



KING FAHD UNIVERSITY OF PETROLEUM & MINERALS

# PERSONAL SKILLS PROGRAM

**MAKING YOUR  
MEETING A SUCCESS  
RATHER THAN  
A MESS**



Business meetings have a bad reputation, and most managers would agree.

This distaste for meetings, however, can be turned into a genuine appreciation for this effective and potentially productive business communication tool that can be used to:

- give and collect information
- solve problems
- make decisions

They help to accomplish many other useful business activities in your company as well. Exploiting this tool does take some understanding of how to organize your meeting and make it a success, rather than a mess.

Here are 10 tips to help managers and supervisors focus on the dynamics of the meeting process and to meet goals as the meeting leader. Please note, too, that attendees can follow the path to success by being aware of these tips and supporting the meeting leader to reach the meeting's goals.

### 1. KNOW YOUR OBJECTIVE.

Don't just "have a meeting." Instead, follow the basic principle of all communication, which is Know Your Objective. For this skill, that means you must know WHY you want to gather your employees and HOW you will organize your meeting to achieve goals and objectives. These should be stated at the beginning of the meeting (and in the memo/agenda -- see point # 3).

You can choose different formats such as a presentation in front of the room, a roundtable discussion, a small and informal group, or a combination of these.

Regardless of the format, though, you must clearly focus on the goals you want to achieve, and the tasks necessary to reach them. Ask yourself, for example, "What are the root causes of the problems that need to be solved? What are the important facts I need to give to employees or to collect from them? What is the best way to decide on the solutions?"

If you follow this advice, then you will realize that planning is vitally important. You will also realize that this "pre-meeting" work will save you time -- and money -- during the meeting. (TIP: Remember that every minute you keep your employees in a meeting costs lots of money in salaries and lost productivity -- so you are really "spending time"!)

NOTE: There are basically 3 parts to a meeting: (1) pre-meeting, which is the preparation BEFORE the meeting; (2) meeting, which is the actual time spent DURING the meeting; (3) post-meeting, which is AFTER and includes the follow up.



## 2. CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE PEOPLE AND PLACE

Depending on the problem to be solved or goal you have decided upon, you must choose the proper personnel to attend the meeting. For example, if you want to collect information, call in the one who has all the facts; or, should you require innovation, call in the one with all the ideas.

Overall, remember to include those people whom you can use as resources of expertise or information. Avoid calling in every member of your department, for instance, just because you are "having a meeting." Only use the people needed, and keep those to a minimum.

Choosing the appropriate place is equally important because the correct atmosphere of the office surroundings and even the arrangement of the table and chairs can help to stimulate ideas, assist in giving or collecting information, and generally can add effectiveness and ease to inter-personal exchanges. Proxemics, or the study of how space and distance affect communications, plays an important role in creating open communication or setting up barriers to it. For example, all the chairs facing each other -- as if in combat with one side against another -- creates a competition barrier; if the same chairs were arranged in a circle, "U"-shape or rectangle, the atmosphere would be the opposite.

## 3. HAVE EVERYTHING READY IN ADVANCE.

Inform the employees invited to attend the meeting with a memo or e-mail with exact information about the:

- Date and time to begin and end
- Location
- Name of meeting leader
- Names of other attendees

**Agenda** -- List of topics (in order and time allotted for each one including the conclusion or summary at the end of the meeting)  
Contact information

Try to get this information to attendees at least a few days before the scheduled meeting.

(TIP: With electronic communication being so useful, but also so overused these days, it may be helpful and very effective to also leave a voicemail for each attendee the day before the meeting if you have scheduled it for the next morning. Or, if your meeting is scheduled in the afternoon, leave a reminder early that same morning.)



#### 4. START AND END ON TIME

It is important to keep to the schedule so that everyone else will respect the time frame that you have set up for the meeting. The agenda with its time limits next to each topic will serve as a guide as you move from topic to topic, and point to point.

Starting on time, regardless of who or how many did not show up at the scheduled beginning, will also help to discourage late-comers for the next meeting.

Ending on time, and keeping to the agenda will motivate everyone by promoting good feelings and lessening boredom and frustration.

#### 5. KEEP TO THE AGENDA -- Good relations; Good time management

Too often, time is wasted by side discussions (what I call "parking lots" off the subject highway) which are off the main topic.

To keep moving in the right direction (on the highway, and not stopping in a parking lot), and to stay on schedule, you can get meeting participants back to the current topic by referring them to the time limit of the agenda. In this way, you will not seem rude because you are not stopping a person and blaming him -- instead you are blaming the shortness of the time and motivating everyone to keep to the schedule. As a result, you have two wins: maintaining good feelings and keeping to the agenda.

#### 6. GIVE ASSIGNMENTS/ACTION ITEMS

Since you have chosen only the appropriate people to attend the meeting, it will be necessary to delegate responsibility to individuals and assign action items (tasks) to others during the meeting, as you discuss each agenda item. These employees must be informed about the details of their assignments/action items, including:

Who is responsible (owners)

What is to be completed (action items)

When it is to be completed (due date)

To make sure that everyone understands your verbal directions, follow up after the meeting with a written memo (or e-mail) with all the details and a list of action items and their "owners."

#### 7. USE AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS AND HANDOUTS

Decide in advance if a list of words or a graph projected on a screen will make points clearer, or think if a handout on paper will help explain the topics/points to be discussed.



Have your equipment ready and test it well before the meeting begins so you will have time to make any changes or repairs -- rather than using up valuable time trying to fix something during the meeting. (TIP: A tactic I have used is to keep an extra projector in the room or at least a new bulb for it ready. If doing this is not possible, then that makes checking ahead of time even more important.)

Remember the old saying, because it's true: "A picture is worth a thousand words." That means an important point of yours can be even more effective if you have the proper visual to support it, such as a pie chart, line graph, table of numbers or a flow chart.

Handouts can also be effective. However, they must be distributed at the proper time.

### **Caution on handouts:**

Distribute handouts at the time when you are going to speak about the information on them. Otherwise, if you distribute them too soon, people will be looking at the pages -- and other topics -- and not listening to what you are explaining at that time. If you distribute them too late, the information they need will not be available at the right time while you are speaking.

The best scenario when using handouts is: when it is vital for the meeting attendees to have the information you will talk about on paper; or, to follow your discussion, to make notes, and to keep the information for later use (even to ask questions during the meeting or refer to the handout weeks later to remember an important point).

An example of this is to print out your slides, and distribute them as handouts. Then attendees can follow along as you speak, make notes and keep them for future reference.

## **8. MAKE A SUMMARY OF POINTS**

This is one of the most important responsibilities of the meeting leader.

Periodically during the meeting, summarize the points that have been made about the current topic being discussed in the agenda. This method will help participants/attendees to review their notes (if they are taking any) and assist them in formulating any questions they may develop before going to the next topic on the agenda.

For you, the leader, it also provides a transition to the next item on the agenda. For example, you would summarize the main points of topic C and then say, "that brings us to our next topic, D, which has 20 minutes assigned to it for discussion and recommendations."



## **9. CONTROL THE TALKING**

At the start of each of the topics, remind everyone about the time allowed (as in the example above). "It's now 2 pm so we have to finish our discussion about this one by 2:20." During the discussion, you can then, use the time constraint as a gentle reminder if anyone starts to "drive into a parking lot" and go off the subject. In this way, you will be successful in keeping to the agenda and making everyone happy [see point # 5].

## **10. SUM UP AND END, THEN FOLLOW UP**

When you have completed discussing each topic on the agenda, restate the overall purpose of the meeting, then briefly enumerate the decisions taken, solutions given, or ideas presented. If time allows (and remember to assign a time limit to the summary too), you may ask participants to clarify any points or you can do the clarification yourself.

When you finish, stop. (One of the most boring actions is to keep talking and talking at the end for no real reason. Stopping is better.)

Say "thank you for attending." Get up and go to your next work assignment in your office, with a customer, and so on -- and the attendees can do the same.

(TIP: Remember that ending on time, or even before time, is very motivating and is appreciated by the attendees. Why? Well, everyone has work to do. Some may have appointments with customers and others may have another meeting to go to which they scheduled according to your start and end times in your memo/agenda. Keeping to the time will mean that your attendees will attend again and will WANT to attend your next meeting.)

After the meeting, FOLLOW UP. Send a brief and concise memo or e-mail about the decisions made, action items to be done and other responsibilities of the attendees with the due dates for each one. This memo or e-mail is not the same as the minutes, which are all the details recorded by the secretary to document what happened in the meeting.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a meeting leader, these 10 steps can easily guide you toward a successful meeting, but do not expect them to produce results on your first try. They take a good deal of practice and effort -- and some time to get everyone's behavior in line with goals and objectives.

In the end, however, you should notice an improvement in your control of meetings and increased quality in the contributions of your employees so that your meeting will be a success rather than a mess.