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How to Make Meetings More Productive

by Pete Harmon

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About the Author

Pete Harmon has been involved with meetings in sporting, social and business areas for most of his adult life.

Pete has always been focused on making a positive contribution to the organizations of which he was a member.

Like many other members, he found this very difficult at first. But, he worked very hard to be a more effective member.

He also slowly improved his presentation and other personal skills which helped with his club activities. He also believes that his career has been helped by this effort as well.

In the depressed economy and tight job situation, it can be a real plus when someone shows they can present their self and their point of view effectively in all kinds of social and business situations.

Pete said that he is not a professional meeting organizer or a lawyer, and he has no special talent or secret.

He learned by watching and doing.

“That’s the best way, but it takes a fairly long time. And, some mistakes that I’ve seen people make have been costly to their reputations and their ambitions, both personal and professional.”

“So, I wrote my book to help others learn from their armchair in a couple of evenings what took me years.”

Pete’s book will give you the basic knowledge to get better outcomes for yourself and the organizations you support as well as give you more self-confidence in all kinds of public situations.

Introduction

A lot of meetings are mostly a waste of time.

They take busy people away from their main tasks, often at the most inconvenient times.

They are seen as interruptions to the work in progress rather than a valuable tool.

Researchers have demonstrated that interruptions to a person's workflow mean that he or she will lose more time by having to prepare for the meeting.

There is also a serious cost to the organization's bottom line from what it costs your business to have the staff in the meeting instead of performing their regular duties!

Everyone involved also loses some productive time because they have to prepare for the meeting and travel to and from it.

They also need some time to adjust back to their normal working pattern after the meeting is over.

It's our duty to do everything we can to ensure that every meeting we take part in produces useful results.

My book will help you to get maximum value from the meetings you attend and suggest ways to prevent you wasting time and money when you have to organize, attend and participate in meetings.

This book is not a manual on procedures.

I give you some general information on procedures and other matters related to formal meetings but the rules vary widely according to the country and type of organization. It's an area which is often subject to laws and regulation which are specific to the area where you are located.

I have included links and suggestions for resources on procedures and other related subjects in the reference section at the end of the book.

This book is focused on information which will help you produce better results from the time and effort you invest in whatever kind of meetings you take part in.

I've included some information about how to put forward your views and the ways which I've found best to interact with people, including those whose views are widely different to mine, wherever possible.

Preparing for the Meeting

If you are given the responsibility to organize and perhaps chair a meeting, don't worry too much. My experience is that most people at most meeting will respect the Chair, even an inexperienced one provided they show they have done some preparation and do their task without bias or pressure.

When you decide to hold a meeting or are co-opted to organize one, make a list of the people who you believe may need to be at the meeting.

Then, contact them about their availability and interest in the meeting.

Keep the number of people that your meeting takes away from their regular work to a minimum. Avoid the temptation to invite everyone who might have even just a peripheral interest in the main topics to be discussed.

Support People

If you are chairing the meeting, you will need to find someone willing to record what happens at the meeting and confirm that the agenda items are attended to.

You will also need someone to look after any equipment or supplies which are required for the meeting.

Prepare Your Agenda

Give the people you contact a list of topics which you expect to discuss at the meeting and ask them for suggestions of topics which they would like to add.

Sometimes, you may get suggestions for changes to the items which you have on your initial list. Someone may have reasons for wanting more time for a particular topic.

You may even discover that some items have been dealt with.

Check with them if they can suggest other people who might benefit from being at the meeting or who could be a source of relevant information which could be helpful to the group at the meeting. This information might be supplied in written form or verbally by you if there is no other reason for the provider to actually be at the meeting.

Provide the agenda to all the relevant people in a timely manner before the meeting so that they can prepare themselves, gather relevant material and fit the meeting time into their personal schedule.

Write the agenda items in a way that makes it clear to the group how each item will be treated:

- A decision about action
- Information about current status, outstanding problems or future possibilities
- Suggestions for improvement

Providing a clear agenda in advance will help everyone concerned to decide whether or not they need to be at a particular meeting.

This can also help anyone that is unable to attend the meeting. They can contact the organizer or another attendee and provide them with relevant material.

Sometimes, you can't arrange a time which is convenient for all stakeholders but you should do your best to ensure that as many as possible are present and all are consulted.

Check that they will either attend the meeting or contact someone else who will be able and willing to offer their information and suggestions to the group.

Check records (minutes) of previous meetings for items which were to be acted on between meetings and confirm that responsible people will attend to, report and answer questions, if any.

Chairing the Meeting

Someone has to control the meeting and that role usually falls to the person that organized it.

Check that morning with the person who agreed to help you by recording the minutes. Don't leave that to the very last minute.

Instead of just waiting "a few extra minutes" for any latecomers while the people who have arrived chat among themselves, always start the meeting on time.

You can introduce yourself and then ask each person to introduce themselves with their name and what they do which is relevant to the purpose of the meeting. Pay particular attention to people that have only recently joined the organization.

That courteous formality gives you a chance to gain a quick impression about each of the people. There are likely to be people who try to dominate, become aggressive or are so shy that they need help to deliver their contribution to the group.

Ask if there are any apologies for absence from the meeting.

Give a brief outline of the purpose of the meeting and read out the agenda.

Ask if there are any comments about any of the items (some may have been settled since the agenda was prepared and circulated).

You should also ask for any other important items which anyone present believes should be added to the agenda.

Adding Items to the Agenda

The Agenda is important, but not cast in stone but flexibility may be required at times.

The chairperson will give priority to the items which were properly submitted in advance for inclusion in the meeting's Agenda.

But, they have to be ready to accept new items of business which arise between the preparation of the Agenda and the actual meeting.

The secretary or minute-taker should write them in a separate list. They can sort them according to urgency and importance so that as many as time allows can be dealt with after the main items have been discussed and actions decided.

Items which Run over Time

If any agenda item starts to take more time than you think should be allowed for it, suggest that the group agree to defer further discussion so that the more important items can be given sufficient time.

Then, give it some time, if available, near the end of the meeting or defer it to the next meeting.

If it needs to be finalized before the next meeting, suggest that a sub-committee be formed, including those with a particular interest in the matter, to deal with it.

If that is accepted by the meeting, ask the sub-committee to call on you or other members of the group for any help which they feel they might need to do so.

Wrap up Each Item after the Discussion

When discussion is over about an item, either the Chair or the secretary should give a quick summary of the main points made, decisions and the person responsible for any agreed action.

This may add maybe a minute or so to each item but it can reduce the length of discussion when people start to repeat points which have already been made.

The Time Factor

Set the time of the meeting and start on time. This is one of the most important recommendations and one that is most often ignored.

Many organizers accept that people will arrive late, sometimes for very good reason and sometimes just because "they always do".

But, the organizer may believe that it is both polite and practical to delay the actual starting time by a few minutes.

That will not help to encourage prompt attendance at future meetings by the latecomers. The problem with this approach is that everyone will assume that future meetings will also start a little late.

Even some of those who made the effort to be on time for this meeting will give themselves a few extra minutes to do their own work before coming to future meetings because there seems to be no advantage to arriving on time.

That is also not considering the people who make the effort to be ready at the appointed time and place. The delay rewards the latecomers and cuts into everyone else's productive time for that day.

Give your starting time and your finish time in your agenda and stick to them both.

Emphasize this policy when the agenda is circulated. That will help to encourage everyone to be on time or even a little early.

Of course, this policy makes it very important that you get to the meeting room in good time yourself.

Show respect for the group's other commitments by finishing the meeting on time. There is likely to be a little over-run with even the best meetings but keep it to a minimum.

Handling Agenda Items

Sometimes, an item may need more discussion than first thought. If that time is not available at the meeting, ask the group to suggest a small number of people that could deal with the matter in the days after the meeting and report back to the full group. To save time, if the group is in favor, give the smaller group the authority to finalize the matter before reporting back.

Try to gauge the time each agenda item should be given. Move less important and time-sensitive matters to the front of the list before circulating the agenda.

When you feel that the group has finished with an item, give a short review of what was said and the outcome, then ask the group to confirm, ask the group to review and, if necessary, revise your summary.

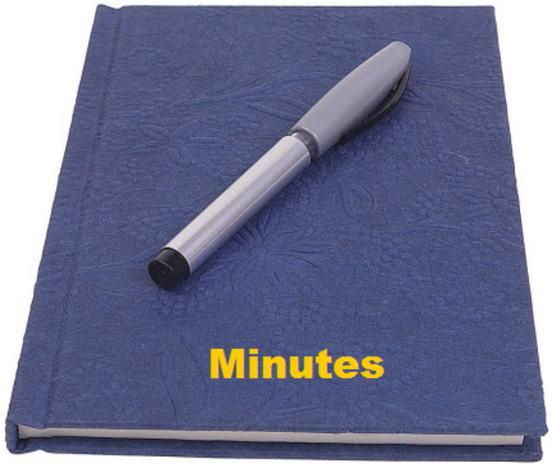
Ask your assistant, or the secretary, to record the final version of the review. Make sure that the conclusion and any required follow-up are spelled out.

Do not waste the group's time by allowing ongoing discussion of suggestions for action which are not within the power of the meeting to promote or take action on.

Some people may be involved with only one or two of the items on your agenda. Where possible, they may want to leave after those items are dealt with so that they can get back to their regular work. Let them do so where possible.

You might be able to help them further when you originally contact them about the meeting by giving them the approximate time when those will be discussed so they can reduce their time at the meeting.

Keeping a record - the Minutes



There are specific rules which secretaries and other office holders of incorporated bodies need to follow during their meetings.

The suggestions in this book are intended to help less experienced readers who are involved with meetings of community, sporting or work groups where recording and use of the minutes are also very important but not subject to official regulation.

The minutes are a vital record of everything which occurs in relation to the running of the organization.

A summary of the minutes from each meeting should be sent to each attendee as soon as possible after the meeting. This will give the people concerned a reminder about what was discussed and decided and who is responsible for any subsequent action or other follow-up.

The summary also makes it easier for anyone to give feedback about the meeting and the contents of the summary which can be considered before the next meeting.

Get a copy of the agenda from the organizer before the meeting starts. Check if there have been any amendments since the agenda was circulated to those attending.

Record the names of those present, including any special guests, as well as apologies from people who could not get to the meeting.

The Chairperson will ask for “any other items” and there may be other topics offered from the floor during the meeting. All these should be put on a separate list.

You will need to show this to the Chairperson so that they can introduce some or all of the items during the meeting, according to their importance and the amount of time available.

Timekeeping

The secretary or person recording the minutes may also be timekeeping in some of these groups.

The group will be told by the Chairperson or the timekeeper how much time will be allowed for each person to speak about a topic.

They will demonstrate the signal which will be used to let the current speaker know when there is just one minute of their time left. This may be a small bell, buzzer, colored light or just a raised hand.

The same signal is often used a second time to signal when they should finish.

Use a stop-watch or other reliable device to see and record the time when each topic or section of the agenda begins and finishes.

Record the time the meeting finishes.

Example of Minutes

This example of a set of minutes will need to be adapted for your particular group. You might need less or more detail according to the rules set by your organization.

………………………………… **[Organization]**

………………………………… **[Department or Committee]**

Minutes of Meeting **[DATE]**

Present

………………………………… **Chair**

………………………………… **Secretary**

………………………………… **[Other Office Holders]**

………………………………… **[Other Group Members]**

………………………………… **[Guests]**

All items from this point are numbered and each sub-topic is given a decimal number:

Example:

4 Proposed Picnic Saturday October 5th 2009

4.1 Report from Sub-Committee

5 Visit to Fartown Branch Office

1) Apologies

Apologies received before the meeting and those offered from the floor are recorded here.

2) Minutes from Previous Meeting

The Chair will move for someone to move that they be accepted.

Proposer ……………………………………..

Seconder ……………………………………..

Minutes Accepted ……………….. [**Signed by Chair**]

3) Action reports

3) Matters Arising (if any)

3.1) Action Reports

The Chair asks each person that was given responsibility for any action arising from an item which was discussed at the previous meeting to give a brief summary of their progress. I suggest that discussion of these matters should be delayed until all the reports are given.

Then, each matter can be discussed with the focus on the topic and not just the results achieved by the person who had to follow up.

Then, the Chair will ask for members to raise any other matters which were discussed at the previous meeting where there may have been developments.

List all the items here with the details of the discussion, including the names of people who spoke linked to a summary of the points they made.

4) Agenda Item #1

The name of the person who submitted each Agenda Item is recorded under the title of the item.

Then, a summary of their points and contributions from other people are listed with each person's name.

Each item should show whether the item was resolved or deferred. Any action which is decided on by the group should be listed with the details of the person who is responsible for doing it.

5) Agenda Item #2

5.1) Agenda Item #2 sub-topic

6) Reports from Secretary

7) Reports from Treasurer

Any Reports from other Office Holders follow the two above.

6) Any Other Business

Items not on the agenda can be raised here. Usually, they will have been mentioned to either the Chair, Organizer or Secretary before the start of the meeting to try to ensure that enough time is left for them.

7) Details of Next meeting and any other Notices.

After this, the secretary records the time and date the meeting closed.

…………………………….. **Chair**

……………………….. **(Time and Date)**

Encourage Wide Participation

Apart from the time which people feel is wasted with many meetings, the main concern which I hear about is the feeling that their input is not valued or even that they are not able to put their point of view.

It's natural for some people to try to monopolize any discussion which they take a part in. This can make other people in the group uncomfortable but they will often be reluctant to interrupt when someone else is talking.

That's why you need to politely but firmly end the dominating person's talk and ask if anyone else wants to have their say about that point.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a method of producing ideas on a given subject without filtering or criticism. It is a proven way to encourage wide participation and it could also produce some great ideas which a standard form of discussion about an issue won't.

It's usually most successful with a group of no more than ten people who have a common goal.

Apart from the need to allow each person to express their ideas without criticism or any kind of negativity, the other important factor is to have a fairly brief time for this free-thinking generation of ideas.

The maximum time should be about five minutes to force people to push their ideas out quickly without pre-editing or judging them.

Someone must be writing the ideas onto large sheets of paper or a very large whiteboard. They need to have a number of pens in an assortment of colors.

Give each idea some space so that additions can be made during this section and the evaluation which follows.

You may need to stop someone who is taking too much of the time available because it is important that everyone gets their turn. This makes it more certain that they will continue to contribute to the evaluation and support later implementation of the ideas which the group agree to move forward with.

The evaluation process needs to be equally constructive and without heat. Try to have the group pick no more than five suggestions to take further.

The other ideas can be filed for later review, perhaps as idea starters for more brainstorming sessions.

Then, you can raise the ideas at the next formal meeting while making due acknowledgement to all those who were involved in the brainstorming session.

Mind Mapping

This method of expanding and connecting ideas was popularized by Tony Buzan.

It is useful for groups but is also used by many people for developing their own ideas and strategies.

You start with a large blank sheet of paper, some colored markers and a core idea.

Write the idea in the center of the page. Expand on the idea by writing an extension of the central thought near to the center and connected to it by a line.

Each idea or phrase which that triggers is added to the sheet.

Each of the subsequent points are connected to the previous entry which seems most closely related to it.

This sounds tricky but it's not, because the focus is not how well you draw the chart, it's the new ideas which the connections generate from the group.

You can get free mind mapping software for computers using Windows, Linux and Macintosh OS X from **freemind.sourceforge.net/**

Concluding the Meeting

Give people a chance to raise other issues and suggestions late in the meeting ("Any Other Business?").

Do a quick check through the agenda and any notes about extra items which were just introduced at the meeting to ensure that they have been resolved or that a plan of action has been agreed which will move each item forward.

Give someone the responsibility for the action required on each point and arrange for them to report by a specified time on their results to all stakeholders.

Ask for feedback from all those who participated just before the end of the meeting about what worked, what could be improved and any parts which could need to be reworked or dropped before the next meeting.

This can be in the form of questions about such areas as:

- Usefulness to their needs
- Length of meeting
- Quality of content
- Possible improvements to agenda and other areas
- Venue
- Timing of Meeting
- Length of Meeting
- Problems which need addressing
- Their ability to participate
- Was the membership of the group appropriate?
- Was the group supportive?

If you feel that the meeting fully explored the subject, ask if people genuinely feel there is a need of another meeting or could any follow-up be done in ways that would have less impact on their working day?

Also, welcome feedback in following days from everyone that attended, including suggestions for improvements to meetings, including procedure and scheduling. Many people will not want to give views or suggestions which they feel might upset some of those present at the meeting. All constructive feedback is useful.

Apart from any legal or other formal requirements, try to keep the minutes just to the essential items:

- Items discussed
- Main points and the names of those who raised them
- Actions decided and names of those who have the responsibility to follow through on them
- Contact person for suggested amendments and items for the next meeting
- The time and location for the next meeting if there is to be one.

Nothing Happens Without ACTION

The last important step is to follow up and ensure that action is taken on the discussion and decisions from your meetings.

Sometimes, there may be items that were finalized in the meeting but which it may be valuable to refer back to at a specific later date. Put a note about that item in your reminder file.

Rate the value of the meeting to You

If you invested an hour or more in a meeting and are likely to be taking part in more with the same group and for the same purpose, you should invest a few more minutes after that first meeting in evaluating what the benefits of your involvement for your company and, of course, for yourself.

If you have not been directed to attend a meeting, your first question should be, "Is my participation at this meeting the best use of my time at this point?" When the answer is no, try to arrange to miss the meeting.

If you are required to attend, try to get permission to leave when the items for which you can provide useful input have been dealt with.

When you cannot get out of a meeting where you cannot make anything but a token contribution to, try to use it as a learning experience.

Watch the interaction of the people in the group and how their meeting is run. This can be valuable because you have more time to study the body language, other signals and tactics than you could with a meeting which you are personally more involved with.

Being a Good Participant

After you have been to a meeting, you should think about the contribution you made as well as the benefits, if any, which you believe you will get from that meeting.

Your contribution can be equally important to the success of a meeting even if you do not have a title or any defined duties.

You need to be aware of the topics in the agenda.

You can provide visual feedback for other people in the group when they are talking. You probably don't like people not listening or reacting when you are talking in a business or social situation. That is how those people probably feel when they are talking at your meeting but you don't show any interest or animation.

Get input from other fields: I've found some great suggestions which have improved my working methods by listening carefully to people discussing ideas which they have tested in other areas of the business and even other industries.

The impact has sometimes been all the greater because these tips are not known in my area.

Things to Avoid:

Avoid side-issues which do not relate to the topics.

Avoid negativity, especially about:

- Individuals
- Other people's ideas
- Other people's performance

Do you talk too long or too often?

Do you tend to leave it to the "experts" in the group? If the point being discussed will affect you, your colleagues or customers, then you should make sure that the effects and, especially, any possible negative consequences are known to all concerned with the decision and its implementation.

Some people don't put their point of view about the items discussed and then criticize the decisions which are made.

Don't switch off when someone is replying to a point you made while you focus entirely on preparing your next comment.

If you didn't understand what someone said, ask them to repeat it or perhaps explain it more simply. Very few people could be offended by someone showing genuine interest and a desire to learn more about their suggestion.

Improving Your Presentation

Not many of us want to be a public speaker but the ability to present ourselves to good effect is worth learning.

The cost and effort of learning these skills is minimal, but they can give you more self-confidence and help you with interviews, business meetings and social events.

I've listed some organizations in the resources section at the end of this ebook.

You can also do some self-study though you will find you improve faster when you are in an active and supportive group environment.

One of the best tips I learned for speaking to groups is to never read to them. You should keep your comments brief so they are easy to remember.

Just write them on a card and then glance over the card just before you rise to speak.

Record Yourself

If you have access to an audio recorder or digital camera, I suggest that you ask someone to record you.

The first time I heard my own voice after recording it was a shock. My belief is that we hear our speaking voice through a sort of sound chamber (our head).

That can be quite different to how other people hear us.

After that, I wanted to improve my voice as quickly as I could.

But, maybe your voice is fine.

So, how do you look on video?

You must realize that you won't look quite the same on video as you do really but it will probably be much closer to the image which other people see and react to than the image we carry in our own minds.

Now, you smooth out those ums and ahs which we are probably almost completely unaware that we are doing. That's better for us and those who are listening to us too.

Is it worth doing? I say, "Yes".

It's more effective than a lot of cosmetic surgery because it's still the real you, and costs you nothing. And, you can do it whenever you have some time in your own home!

But, even more important than the effect on ourselves is the effect on other people that we interact with. I'm not suggesting that you adopt any fake mannerisms or postures. I believe video and even audio can be a great help for making our message clearer and easier for other people to understand.

Put that with the extra confidence that we can obtain and the small cost of the equipment is probably a worthwhile investment for just about anyone.

You can also use it to record your kids and your pets and still probably claim it as a business deduction!

I don't know a better way of catching any mannerisms or muddled speech that we are no longer aware that we are doing.

Please don't record over that first attempt too quickly.

Keep the video until you've done some practicing. Then, run the original video and see if you can see any improvement.

That will probably give you more confidence.

Use the equipment you have available to record what you plan to say at your next meeting.

If you see something which you think should be corrected, you will probably decide to try a couple of tweaks, nothing major.

That's the best way, a little at a time. Trying to do too much at once will probably cause the result to be less effective than if you take it more slowly.

Body Language

You have probably heard about Body Language, the study of visual signals which we send and receive and how they affect our interaction with other people.

Although it is far from an exact science, it can be helpful in evaluating what people are telling you.

There are many factors which can affect body language which may have nothing to do with their truthfulness or intent. For example, you will read in most texts about body language that you should interpret someone folding their arms when you are talking to them as a sign of them losing interest or confidence in what you are saying. That may be right, but they may just be cold.

So, you should not just evaluate the message which you get from someone on their body language alone.

It's also worthwhile to check that the visual signals which you are displaying match with the message that you want to give the people you are speaking to.

Many people develop mannerisms which detract from the effectiveness of what they say. Correcting these will improve the results you get in most situations.

But, changing your natural body language or other acquired traits is not something that you can do overnight. It takes time.

Don't try to make more than one change at a time.

These techniques are often used to try to deceive people but most people cannot project false signals consistently. The people they try to bluff are often put off by the lack mixed signals they get.

Eye Contact: This is one of the most important factors in any kind of social or business interaction.

Many people have difficulty maintaining eye contact. It only takes a little effort and you will probably notice a better response from the people you deal with fairly quickly.

You just have to focus more on the person you are listening to. Our society offers many distractions and we may let our attention wander from their face to their clothes or something else completely.

One simple tactic which can help you to focus on what they are saying and also to demonstrate that you are interested in what they say is to use what they say as the basis of your reply. Developing this habit will make you focus more on their words and gestures instead of just focusing on your own thoughts while they are speaking.

Eye contact can, like many other techniques, be overdone especially when you are trying to improve your use of it. No-one wants to be stared at.

Smile: A genuine smile is like a magnet that can draw people toward you. Check your smile in a mirror to ensure that it does not look forced or insincere.

Posture: Our posture may be giving a different message to what we are saying.

Some people want cooperation but show an aggressive stance, by leaning forward or clenching their hands, which indicates they want control.

Some people adopt a defensive or submissive posture, with a bowed head or slumped shoulders, which detracts from their message by suggesting that they perhaps lack confidence in their ability to present their point of view or what they are saying.

Gestures: Thoughtful use of appropriate gestures can re-enforce your points and help people to remember them better.

Some people use irrelevant or inappropriate gestures, or they fiddle with their glasses, pen or other items while they talk. This distracts the people they are talking to from their message.

This can be reduced or eliminated by putting more effort into your preparation so that you can focus on the people you are talking to.

Inexperienced speakers tell me that they don’t know what to do with their hands.

The problem is usually that they may not know their material well enough or they lack confidence in their ability to put their points forward, so their mind focuses on other aspects of their presentation like their hands.

Problems and Remedies

Disruptions

Mobile Phones, etc: There is always the possibility of a true emergency requiring the attention of someone in the group during the meeting.

But, except for those rare occurrences, everyone present owes it to the rest of the group to remain focused on the matters being discussed.

Unless there is a good reason for people to use their lap-tops during the meetings for the benefit of the group, ask them to keep them shut.

Likewise, <u>all</u> mobile phones and other portable communication devices should be silent and, preferably, turned off for the duration. That is the ideal but you'll probably have to deal with that sort of interruption from time to time.

I've found that circulating a notice with the agenda, asking all those who attend to leave their devices with a trusted associate or switch them off while they are in the meeting is often the most you can do unless you own the business.

Inattention: Sometimes you will notice that someone is absorbed in using their device and not taking any active part in the meeting. You might want to ask them their opinion about the topic being discussed. After all, there's no reason for them to be there if they are not ready to contribute to the discussion.

Interrupting other speakers: This has to be firmly but politely discouraged, unless the interruption is to correct an error.

Food: If the meeting is only for an hour or so, there should be no need for refreshments other than water. The lack of coffee and other drinks may encourage people to keep the meeting short and their comments on topic!

Background conversation: This is likely to be on a totally different topic to what the group is trying to focus on, so it is likely to cause irritation as well as making it hard for the other people to hear the person who is presenting their suggestion or comment on the topic.

Ask the speaker to pause for a moment and ask one of the conversationalists to share their idea with the group.

It's a tactic straight from the junior school but it works. And, these people are not acting like adults, are they?

Faulty Equipment: Have a contingency plan, but ensure that all presentation materials from projectors to marking pens are checked immediately before the meeting.

Responding to Comments

Negative comments: Some people delight in talking down other people's contributions. They're often too busy working out something to say that they don't have time to contribute much that's positive to the discussion. So, you might ask them directly, "How would you deal with this situation/problem/need?"

Off-topic comments: These are unproductive and time wasting. Thank the person for their contribution and perhaps add something like, "Do you have any suggestions about *the topic*?"

Repetitive comment: When someone meanders on with their suggestion without adding any further useful material, thank them for their contribution. Then focus on another speaker. Be polite but firm, so that you can keep the meeting within a reasonable time frame.

Revisiting previous topics: If someone tries to bring up a topic which has already been discussed, politely remind them of the earlier discussion but also suggest that they raise the matter in the "further business" section near the end of the meeting if they have new points which they want to put to the group.

Confusing contribution: Sometimes, someone offers a suggestion but is not able to express it clearly. The Chair should offer what they understand to be the suggestion. That should help the person gather their thoughts and express their view more clearly.

Being helpful in that way will encourage the person to contribute more in the future and probably get their enthusiastic support for implementing any decisions made by the group.

Asking Questions the Right Way

Asking questions is one of those things we do almost every day, so most of us take it for granted that we do it well.

But, many people don't get the answers they need.

Improving the quality of our questions will get better results and make the people we ask or advice and information more responsive.

Open and Closed Questions

You probably know the difference between open and closed questions;

a closed question only needs a short, specific answer such as yes or no.

An open question gives the person you are asking an opportunity to provide a detailed answer which can lead to more information being provided and further discussion.

Each type of question is most likely to be much more helpful to you in some circumstances:

Use closed questions to:

- Keep answers from garrulous people short and on topic
- Get confirmation of specific points without possibly confusing detail or side issues such as opinions and theories.

Closed questions tend to end any discussion of that particular point because they do not encourage the other person to say anything which will invite further responses from you or other people in the group.

Use open questions to:

- Encourage people to participate in the discussion and add any relevant material which they have
- Broaden the discussion of the topic to ensure all that all important points are covered
- Bring more people into the discussion

Pointed Questions

Pointed or leading questions are stock in trade for lawyers.

They can be helpful but you need to be careful when using them.

Some ways to use pointed questions include:

a) Assume that your preferred answer is what the other person will say. "Will we order the green trolleys?" is more likely to get a decision and avoid prolonged discussion than, "which trolleys will we order?"

b) Add a question to a statement of your opinion. This might be something like, "The Roosters are a great team, don't you think?"

When used carefully, pointed questions can help you to control the discussion and increase the possibility of getting the results you want. They also can reduce the length of time taken to reach a conclusion on that particular point.

Follow-up questions

Be ready to ask for more specific details about any answer you get.

When someone answers your first question, they may mention something which suggests that they have further relevant information.

There may be times when you use follow-up questions to try to get information which the other person seems unwilling to provide.

Always be considerate of the other person and keep a professional attitude. Where appropriate, compliment them on the work they have done and their clear explanations.

Put your questions on the basis that you, or other people who are involved, do not have that person’s deep knowledge of the particular subject and you would appreciate more detail so everyone is able to understand the whole discussion.

Best and Worst Questions

The worst questions are those which are focused on getting some benefit for us and don’t offer anything to the person we are asking.

The best questions are those which are focused on getting some benefit for us but also offer something to the person we are asking.

A lot of large fortunes were based on the idea of providing services to other people.

All of us are tuned to Radio Station WIIFM, “What’s In It For ME” so we are likely to react a lot better when someone is showing interest in supplying what we want, even when they want us to pay something for that.

Better Listening

Practicing good questions will be of little value unless you also listen carefully to the answers and respond appropriately.

Hearing, like talking, is something that most of us can do well enough to get by from an early age.

Listening is something we *think* we're naturally good at too. But, hearing is an ability we are given, listening is something we have to learn to do well.

The effort is worth it because people really appreciate someone that makes better communication easier for them.

Try these tips to improve your listening and you could improve your social and business success as well.

- ✓ Maintain eye contact with the speaker. Don't look over their shoulder at someone else.
- ✓ Don't focus on what you're going to say next. If you seem disinterested, they may not stay around to find out what that is.
- ✓ Don't interrupt (your grandmother was right about that!)
- ✓ Show interest by leaning *slightly* toward the speaker.
- ✓ Give visual feedback; a slight nod or a genuine smile.

If your smiles are not getting good responses, check them in the mirror – many professional performers put as much effort into practicing their smiles as they do their scripts.

Some factors which may reduce your ability to listen well include:

- Your own preconceptions about the speaker or the topic.
- Your state of health
- Noise
- Weather conditions
- Low attention focus

The most important trait is to be yourself and don’t just assume a posture to try to impress someone or a group.

Meetings Out Of Your Office

Everyone likes to get away from the office or workshop routine sometimes. If you can't get a holiday, the next best thing might be a couple of hours at a local restaurant or a few days at a hotel in another city or even another country.

The first thing to remember about these trips, whether across a road or an ocean, is that you're still representing your company the whole time you are with your colleagues.

Networking events, Seminars, Power lunches; they're all business events and you're likely to be seen as either promoting your brand or downgrading it.

Most of these events are focused on business but they're no place for a hard-sell.

Practice an elevator-style introduction for yourself and what you do; that's about thirty-five to fifty words which are interesting to the person listening even if they've never heard of an agrarian consultant before. The elevator refers to the original concept that you prepare an introduction which you could tell someone (only after they asked) who you are and what you do while you were both in a fast elevator between floors.

If you are at a stand-up function like a networking event or buffet, do what the organizers want you to - circulate.

Don't set yourself up next to the food; it will come to you anyway as you move around, the waiting staff will find you.

If you get into a line at the buffet, do some gentle networking.

Try to meet some interesting people in various parts of the room. The people you really connect with could help you more than a couple of tired canapés ever could.

Give the people you meet equal time to introduce themselves and their business to you. Be selective about who you give your business card to. You want people that will keep it and use it. That might just be one person at some events and twenty or more at others. But, not everyone needs an agrarian consultant, really.

After the Meeting

Perform your own Post Mortem

After each meeting, review the results. If the meeting did not achieve the goals that were set in the agenda, recognize that it was a failure and try to draw lessons about how to avoid that happening again.

Pay attention to the length of time which various parts of the meeting agenda took to complete.

You can check, while your memory of the meeting is fairly fresh, whether there were particular one-off reasons why something took more time than you expected.

Maybe you could:

- Allow more time for similar items in future
- Keep a tighter rein on people that often go over their allotted time
- Reduce the number of items for each meeting.

Encourage feedback from participants, even if it is not favorable. Ask that all feedback be put in writing. Then, follow it up with the writer and thank them for their suggestions.

Resources

Training

Whether or not you ever expect to have to organize or run a meeting, you can expect to be involved in some through your work or social and sporting activities.

The benefits of your participation will be limited if you are not comfortable putting forward your point of view in lively discussions where some of the people with different views can sometimes be a bit overpowering.

I believe, from my own experience, that it is worthwhile for almost anyone to get some training in how to present themselves and their views.

Public Speaking is almost as feared by many people as a trip to their dentist. But, this fear can be relieved in a painless and fairly inexpensive way through clubs like those I've mentioned below or through classes at local colleges or Adult Learning Courses.

This can have great benefits for your self-confidence, social skills and help with your career as well.

The clubs offer other benefits including social and public service activities.

Toastmasters **http://www.toastmasters.org/**

Jaycees

Jaycees International, **http://www.jci.cc/** (18 to 40)

United States Junior Chamber, **http://www.usjaycees.org/** (18 to 40)

Australian Rostrum, **http://www.rostrum.com.au/**

Dale Carnegie Training is a professional training organization founded in 1912. **http://www.dalecarnegie.com/**

Procedural Guides for Meetings

"Robert's Rules of Order" by General Henry M. Robert

The current edition of this American classic is "***Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised"*** *10th edition "**The*** book on parliamentary procedure for parliamentarians and novice club presidents alike".

There are many other books with similar titles, many of which are apparently based on earlier editions of "Robert's Rules of Order" that are now out of copyright and out of date. I don't know if any are as useful as the updated original which is widely used.

"**Guide for Meetings and Organisations**" by Nicholas Edwin Renton

The 8th edition of this Australian classic text is two volumes instead of one like the original edition in 1961. The first volume is a Guide for Voluntary Associations. Volume 2 is the Guide for all kinds of meetings.

http://users.bigpond.net.au/renton is the author's very interesting web site.

http://users.bigpond.net.au/renton/gmo8.htm has details of the above books.

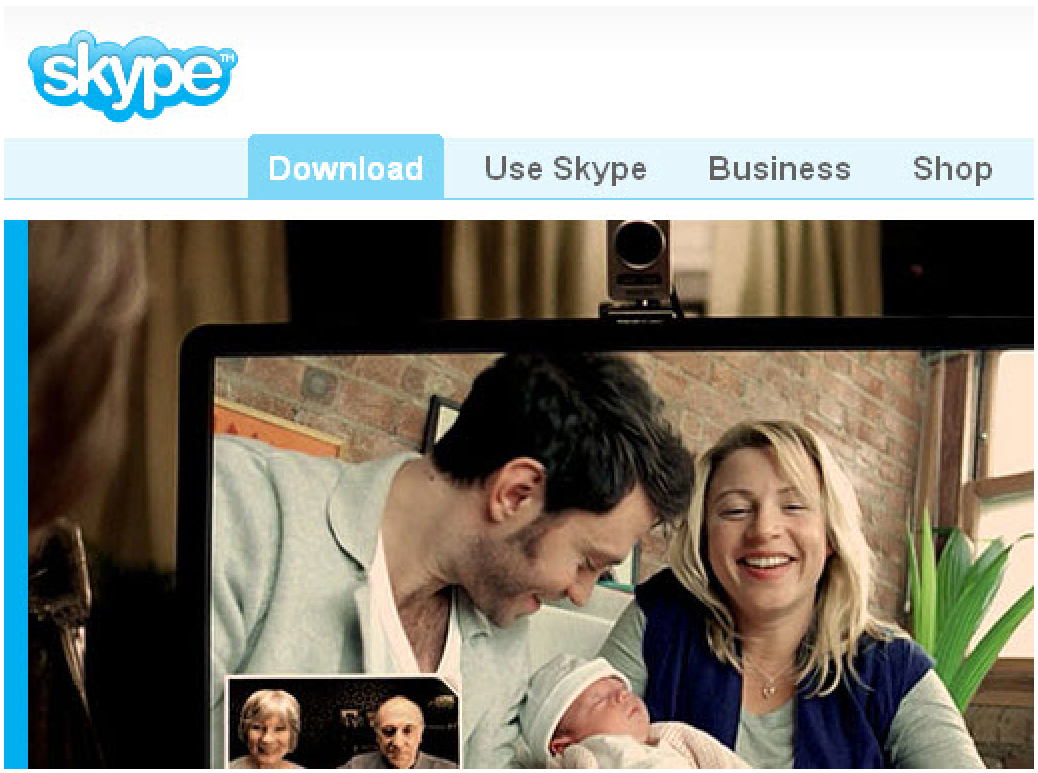
Video and Teleconferencing

I admit that I've only attended a couple of these at this point but I have sought opinions from more experienced people so that I can at least give you some basic pointers.

The first point that draws your accountant's attention is that there is a possibility of large savings by using Internet based conference software and services over the usual practice of bringing staff members and guest speakers, if any, from various parts of the country or even the world.

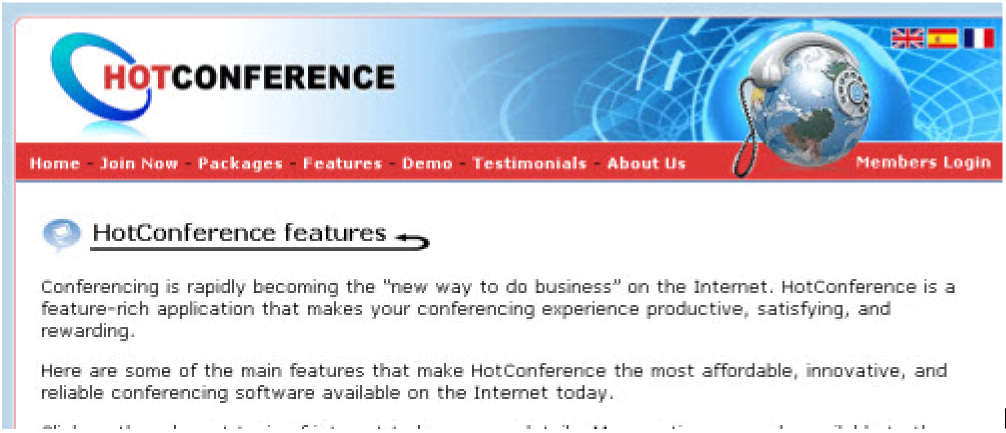
Setting up a video conference or teleconference through the Internet is fairly easy and there are options at various cost levels.

One of the simplest is a conference call through a VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) phone service like **Skype**.



This just gives you voice but is much cheaper and more convenient than using regular telephone services.

For video conferencing, there are many providers and levels of sophistication.



Hot Conference **http://www.hotconference.com/** offers a couple of different packages at what seems a reasonable cost where up to 500 people can interact in each virtual room. Note, this is only suitable for conferencing, it isn't a complete virtual reality setup.

You can brand the rooms you have with your company details.

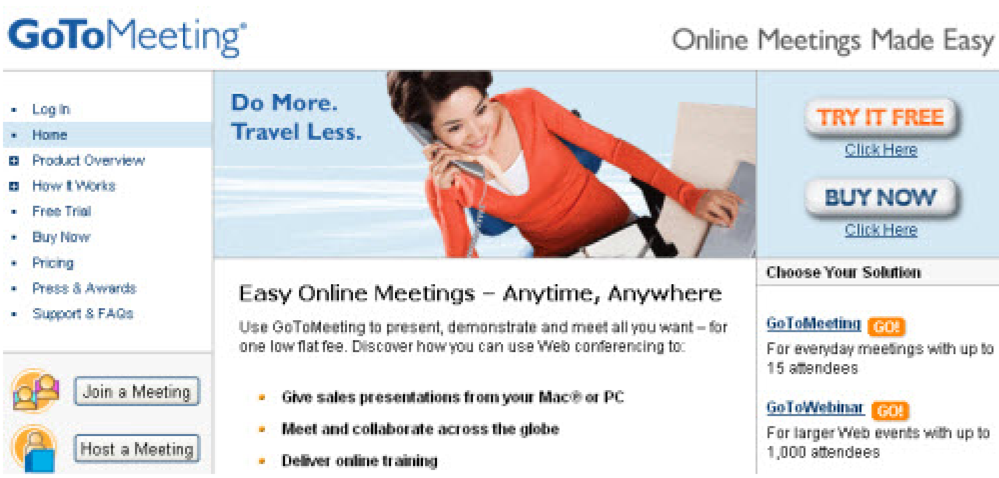
The company sell the service on a monthly basis directly and through independent distributors. All details are on their web site.

CiscoTel Presence

http://www.cisco.com/en/US/netsol/ns669/networking_solutions_solution_segment_home.html

Webex **http://www.webex.com/** is also owned by Cisco Systems and available internationally.

GotoMeeting **http://www.gotomeeting.com** is another service with a good reputation.



Running Your Video Conference or Teleconference

Here are a few suggestions for setting up and running your first online conference.

Make contact with all the participants well before the conference and ensure that they are familiar with the requirements for the session.

A VOIP service like Skype only requires that each participant has subscribed to the particular service so they can take advantage of the low VOIP call rates, has a working Internet connection and a head-set which includes a microphone and earphones.

The headset should be rated for VOIP use – I use a Logitech® ClearChat™ Comfort headset with good results. The label says that it is suitable for use with voice-recognition software, so you might look for a product with that sort of qualification if you can't find one you like which is recommended for VOIP telephony.

Do not use external speakers connected to your computer for these calls.

Users need to check their volume levels when they first comment on the conference.

For full use of a video conferencing setup, the users need a webcam connected to their computer as well. But, it's optional so you can use the service without one.

The organizer and the chairperson should study the instructions some time before the conference and consult the supplier about any technical questions.

Some services provide a technical support person to do some hand-holding for at least part of the first conference or a number where prompt support is available.

A very important consideration is to tell the group which time zone the conference is originating from so that they can confirm they will be available at the appropriate time in their location. Confirm with all people involved that they have checked this.

Each person will probably have to download and install some software to make the conference work.

They may have to check that the software is compatible with their computer firewall and security software.

Anyone that is using a webcam needs to check that the focus is correct and they are happy with the image which can be seen on the Internet. They will probably get best results with reasonably dark clothing and by making sure that their face is well lighted.

Check the background is not distracting. Try to almost fill the lens with the person’s face.

If anyone is joining the conference from their home, make sure there will not be interruptions from children, pets or lawnmowers, etc.

Everyone should keep any extra noise to a minimum – rustling papers or the like can be loud enough to be a distraction because people are focused more than in most face-to-face situations listening to everything.

Even work-related chatter can be off-putting, especially for people in other offices who have little interest in your day-to-day tasks.

Get each person to email the organizer with confirmation that they have the number or web address needed to connect to the Internet conference. Some services provide connection through your phone or through the Internet.

Understand that there could be some mistakes or problems with the first conference. My experience is that the benefits can be great, though some services will be a better fit with some people and not others.

I would not try to run a first conference of more than an hour.

If you were considering using people in different locations to manage different conferences, you might set up the first conference between them and use it to audition them as well as help them to become familiar with the systems.

Even if your group all have the software program installed before the conference day (or night), ask them to check in about ten minutes before the conference is due to begin. This helps to ensure that any problems caused by last-minute technical difficulties are kept to a minimum.

The Chair and the organizer should make themselves familiar with the most common problems which might occur and have a list of suggested solutions which has been checked by the provider, so that they don’t have to call in the support person for something which might be fixed by simply having someone resetting their computer, for instance.

The Chair should welcome everyone and do a roll-call at the beginning of the conference. Get people to indicate their presence with a click rather than typing in their Hello to save time.

If there is time, the Chair could ask for one person from each location to tell the other attendees something about what they do.

The Chair will normally mute everyone else while someone is talking. I wish we could do that in regular conferences too!

The Chair could give some general tips about using the service and how to best participate in the conference, then go to the regular agenda.

It’s important to give each person a few extra seconds to start speaking, especially when it is their first conference of this type.

All participants should mute their own microphone when it is not their turn to speak. With some services, this can be done by clicking an icon (small picture) on their computer screen.

The Chair or an assistant should check whether everyone is being given reasonable opportunity to speak. Some people will naturally remain quiet unless prompted and you could find you have to remind some that there are other people that want to talk.

Each speaker should give their name and department or other relevant information when they start to make a comment.

Using a web cam requires practice – don’t use a new camera for the first time when your boss is watching you!

A Word from Pete Harmon

I hope my ebook has given you some ideas and resources for improving the results which you get from all your future meetings.

Remember that the most important ingredients in the whole process are enthusiastic, committed people and the actions that we take to improve our companies, community groups and the world around us.

Knowing how to make our meetings shorter and more productive empowers us by giving us more opportunities to improve our business achievements and to have more time with our friends and family.

I wish you great success in all your endeavors,

Pete Harmon

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