

Supervisor/HR Supplement Newsletter

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How To Conduct Better Meetings

Surveys suggest that most employees view meetings as being 2.3 times longer than necessary. Since meetings are vital to a team's success, the secret lies in making them more efficient. Here are ten ways to conduct better meetings.

Inform and remind employees of purpose just before meeting

By reminding people just before a meeting, they are not only more likely to remember and attend, but they will also come prepared with any material needed to support the discussion. Otherwise, a question may be asked that requires someone to leave and get information. This is a huge time-waster.

Minimize participants

Invite only those employees who are truly needed at the meeting. As the number of participants goes up so does the tendency to get bogged down.

Establish and follow an agenda

As a rule, every meeting should have an agenda that has at least three points; the topics, the time allocated for each topic, and the lead discussant for each item. It is good practice to send out a proposed agenda before the meeting to solicit input and give people a sense of involvement. Doing so will also cut down on "afterthought" topics that extend the meeting beyond the planned time frame.

State the purpose and intended outcome

Supervisors should not assume that all employees understand the intent of the meeting. Stating it clearly at the beginning will help keep things on track.

Attempt to involve each team member

Meetings can often get off balance when a few attendees do all the talking and dominate the discussions. Involving each member enhances team work.

Use diagrams, pictures and graphics

The old adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words" is highly relevant to meetings. Graphics allow for succinct presentation of information and are generally more engaging than, for example, an entire page of text.

Put important but unrelated topics on hold

There may be times when an important topic, not on the agenda, arises. Rather than divert focus, it may be better to table the item for another meeting. It is important, however, that it be addressed later, so be sure to put it on the next agenda.

Record action items (and those responsible) with due dates

Meeting discussions are often very interactive, but the results are not translated into action. This effectively renders the meeting pointless.

Issue a brief written meeting summary ("minutes")

By summarizing the meeting—who attended, what was discussed, what the conclusions were, and any assignments that resulted—the meeting is much more likely to result in productivity, and questions that arise can be easily answered. Minutes should only be a page long, and bulleted statements are best.

Record action items (and those responsible) with due dates

When regular meetings first begin being held, many are ineffective due to new participants, circumstances, unfamiliarity with roles, etc. However, they should shortly become productive or be changed. Periodically send attendees questionnaires (e.g. was an agenda used, did we stay on track, were the right participants there, etc.) and incorporate the feedback in future meetings.

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Masterful Communication 101

Invite participation

Hold meetings that include employees from different areas, and encourage everyone to contribute. Ask employees to send you e-mail regarding their ideas for doing things more effectively, and respond to all queries. Have a "graffiti wall" where employees and leaders can exchange concerns and ideas. This will provide the group with different perspectives of the issues discussed and help ensure the flow of information.

Deal with uncertainty

Don't be afraid to talk about failure, adjustments along the way, or problems the organization needs to address. Create the expectation that this is a normal part of the work environment. You'll be telling the truth. Throughout a transition, clearly communicate (as much as possible) what changes mean and why decisions were made.

Be an active listener

Too few people have mastered good listening. Don't be formulating your responses while the other person is talking; instead, focus on the speaker's message and resist distractions. Keep an open mind to others' ideas. Don't tune out if you disagree. Indicate you understand what was said by reframing key points: "Let me be sure I understand correctly. You're saying...?"

Respond, don't "re-act"

We often "re-act" to others based on something that happened to us before. Responding mindfully rather than re-acting emotionally requires self-knowledge and discipline, but allows us to be more effective in our interactions. As a leader, you are a role model; you set the tone for what's appropriate. Reflect on your hot buttons, and have a "keep calm" strategy for when they get pushed.

Watch your language

You may use metaphors to offer something that people can relate to, but too many leaders rely on battle metaphors or divisive language such as "this is war," or "obliterate the competition." Such words subconsciously reinforce win-lose, self-interested behavior rather than collaboration. Choose positive language to foster the same energy in your atmosphere.

Follow through

People failing to follow through on their words accounts for a lot of the cynicism and weariness seen in today's workplace. If you make a promise, honor your word, even if you end up having to explain why you can't fulfill the promise. People remember. Also, don't contradict yourself by, for example, talking about the importance of customer service while treating your colleagues rudely.

Give feedback

Negative feedback is too often "softened," often at the expense of clarity and with the aim of avoiding confrontation. Provide specific examples that illustrate your critique. For example, instead of "Your attitude is bad" or "That just didn't work," say, "When you miss deadlines, then cross your arms and look away when I talk with you, it gives me the impression you don't care about the quality of your work. Can you help me understand this differently?" Don't forget positive feedback; studies show that a high percentage of employees rarely receive positive feedback from their manager. However, don't confuse the messages.

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