# SIX TIPS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

## 1. Don't Meet

Avoid a meeting if the same information could be covered in a memo, e-mail or brief report. One of the keys to having more effective meetings is differentiating between the need for one-way information dissemination and two-way information sharing. To disseminate information you can use a variety of other communication media, such as sending an e-mail or posting the information on your company's intranet. If you want to be certain you have delivered the right message, you can schedule a meeting to simply answer questions about the information you have sent. By remembering to ask yourself, *"Is a meeting the best way to handle this?"* you'll cut down on wasted meeting time and restore your group's belief that the meetings they attend are necessary.

## 2. Set Objectives for the Meeting

Set objectives before the meeting! Before planning the agenda for the meeting, write down a phrase or several phrases to complete the sentence: *By the end of the meeting, I want the group to…* Depending on the focus of your meeting, your ending to the sentence might include phrases such as: *…be able to list the top three features of our newest product, …have generated three ideas for increasing our sales, …understand the way we do business with customers, …leave with an action plan, …decide on a new widget supplier,* or *…solve the design problem.*

One benefit of setting objectives for the meeting is to help you plan the meeting. The more concrete your meeting objectives, the more focused your agenda will be. A second important benefit of having specific objectives for each meeting is that you have a concrete measure against which you can evaluate that meeting. Were you successful in meeting the objectives? Why or why not? Is another meeting required? Setting meeting objectives allows you to continuously improve your effective meeting process.

## 3. Provide an Agenda Beforehand

Provide all participants with an agenda before the meeting starts. Your agenda needs to include a brief description of the meeting objectives, a list of the topics to be covered and a list stating who will address each topic and for how long. When you send the agenda, you should include the time, date and location of the meeting and any background information participants will need to know to hold an informed discussion on the meeting topic. What's the most important thing you should do with your agenda? Follow it closely!

## 4. Assign Meeting Preparation

Give all participants something to prepare for the meeting, and that meeting will take on a new significance to each group member. For problem-solving meetings, have the group read the background information necessary to get down to business in the meeting. Ask each group member to think of one possible solution to the problem to get everyone thinking about the meeting topic. For example, to start a sales meeting on a positive note, have all participants recall their biggest success since the last meeting and ask one person to share his success with the group. For less formal meetings or brainstorming sessions, ask a trivia question related to the meeting topic and give the correct answer in the first few minutes of the meeting. These tips are sure-fire ways to warm up the group and direct participants' attention to the meeting objectives.

## 5. Assign Action Items

Don't finish any discussion in the meeting without deciding how to act on it. Listen for key comments that flag potential action items and don't let them pass by without addressing them during your meeting. Statements such as *We should really…*, *that's a topic for a different meeting…*, or *I wonder if we could…* are examples of comments that should trigger action items to get a task done, hold another meeting or further examine a particular idea. Assigning tasks and projects as they arise during the meeting means that your follow-through will be complete. Addressing off-topic statements during the meeting in this way also allows you to keep the meeting on track. By immediately addressing these statements with the suggestion of making an action item to examine the issue outside of the current meeting, you show meeting participants that you value their input as well as their time.

## 6. Examine Your Meeting Process

Assign the last few minutes of every meeting as time to review the following questions: *What worked well in this meeting? What can we do to improve our next meeting?* Every participant should briefly provide a point-form answer to these questions. Answers to the second question should be phrased in the form of a suggested action. For example, if a participant's answer is stated as *Jim was too long-winded*, ask the participant to re-phrase the comment as an action. The statement *We should be more to-the-point when stating our opinions* is a more constructive suggestion. Remember – don't leave the meeting without assessing what took place and making a plan to improve the next meeting!

### Meeting Tips Summary

### Don't Meet.
Avoid a meeting if the same information could be covered in a memo, e-mail or brief report.

### Set Objectives for the Meeting.
Before planning the agenda, determine the objective of the meeting. The more concrete your objectives, the more focused your agenda will be.

### Provide an Agenda Beforehand.
Your agenda needs to include a one-sentence description of the meeting objectives, a list of the topics to be covered and a list stating who will address each topic for how long. Follow the agenda closely during the meeting.

### Assign Meeting Preparation.
Give all participants something to prepare for the meeting, and that meeting will take on a new significance to each group member.

### Assign Action Items.
Don't finish any discussion in the meeting without deciding how to act on it.

### Examine Your Meeting Process.
Don't leave the meeting without assessing what took place and making a plan to improve the next meeting.

1. *Meetings in America: A study of trends, costs and attitudes toward business travel, teleconferencing, and their impact on productivity.* A network MCI Conferencing White Paper, 1998.