to hold a meeting, you must ensure that it has a clear purpose that is communicated via the agenda. Also, you should make sure that the invitees understand the reason for their attendance.

Simple Structure – all meetings should follow a simple linear structure that is published as an agenda and distributed to attendees well in advance. An exception here might be a daily 'standup' or 'tool-box' meeting where the topics are limited to achievements and plans that are delivered in a fast round-robin format. Generally, the agenda must include logistical information for the attendees and it must be clear on what will be expected of them. The agenda must identify all attendees and associate them with specific topics so ownership is clear. Each item should have a start-time (not a duration) to act as a waypoint and thereby help ensure the meeting stays on track. Time should be allocated at the start for introductions and clarification of purpose to ensure appropriate focus and contribution during the meeting. This is especially important if there are new members joining the group.

Simple Rules – it is important that some basic rules are established up front to ensure the meeting is productive. Some suggestions that work well are: start and end on time, stick to the agenda, take off-agenda items off-line, only one person speaks at a time, no side-conversations and phones on silent.

Right Resources – only invite people who are necessary for achieving the objective of the meeting. If there is information to review then this needs to be sent out well in advance with sufficient time to do it justice. Do not review the material in the meeting. Also, do not hold a meeting prematurely – if the material is not ready then the meeting will have to wait. With respect to the meeting itself, if there are likely to be significant numbers of decisions/actions and the meeting leader is required to contribute to the content of the meeting (often the case) you should consider assigning a dedicated facilitator to run the meeting and/or a secretary to scribe the minutes.

Keep to Time – meetings should be no longer than necessary and certainly shorter than ninety minutes; after which time people are generally fairly

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unproductive. It is important to stick to the allocated time by following some simple rules: (a) start on time – do not wait for latecomers, (b) stick to agenda – assign a timekeeper to prompt contributors and ensure that the run-sheet (agenda) timings are followed, (c) reschedule items/issues that cannot be dealt with in the allocated agenda slot (d) finish on time (e) consider extension only as a last resort and only with prior agreement from the participants. People need to be able to plan their time so show it the appropriate level of respect.

Full Engagement – attendees have been invited to add and/or receive value so it is important that everyone gets a chance to participate. It is essential to respect the agenda timing, manage grandstanding and encourage contributions from quieter participants. You should also seek to confirm understanding and ensure that everyone is comfortable with the material, decisions and actions.

Record Decision & Actions – if the meeting has been called to make decisions and assign actions then it is essential that this be done on the way through by wrapping up each agenda item within its allotted time. Invite those with ownership for a decision or action to echo it back to the other attendees for capture in the minutes. This avoids misunderstandings and engenders a level of public commitment. A well-articulated action conform to the generic formula – ‘who is doing what by when?’ The minutes must be published to all attendees as soon as possible after the meeting. It is worth noting that the minutes do not be a verbatim transcript of the meeting. Instead, they should simply capture key decisions and actions arising.

Ideas Pen – don’t get derailed but don’t lose those good ideas or off-topic issues that emerge during the course of a meeting. The best way to manage this is to have somewhere for them to go and to schedule a slot at the end of the meeting to review and make decisions about how to deal with them. The ‘Ideas Pen’ can be a whiteboard, flip chart or any other suitable mechanism that keeps the items visible without distracting from the main flow.

Continuous Improvement – from time to time it makes sense to include the meeting process itself as an agenda item to examine what is working and what needs adjustment. Unless you are really struggling this is unlikely to need more than ten minutes.

If you’d like some specific help with your leadership or management issues please drop us a line at info@sigmarose.com or simply call the number below.