

## Guidelines for Productive Meetings

Although individual team members perform assignments between team meetings, much of the team's work gets done when all team members are together during meetings. Many people dislike meetings; however, productive meetings enhance the chance of having a successful project. Just like other processes, meetings can be studied and constantly improved.

It is difficult to have productive meetings because few people know the rules and skills needed for such meetings. In fact, the goal of having constantly improved meetings may be as hard for the team to reach as the improvement goals set for the project. The best way to have productive meetings is to follow the guidelines given below from the start of the project when the members expect to learn new ways of working together.

### 1. Use agendas

Each meeting must have an agenda, preferably one drafted at the previous meeting and developed in detail by one or two members prior to the actual meeting. It should be sent to participants in advance, if possible. (If an agenda has not been developed before a meeting, spend the first five or ten minutes writing one.)

Agendas should include the following information:

- ✓ The agenda topics (including, perhaps, a sentence or two that defines each item and why it is being discussed), presented in a logical order so that items that need to be decided first are addressed first..
- ✓ The process to be used in coming to a decision (e.g., brainstorming, affinity process, multi-voting, etc.) and not simply state "discuss. . ."
- ✓ The presenters (usually the person who originated each item or the person most responsible or knowledgeable about it).
- ✓ A time guideline (the estimated time in minutes needed to discuss each item).
- ✓ The item types (does each item require discussion or decision, or is just an announcement).

Agendas usually list the following activities:

- ✓ Warm-ups: short (five- to ten-minute) activities used to free people's minds from the outside world and get them focused on the meeting.
- ✓ A quick review of the agenda: start each meeting by going over the agenda, adding or deleting items, and modifying time estimates.
- ✓ Breaks for long meetings: if the meeting lasts more than two hours, schedule at least one short break.
- ✓ Meeting evaluation: this is perhaps the most important item on the agenda.

Although some of these elements may be unfamiliar, we encourage team leaders to introduce them at the first meeting and include them in all subsequent meetings. Team members will probably feel awkward at the first meeting anyway, and a new activity will not add much to that awkwardness. As members become more comfortable with the group, they will feel less self-conscious about these activities.

## 2. Have a facilitator

Each meeting should have a facilitator who is responsible for keeping the meeting focused and moving. Ordinarily, this role is appropriate for the team facilitator; however, your team may rotate the responsibility among its members.

Among the facilitator's chief responsibilities are:

- ✓ encourage compliance with the team norms;
- ✓ keep the discussion focused on the topic and moving along;
- ✓ intervene if the discussion fragments into multiple conversations;
- ✓ tactfully prevent anyone from dominating or being overlooked;
- ✓ bring discussions to a close.

The facilitator should also notify the group when the time allotted for an agenda item has expired or is about to expire. The team then decides whether to continue discussion at the expense of other agenda items or postpone further discussion until another meeting.

## 3. Take minutes

At each meeting one team member should record key subjects and main points raised, decisions made (including who has agreed to do what and by when), and items that the team has agreed to raise again later in this meeting or at a future meeting. Team members can refer to these minutes to reconstruct discussions, remind themselves of decisions made or actions that need to be taken, or to see what happened at a meeting they missed. **Rotate this duty among the team members.**

## 4. Draft next agenda

At the end of the meeting, draft an agenda for the next meeting.

## 5. Evaluate the meeting

Always review and evaluate each meeting, even if other agenda items go overtime. The evaluation should include decisions on what will be done to improve the meeting next time and helpful feedback to the team leader. You may want to experiment with mid-meeting evaluations.

## 6. Adhere to the "100-mile rule"

Once a meeting begins, everyone is expected to give it their full attention. No one should be called from the meeting unless it is so important that the disruption would occur even if the meeting was 100 miles away from the workplace. The "100-mile rule" will need to be communicated--perhaps repeatedly--to those who keep taking phone messages or would interrupt the team's work for other reasons.

## ***Summary: The Structure of an Effective Meeting***

### ***Have a Detailed AGENDA***

- ✓ Issued in advance of meeting
- ✓ Preassigned meeting roles
- ✓ Agenda topics
  1. A sentence or two defining the item including a clearly articulated objective
  2. In logical order of action
- ✓ Presenters, Resources Required, Assignments, etc.
- ✓ Time guideline

### ***Use Quality Tools***

- ✓ Appropriate tool for the task at hand
- ✓ Team trained in use of tool

### ***Perform a Post-meeting evaluation (Process Check)***

#### ***Comply with Team Norms***

- ✓ Is everyone participating?
- ✓ Is no one dominating?
- ✓ Are team roles being followed?
- ✓ Is the team staying on task?
- ✓ Is the team reaching consensus?
- ✓ Are team members coming prepared to work?
- ✓ Are team members arriving on time?
- ✓ Do the team members understand the decision tools being used?

#### ***Continually Check the Team's Effectiveness***

- ✓ Are we doing the right things?
- ✓ Are we asking the right questions?
- ✓ Are we tackling the right problems?

#### ***Continually Check the Team's Efficiency***

- ✓ Are we taking unnecessary steps?
- ✓ Are we reinventing the wheel?
- ✓ Are we spinning our wheels?
- ✓ Are we looking for process-related problems?
- ✓ Are we using appropriate quality tools?
- ✓ Are we straying from the agenda?