

Misconceptions about meetings

By Robert Garmston and Jane Ellison

10. Everyone should be present and seated before the session starts.

Start on time — regardless of who's in the room. Use interactive activities that make participants think about their prior knowledge regarding today's issues. For example, have subgroups report concerns about the first agenda topic, prime a discussion with an activity that releases feelings and creative thinking such as having subgroups complete a stem — “developing assessment criteria will be like what ethnic food because _____,” — or have pairs talk about ideas that should be brought forward from the last meeting. Soon, being on time becomes the norm.

9. A meeting is the place to read a memo to the group.

Meetings are to process information, not receive information. Test whether an information item needs to be on the agenda by the degree to which the group needs to talk about it to understand or implement it effectively.

8. What's urgent has priority over what's important.

There is always a fire. Performing as a fire crew avoids items that are difficult to address. If meeting agendas are mostly about reducing heat or fighting flames, ask what must happen to schedule items about student learning on the agenda.

7. Furniture arrangement and space don't matter.

They matter a lot. Meeting space must be “just right” to provide comfort, visual focus, and interaction opportunities. Members must be able to see one another, be able to

move around and speak with different people when energy lags, the content is detailed and dense, or the group needs consensus. Facilitators should stand, unless it is a very small group. Post recording sheets on walls to serve as a group memory.

6. The facilitator is solely responsible for a meeting's success.

Concentrate on developing group members, not just facilitators by teaching group members their responsibilities and five meeting standards. (See main article.)

Encourage group members to ask “naive” questions like, “How much detail do we need to move this item?” or “Which process are we using now?” Teach members to be engaged, proactive participants.

5. Not much can be done about group members who are silent, vocally dominant, or negative.

Facilitators or group members can redirect unproductive behavior. Interventions should be simple, take little time, be done in a way that promotes group learning and addresses an idea, the group, or an individual. *Adaptive Schools: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) details a range of intervention principles and strategies.

4. Because everyone has been in the meeting, there's no need for verbal closure.

People may hear and understand decisions differently. Have pairs rehearse what they might say to others about the meeting and check for alignment.

3. Meeting time should be devoted to topics, rather than reflection, processing, or group development.

Any group too busy to reflect on its work is too busy to improve. Routine self-assessments help groups become more effective over time. Routinely assessing the five meeting standards (see main article), however, can almost guarantee meetings that produce maximum work in minimum time with maximum member satisfaction.

2. The more items on an agenda, the more will be accomplished.

Use the rule of one-half. As you plan a meeting, list agenda items and then find alternate ways to address at least half of them. Block enough time for the remaining items for the group to understand, deliberate, and decide.

1. A meeting, unlike a lesson, can be done without planning.

Meeting design turns out to be the No. 1 mechanism for effective meetings. For each agenda item, help the group be clear about goals, processes, and functions. Label items on the agenda with an action: (1) respond in order to clarify, inform, or advocate; (2) dialogue to deepen understanding; (3) recommend; or (4) decide. Envision the processes groups will use and allot enough time.

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