

Effective Meetings

By the end of this session (see [outputs](#)) participants should be more consciously aware of

- the nature and many possible purposes of meetings
- what is involved in being a good participant and chairperson

Meetings cost time and money – both of these are valuable.

Hold meetings only when necessary and ensure that they are short and useful.

Handouts include:

What is the purpose of this meeting?	g010504.doc
Effective meetings – matching purpose to type	010510.doc
The people at meetings	g970520b.doc
Personality types in meetings	g970520e.doc
Helping to make meetings more effective	g970520f.doc
Going to meetings – a creative involvement	g971126b.doc
Video Arts Production – More Bloody Meetings	g970520d.doc
The good chairperson's checklist	g970520c.doc
Effective meetings – a chairperson's self test	010510b.doc
Effective meetings – a participant's self test	010510c.doc

Adding up costs.

To work out a meeting's total cost:

- calculate the combined salaries of all the participants (hourly rates)
- add the annual cost of their organisation's overheads divided by the number of working hours in the year
- add service costs (secretarial support and preparing handouts etc)
- add other hourly costs e.g. room hire
- add transport costs
- add cost of refreshments

What is the purpose of this meeting?

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There are basically two types of meetings – those that **provide information** and those that are called to **make decisions**. The two types of meeting are best handled in different ways so it useful to know in advance which kind you are to be dealing with.

Characteristics	Meeting to provide information	Decision Making Meeting
Number present	Any number	less than 12
Who should be there	Those who need to know	Those responsible and who have something to contribute
Communication process	From the leader to the participants with opportunities for questions	An interactive discussion involving all those present
Meeting room set-up	Classroom style – participants facing the front	Conference style – participants facing each other
Most effective style of leadership	Authoritative	Participative
Emphasis should be on	Content	Interaction and problem solving
Key to success	Planning and preparation of information to be presented	A meeting climate that supports open, free expression

Effective Meetings – matching purpose to type

The following table recognises and matches *four purposes* and *ten types* of meetings.

Purpose	Characteristics	Type
Dealing with information eg giving or receiving reports, issuing instructions, announcing and explaining new procedures	up to three people	informal
	four or more people or a team	formal
	needs feedback & discussion	informal or formal
	keeps directors up to date	formal
	involves shareholders	AGM or EGM
	involves informing many people	public
	involves speakers giving information	conference
Solving problems eg handling grievances	only one other person	one-to-one
	needs input from several people or a team	one-off committee
	concerns an urgent problem	impromptu
Making Decisions eg choosing between options, obtaining authorisation, deciding on a course of action	needs quick decision of concerns non-standard business matter	impromptu
	involves regular business matter	formal
	needs discussion or authorisation at the highest level	board
	needs authorisation from the shareholders of a company	AGM or EGM
Encouraging New Ideas eg generating creative solutions	needs creative ideas to be discussed	informal
	needs new ideas to be invented quickly	brainstorming
	needs reports on issues to be considered, discussed and prepared	formal

- Does your group or organisation recognise that meetings can have different purposes and that they could therefore be organised in different ways?
- If not, what might be done to make your meetings more effective?

The People at Meetings

Think about the meetings which you attend, both as chairperson and as participant.

For each of the statements below, enter in the boxes on the right whether it is:

1. Always true

2. Generally true

3. Sometimes true

4. Generally not true

5. Never true

Column A : Fill this in for situations when you are the chairperson

**Column B : Fill this in for situations where someone else chairs
(think of a particular individual).**

	A	B
It feels as though we are a united group, working together towards a common aim		
People feel able to speak their minds and let off steam when concerned about something, rather than bottle things up		
I am confident our decisions are based on fact not prejudice		
I am satisfied we have not wasted time drifting off the point or arguing at cross purposes		
I am clear about what we are discussing and about what conclusions we have reached		
I am satisfied that everyone gets a fair and adequate chance to put their points across		
I am satisfied that my points are understood the way I mean them		
I am satisfied that all contributions to the meeting are handled constructively.		

Personality Types in Meetings

There are many reasons for people behaving in meetings in the way that they do - they might even behave differently in different meetings. It is useful, however, if you are chairing a meeting, to have some mental map of 'personality types' so that when you recognise them you will know how to handle them. The following types are identified in the Video Arts Production "More Bloody Meetings".

The Aggressive Type

"Look, the answer is ..." "As I've always said ..."

The aggressive type has a tendency to be noisy and coercive, and is always full of the 'right' answers. As well as being too opinionated, the over-aggressive types are usually too quick to jump to conclusions and offer solutions, which are invariably wrong anyway. They fit everything to suit their own perceptions, constantly 'propose', and are too impatient.

The Silent Type

"Mmm". "Quite probably."

The silent type is quiet and reserved. But you cannot be sure whether silence is caused by nervousness, diffidence, or even outright hostility. So be careful. Silence can cause disquiet amongst others. *"Does she think we are all too stupid to bother with?"*. or *"Will she run off if someone says 'boo'?"*.

The Abusive Type

"It'll never work." "Tried that once. Useless"

The abusive type tends to be rude and abusive, and full of reasons why things won't work or can't be done. This type is the real demolition expert, a blocker, who will dispirit and demoralise the meeting if you are not careful. They tend to have closed minds and seldom listen.

The Rambling Type

"That reminds me of ..." "Guess what I heard..."

The rambling type runs about like a rabbit all over the place, and whenever he or she speaks takes the meeting off at a tangent. They tell stories and jokes which go on too long, miss the point, turn up late and are full of gossip.

The Sniping Type

"Picture? More like a disaster movie."

The sniping type can either say a little or a lot, but their speciality is the one-liner, the witty retort, which can be very funny but not very helpful - especially if it's directed at an individual rather than at an issue. This type seem to be experts on everything, but their facts can be suspect on closer probing.

- Are these 'types' peculiarly euro-American or do you know them from the local context?
- How would you deal with them if you were chairing the meeting?

Helping to make Meetings more Effective

It need not be only the chairperson who manages a meeting. If you are in the meeting anyway you are probably concerned that it should prove to be useful and you will want to help it move along smoothly and effectively. A few innocent questions can help:

Innocent Question	Problem Situation
What do you understand to be the goals of this meeting?	Whenever they have not been stated.
What order of priority should these items be in?	When the agenda looks too long.
What do you understand X to have just said?	When someone has not been listening.
Where is the discussion aiming now?	When you do not know.
Where are we in the systematic approach?	When the discussion rambles formlessly.
What has just been decided?	When it is not clear what has been decided.
How exactly did we reach that decision?	When it was not reached systematically.
Who is to do that?	When an action has not been assigned.
When is this to be done by?	When no time has been set.
Could you give us a concrete example?	When airy fairy generalizations are made.
What was your purpose in saying (or asking) that?	When an unhelpful contribution has been made.
Have you followed your plan?	When they have not.
How is the time going?	When everyone has forgotten its passage.
Are we helping you?	When discussion on someone's point makes slow progress.

Note: This particular set of questions could be viewed in the light of a programme entitled "How to Manage your Manager". List at least four other ways in which you might cause your manager(s) to do things your way - at least two of these ways should be so subtle that the manager does not realise that he is being managed.

Going to Meetings - a creative involvement

The way that we look at ourselves, the way that we perceive ourselves, is defined by our attitudes. The attitudes that we adopt in any situation partially determine how that situation will unfold. Our attitudes hold the key to the kinds, and the extent, of relationships that we can enjoy, and hence to the kinds of communities that we build. Consider how your attitudes might affect your inputs to a meeting.

the don't listen attitude	the don't speak attitude
If you go into a meeting with a proposal that you want the group to approve, you are adopting an attitude that you want to use the meeting for your own ends. You will be less open to the suggestions of others, more alienated from any group dynamic that evolves during the meeting.	If, at the other extreme, you go to the meeting with no ideas to put forward, if you adopt an attitude that you will allow yourself to be carried along by the will of the group, then you will make no creative contribution as an individual.

Neither of these attitudes helps with the emergence of a community spirit within the group. This can only emerge when the members trust each other and, while they each have a point of view to put forward, they are willing to change it in the light of free and open interaction with the points of view of others. Some of the characteristics of this middle way are indicated in the following table:

Rigid attitudes leading to alienation from the group	Poised stance compatible with creative freedom	Rigid attitudes leading to alienation from your self
obsession	love	promiscuity
fanaticism	loyalty	following
role playing	character	anomie
habit	style	trendiness
ideological	open-minded	totally receptive
parochial	imaginative	adrift
single-minded	sense of value	anything goes
observation	participation	being taken over
separate	involved	overwhelmed
independent	dialogue	conformity

my way	our way	your way
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So what are your attitudes when you go to meetings? Are you content with them? Are you willing to change them?

Are you ready to contribute to the creative evolution of whatever it is that you go to meetings for?

Video Arts Production - More Bloody Meetings

The Video Arts Production, "Meetings Bloody Meetings" dealt with how to organise the mechanics of meetings - how to prepare, inform others, use the agenda to plan the sequence of discussion, and record the decisions.

But learning the organisational lessons about chairing meetings is not enough. It is also necessary to handle the people in the meeting. This is the thrust of the video "More Bloody Meetings". It sets out:

- **how to calm people down and unite them when they get worked up and aggressive**
- **how to focus them when they are rambling, confused or at cross purposes**
- **how to stop people squashing other's ideas and how to get people to work constructively together**
- **how to build better decisions**

To chair a meeting effectively means to get better results from the group than they would have achieved had you not been there. Most managers spend most of their time in meetings. If they cannot manage meetings then they cannot manage.

The video suggests that there are three laws when it comes to the human side of managing effective meetings. These are stated below with some techniques for accomplishing them.

LAW 1: UNITE THE GROUP

Danger: **Aggression**

- ◆ let off the steam
- ◆ don't take sides
- ◆ bring in the others
- ◆ stick to the facts

LAW 2: FOCUS THE GROUP

Danger: **Getting off the point**

- stay alert
- keep a hand on the wheel
- test comprehension
- paraphrase/ check back

LAW 3: MOBILISE THE GROUP

Danger: **Squashing**

- ➤ protect the weak
- ➤ check around the group
- ➤ record suggestions
- ➤ build up ideas

The Good Chairpersons Checklist

If you are a good chairperson you will be able to unite, focus and mobilise your group. Each of these tasks is divided into four sub-tasks in the table below. When performing each sub task you will be using words. After having watched the Video Arts programme called "More Bloody Meetings", put some key phrases which you might use when performing the sub tasks in each of the boxes.

<u>LAW 1: UNITE THE GROUP</u>	<u>LAW 2: FOCUS THE GROUP</u>	<u>LAW 3: MOBILISE THE GROUP</u>
Let off the steam	Stay alert	Protect the weak
Don't take sides	Keep a hand on the wheel	Check round the group
Bring in the others	Test comprehension	Record suggestions
Stick to the facts	Paraphrase/ Check back	Build up ideas

Effective Meetings – a Chairperson’s self test

You can tell how good a chairperson you are by responding to the following statements. Be as honest as you can. If your answer is ‘never’ mark option 1; if it is ‘always’ mark option 4 – and so on.

1	I begin each meeting at its scheduled start time	1	2	3	4
2	I ensure that participants understand the minutes of the previous meeting	1	2	3	4
3	I follow the approved agenda for each meeting	1	2	3	4
4	I explain the purpose of each meeting clearly to all the participants	1	2	3	4
5	I allow all points of view to have a fair hearing	1	2	3	4
6	I am aware of each participant’s motives and hidden agendas	1	2	3	4
7	I ensure that all participants are fully involved in each meeting	1	2	3	4
8	I make sure that I am thoroughly prepared for each meeting	1	2	3	4
9	I refer to a meeting procedure guide before each formal meeting	1	2	3	4
10	I make sure that full and accurate minutes of each meeting are taken	1	2	3	4
11	I ensure that participants know what action to take before the next meeting	1	2	3	4
12	I ensure that participants know the time and place of the next meeting	1	2	3	4
	Sub Total scores				
	Total score				

The higher your score the more effectively you run meetings.

What are your particular strengths and weaknesses?

Which particular activity will you try to improve in your next meeting?

Based on Hindle T (1998) Managing Meetings; Dorling Kindersley; ISBN 0 7513 0529 4

Effective Meetings – a Participant’s self test

You can tell how useful you are in meetings by responding to the following statements. Be as honest as you can. If your answer is ‘never’ mark option 1; if it is ‘always’ mark option 4 – and so on.

1	I allow speakers to finish making their point before I speak	1	2	3	4
2	I am confident when making a point or stating my views	1	2	3	4
3	I am able to concede when I am wrong	1	2	3	4
4	I can control the tone of my voice when I feel nervous	1	2	3	4
5	My body language suggests self-confidence	1	2	3	4
6	I dress appropriately for each meeting I attend	1	2	3	4
7	I listen carefully to what other people are saying in a meeting	1	2	3	4
8	I am thoroughly prepared for every meeting that I attend	1	2	3	4
9	I carefully review the minutes of the previous meeting	1	2	3	4
10	I research in advance the views of the other participants at a meeting	1	2	3	4
11	I know what my objectives are before I attend a meeting	1	2	3	4
12	I share a common purpose with the other participants at the meeting	1	2	3	4

The higher your score the more effectively you contribute to meetings.

What are your particular strengths and weaknesses?

Which particular activity will you try to improve in your next meeting?

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Effective Meetings

BPL ACCESS Staff Development Session – 01 June 2001

Present:

Donna Barnett, Melissa Bremner, George Clark, Duncan Leece, Alison McKenzie, Bob Peden, Alison Simpson, Joan Rennie

Aims:

By the end of the session participants should be more consciously aware of

- the nature and many possible purposes of meetings
- what is involved in being a good participant and chair person

Outputs:

Technical and social aspects of effective meetings

George introduced the session by suggesting that it was useful to think about meetings as having technical aspects (agendas, procedures and minutes etc) and more human and social aspects (how to behave as a good chairperson and participant). This session would be dealing mainly with the social aspects and another session will deal with the technical aspects.

Community meetings are multipurpose

While the information in most of the handouts was appreciated it was felt that they were based on what happens in business meetings. Community meetings usually have social objectives mixed in with the business ones and they give people a chance to exchange ideas and catch up on gossip. But this was not thought to be a problem. Meetings can have more than one purpose and time can be allowed for different things.

The people at meetings

Most people at community meetings are ‘normal’ which means that they are well rounded although they may not always behave in the same way. The same person might sometimes be silent or aggressive, rambling or abusive or whatever – it depends on the topic and the mood that the person is in. It is usually OK to let people have some space to vent their feelings but the chairperson should be able to prevent them from throwing the meeting completely off course.

Most people could think of individuals who are not 'normal' but are like the types described on the handout.

Helping to make meetings more effective

It was felt that some of the 'innocent questions' listed in the handout could be seen as aggressive (eg "What was your purpose in asking that?") – it depends on your tone of voice and the way that you ask the question.

Many community meetings are woolly and inconclusive and this is often due to their being badly planned and chaired. As a person taking the minutes it is usually possible to ask many of the 'innocent questions' in a fairly neutral and non-offensive way.

As a general rule the more that people understand about how to run effective meetings the more likely they are to allow the chairperson, or indeed anybody else who seems to know what they are doing, to control it.

Chairperson skills vary a lot

Everybody present could give examples of horrendously bad chairpersons and most could give examples of others who were pretty good. Some chairpersons let meetings go off at tangents and do not stop people from rambling, others get involved in arguments and lose track of time. The good ones stay cool and focussed and stick to the agenda and the time frame.

The best chairpersons have a high degree of self confidence and can be patient but firm and fair. Some people are maybe born with the skills but they can also be developed. Often the problem is that those most in need of learning are the least able to recognise the fact! But even the worst of them pass on eventually – sadly missed!

It's not just what you say

As paid staff we tend to go to meetings as 'outsiders' who take minutes or provide information or advice. How we should dress and behave depends on the meeting that we are going to.

If we are going to a conference or a meeting in a posh office with people in suits then it is best to be well dressed and a bit formal. We can afford to be more casual with groups that we have known for a long time.

There are no hard and fast rules other than that we should be sensitive to the fact that 80% of all communication is non-verbal ie what matters most is not the words that come out of your mouth but rather your tone of voice, your body posture and the clothes you wear. Whether you wear a suit, a cardigan or a fleece makes a difference to how people react to you!

"The attitudes that we adopt in any situation partly determine how that situation will unfold. Our attitudes hold the key to the kinds, and the extent, of relationships that we can enjoy, and hence to the kind of communities that we build." (Zohar & Marshall (1993))