

How many times have you gone to a meeting that lasted too long, didn't stay on-subject, or just seemed to waste everyone's time? You're not alone...we don't take a lot of time teaching leaders how important meetings are. Here are some tips to making your meetings more meaningful. People will brag about your meetings if you follow these simple rules:

1. Have an agenda and a goal. When a meeting does not have a clear goal of what it needs to accomplish, it may not accomplish anything. Think about what issues you want to address and stay on topic. Don't try to accomplish too much in a single meeting. Solicit issues or problems that the participants may want to discuss, but do it ahead of time, not once the meeting has started. Have an agenda and stick with it. "Park" any other issues that come up during a meeting and make a point of addressing them later. This keeps the meeting moving.
2. Make your agenda known. Notify participants about the important facts beforehand. Be creative with your memo announcing the meeting, date, time, place, length and agenda. Prepare the participants to discuss the topic at hand. If appropriate, use humor and imagination to create excitement about the meeting, and make sure you don't let them down. Stick to the topic and time frame.
3. Set the scene. Above all else, the meeting site should be comfortable and free from distractions. If you keep your meetings to a reasonable amount of time, this should not be a problem. Vary your meeting sites to offer a little change or variety. If at all possible, participants should not take phone calls. You may want to announce "please turn off your phones and blackberries or put them on silent."
4. Kick off. Start the meeting with a summary of your goals. Let whomever you are speaking to know what you want to accomplish. Ask for comments on your goals, if appropriate.
5. Establish your set of rules. Make them known at the beginning of the meeting to set the tone for all meetings to come. This may seem too regimented to you at first, but try it and you'll find participants will provide you feedback later about "finally having meetings that are organized and that get something done."
6. Stay on the topic. Put any issue that comes up that is off the topic but important in the "parking lot." Have a notepad handy to write down good ideas or other key issues that should be discussed after the meeting has accomplished its original goal.
7. Use the "three-knock rule." This is where it takes courage to keep the meeting moving. Use the three-knock rule to make someone who is speaking know that he/she is either rambling or is off the topic at hand. When you knock three times on the table, say something like "Joe, we've got to keep moving, please take about half a minute to wrap up your thoughts." If Joe keeps talking, politely interrupt with something like "Joe, I appreciate what you're saying. I'd like to talk to you afterwards so we don't lose your point. For now, let's go to ... (and name the next subject)." Politely interrupting, and keeping the meeting on track, is where it takes courage. You don't want to embarrass Joe, yet you have to find a way to keep the "expressives" in your group from dominating the conversation. Conversely, you may have to ask the quiet ones to offer their thoughts, especially if they have much to offer, but just don't like to jump in the conversation.
8. No personal attacks. When hosting a meeting, make it a policy that no one attacks another participant. Avoid negative or aggressive comments. Word criticism in a constructive way.
9. Keep the tone upbeat. People will listen better and longer to a voice that has some inflection and energy to it. Give your pitch and then open it up for comments or questions. Keep your audience involved by sincerely listening to their comments or suggestions. Nothing wins people over like them knowing they were heard.
10. Manage your time. Start on time and end on time. It may help to have a timekeeper remind you (and if you want, everyone else) of key times to announce ("30 minutes left," "10 minutes left," etc.)
11. Plan for success. Don't settle for meetings that wander aimlessly and accomplish little or nothing. A little thought and planning will make your meetings effective and productive.