

5 Steps to Better Board Meetings

Written by Alan Hewitt on February 12, 2019



Meetings, love 'em or hate 'em, are increasingly important in our lives. Board meetings are no exception. The dictionary defines a meeting as, **An assembly of people for a particular purpose, especially for formal discussion**, which isn't a bad place to start.

If we break down that definition a little it suggests that:

1. To have a meeting you need people, and those people need to know why they are attending the meeting
2. In the meeting there should be opportunities for both the receiving and giving of information as well as the opportunity to discuss matters arising

That seems straightforward, doesn't it? So why is it that so many board meetings, and meetings in general, are painful, don't seem to have clear structure and don't come to clear outcomes? Again, I went online to see what, if any, research has been done on the subject.

I found a [Harvard Business Review](#) article that highlights some of the things that can go wrong:

- One or two people dominate the conversation and no one does anything about it
- Bosses don't lead meetings effectively
- Most meetings are just passing along information that could easily be sent in an email. Real issues are rarely discussed
- No one pays attention because participants are either on their phones or laptops
- The same topics come up again and again because nothing gets done between meetings

So perhaps meetings are useful but they tend to be badly structured and badly run. So are all meetings bad? Probably not true, but what differentiates a good meeting from a bad one? I found the following brief summary from [Inc.com](#) which seems to capture some important points quite nicely.

What distinguishes an effective meeting from one that is a complete waste of time? Here are five factors that help ensure a good meeting:

1. *Having a good reason to meet in the first place;*
2. *Having an agenda that clearly states the purpose of the meeting and key steps to satisfying that purpose by the end of the meeting;*
3. *Stating a timeframe at the beginning of the meeting and sticking to it, with few exceptions;*
4. *Requiring that participants come prepared to discuss the topics on the agenda, meaning that participants have received the agenda and have been told what's expected from them personally;*
5. *Having some degree of skilled facilitation -- someone who can keep participants focused on the agenda items and can navigate prickly interpersonal issues so that the meeting is effective rather than dysfunctional.*

Now in reality life has become more complicated with the advent of conference calls and video conferencing; not all meeting attendees will be in the same room at the same time, which makes the observation from above, "No one pays attention because participants are either on their phones or laptops," a little harder to spot.

So what can we do about improving the meetings that we run or attend? Well, taking each point in order, we need to:

➤ 1. Have a clear purpose

A clear purpose and an itemised agenda should be set for each meeting. A good idea would be to circulate a draft agenda at least a week before the meeting so that participants can add their own points if required or comment on points already suggested. This gives attendees a way to feel more connected to the agenda as they will have had some input into creating it.

➤ 2. Help your participants walk into meetings prepared

You should provide all participants with early access to any pre-reading and alert them to the fact that they have an action to complete before the meeting, e.g., read x,y and z documents. It is probably worth saying that the pre-reads shouldn't be the equivalent of War and Peace but a concise précis of the main points. This isn't always possible but just trying to net things down will tend to make the background reading easier to do.

➤ 3. Stick to your agenda

Make sure that each agenda item has an allocated time slot against it and do what you can to keep to the schedule. Again, this isn't always possible but try to become more disciplined in how you actually run the meetings. Failing to cover an item because you ran out of time is not ideal.

➤ 4. Define roles and responsibilities

Be clear what the role of each person attending the meeting is. If he or she is there to present, contribute or discuss then make sure that person is so informed, upfront.

> 5. Have a facilitator

Finally, and this is the big one, meetings need to be well facilitated. This isn't easy when everybody is in the room and is even harder when you have a few participants joining via the phone or a computer. For board meetings the facilitator is usually the chairman. It is his or her job to:

- Keep the meeting on time
- Keep the meeting on track
- Ensure that ALL of your participants can give input
- Leave the meeting with an agreed set of outcomes, allocated actions and items that will be followed up at the next meeting

Large parts of meeting best practices are administrative and having a system or tool (like a [board portal](#)) that manages attendance, reminds people of their actions and provides easy access to readings, in fact, helps to manage this whole process and makes the meeting a whole lot less stressful and more valuable.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan is a Non-executive Director at Praxonomy. Alan has worked in IT Services and Consulting for nearly 40 years including 30 years at IBM, where he was an Executive Partner in IBM's Global Consulting Business responsible for the development of the Workforce Transformation Practice. Since leaving IBM in 2010, he has worked as an independent Business Consultant working for major companies across industries and the world. Alan is a Fellow of both the IET and BCS.