Conducting an effective business style meeting

A business meeting is a gathering of people and resources for the purpose of advancing items in an agenda. This could be for a myriad of reasons, but the primary reason is to facilitate communication and interaction among multiple parties. An effective business meeting should not be a unilateral dissemination of knowledge, an update between two people, or without specific goal. Business meetings are effective tools for collaboration, decision making, and most importantly cross functional brainstorming or problem solving.

There are multiple mediums for conducting a business meeting with today's technology; however, the steps outlined below are for the traditional in person meeting with editorials on how to adjust if the meeting is conducted via voice or video.

A. Deciding to call a meeting.
   a. First thing to considered when deciding that it is time to have a meeting is the necessity. These questions should be asked before an agenda is ever put together.
      i. What are my goals out of a meeting and are they best resolved through a meeting of a group?
      ii. Should this be a one on one conversation instead?
      iii. Who should be involved and can I justify taking them away from their tasks?
   b. Who should attend?
      i. Once you have decided that you do need to meet with a group of people over a set of topics decide who needs to attend.
      ii. Effective meetings contain input from everyone in the meeting so unless this is an annual update try to manage a size where everyone can be encouraged to participate.
      iii. All parties invested in the decision should be present.

Note: Determining when not to hold a meeting is considered one of the most important skills in today’s the meeting centric environment.

B. Setting an agenda
   a. Design the agenda so that participants get engaged early.
   b. The agenda be distributed along with any other material before the meeting, usually 2 days in advance to allow participants to read the information
   c. In the agenda, state the overall outcome that you want from the meeting
   d. Leave at least 10 minutes open on the agenda to compensate for presenters that go over the allotted time.
The agenda should be created in collaboration with key members in the meeting.
Create advanced assignments to ensure that participants can critically and actively engage.
One effective agenda planning strategy is the bell shaped agenda its outline and explanation can be found in Appendix 1.

Note: Developing an agenda and determining if a meeting must be held are the two most critical steps in executing an effective meeting.

C. Location
   a. Determine if this needs to be an in person meeting or via other mediums.
   b. If this is in person, understand that the layout of the room sets the mood for the meeting.
      i. A circular table promotes democracy
      ii. A rectangular table promotes a leadership role
      iii. Rows of tables promotes a presentation or information session more than a meeting

Note: 7% of communication is spoken, 38% is made up of tone and the remaining 55% is body language. So by eliminating a visual component more than half of communication is lost.

Once the meeting starts

D. Timing
   a. Always start on time; this respects those who showed up on time and reminds late-comers that the scheduling is serious.
   b. Schedule a 5 minute welcome and attendance can be captured during this time.
   c. ALWAYS END THE MEETING ON TIME. You will lose respect of all attendance as well as their attention if you do not.
   d. For meetings that involve other countries or time zones check to make sure those times are appropriate.

E. Ground rules of a meeting
   a. Stick to the agenda
   b. Everyone participates actively, silence means acceptance.
      i. If computers/cell phones are not required, ask that they be put away.
   c. Have a designated recorder to take notes.
   d. Participants engage in active listening, different opinions are welcomed and foster wiser group decisions.
   e. Once a decision is made, unite in the communication of the decision throughout our site/functional areas.
   f. Show willingness to reach consensus on decision issues.
F. Wrapping up a meeting
   a. After finishing the meeting on schedule there are three steps to follow.
      i. Distribute meeting minutes as soon as possible.
      ii. All actionable items need to be distributed separately to the correct participates, i.e. Sarah need to look into a venue for Saturday, should be distributed to Sarah.
      iii. Follow up. This is probably the most important of the three because if momentum isn’t carried through to completion, it could lead to another meeting which at that point is wasting other’s time.

G. International considerations-
   a. Cultural aspects must be taken into consideration, for example if it is customary to take a smoke break after 45 minutes, then be sure to learn the culture and take that into account.
   b. Language, make sure that you are effectively communicating to all participants in both written and verbal aspects in a medium which everyone is comfortable. (use interpreters if necessary)
   c. Local holidays / timings, different countries or regions may have holidays or customs like prayer which will interfere with your meeting. It is your responsibility to check for these things before you schedule a meeting.

Helpful tips about meetings.

Remember a meeting should end with actionable items.

Don’t over schedule; if everyone always has meetings scheduled then they will never have a chance to do the work they are given from meetings. A way to avoid this would be have a protected time where everyone knows they will be able to work.

A trick to help ending a meeting on time is having it before lunch or the end of the day.

Evaluation.

There are many methods to determining how effective your meeting went, including formal and informal surveys and talking with those who attended the meeting or simply observing how often goals at the meetings were effectively covered. In Appendix 2 is a standard scale that can be used to evaluate how effective your meetings are and where are opportunities for improvement. Things to look at after your finished with a meeting are; was my timing correct, were all participants constructively engaged, were critical issues addressed, do team members complain about meetings, are discussions cut short due to poor time management and are the meetings productive in meeting the goals. These are simple questions that you should be able to answer and self-evaluate the effectiveness of your meeting.
Uses for a meeting

Remember meetings can be used for collaboration, decision making, and most importantly cross functional brainstorming or problem solving. They are critical in projects that require multiple parties, and will be used, either formally or informally, throughout our practicum and culminating experience.
Appendix 1.

The Bell Shaped Agenda is a structure for organizing one's agenda. It is to encourage participation and have a more positive atmosphere. The philosophy is similar to that of management start and end with positive points and have the more difficult tasks sandwiched in the middle. An outline of this agenda is below.

Item 1. Welcome

    Introduction

Item 2. Announcements (this is supposed to be short and non-controversial)

    i.e. Upcoming Events, significant achievements made since the last meeting

Item 3. An easy topic item

    The purpose of this item is to be an ice breaker for the group, this should end on a positive note

Item 4. The hardest item of the topic

    This item is in the middle for a few reasons. The first is that this should be closer to the middle of the meeting and the meeting should have full attendance. Second by being in the middle of the meeting it allows the group to spend the bulk of their time on the hardest and possibly most important item. Third there is little risk of having the meeting end with this item unfinished as there are items still left on the agenda.

Item 5. Perhaps a Discussion only question.

    This is the educational equivalent of planting a seed question which allows the group to ruminate on it and then come back to this at another time.

Item 6. Easiest Item

    This should be an item should provide agreement among a group that might have been torn on items 4 and 5. It will also end the meeting with a positive tone.
Appendix 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Disagree a little</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Goals of the meeting were clear</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2. Group members were prepared</td>
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<td>3. All group members contributed effectively</td>
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<td>4. Leadership was effective</td>
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<td>5. Time was used effectively</td>
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<td>6. Group accomplished goals</td>
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<td>7. Next steps/activities are clear</td>
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Sources


