



Follow These Steps for Better Meetings

Take this quick quiz to rate – and improve – your meeting experiences.

By Rich Horwath

Do your meetings lead to valuable new insights? Are they productive conversations about key issues? Or are they a rehashing of all the same stuff? Are your meetings getting better or worse?

Ask Yourself These Questions

Respond “yes” or “no” to the following five statements (provided by the Strategic Meetings Assessment) for the meetings you typically attend:

1. Relevant information is sent out beforehand to avoid one-way presentations during meetings. Yes No
2. Meetings start at their scheduled time. Yes No
3. People are fully attentive and not engaged in multitasking (such as checking phones). Yes No
4. People leave meetings with a clear understanding of who is doing what by when. Yes No
5. I decline meeting invitations when the purpose and/or agenda haven't been communicated. Yes No

In this brief sample, a score of three or more “No’s” indicates an opportunity to dramatically improve your meetings.

What's a Meeting's Purpose?

A meeting can be defined as: a gathering of two or more people, featuring collective interaction and engagement, using conversations to make progress toward a purpose. Note the words “interaction” and “conversations” in the definition. If you find yourself in meetings and teleconferences that are mostly one-way presentations, there's ample room to improve.

Studies Pinpoint Problems

Key points from research to consider:

- **Meetings consume about 40%** of working time for leaders.
- **Up to half of the content of meetings** is either not relevant to participants or could be delivered outside of a meeting.
- **20% of meeting participants** should not be there.
- **40% of meeting time** is spent on information that could be delivered before the meeting.
- **Executives rate 50% of meetings they attend** as “ineffective” or “very ineffective.”

“Are your meetings a rehashing of all the same stuff?”

Here Are the Steps to Take

There are five critical steps you can follow to take a more strategic approach to meetings and teleconferences:

1. Conduct a meetings audit.

Before doctors prescribe medication, they first diagnose the patient's condition. In the same spirit, before you prescribe new meeting guidelines, it's helpful to first baseline what's happening today.

Look at factors such as the types, frequency, and length of meetings you attend. Then identify the reasons these meetings exist. Decide if all these meetings are necessary. This audit will provide a bounty of useful information to shape future meetings.

2. Identify current meeting mistakes.

Meeting mistakes occur in three phases:

- pre-meeting mistakes
- in-meeting mistakes
- post-meeting mistakes.

They can also be categorized as:

- leader mistakes
- participant mistakes.

For example, a common in-meeting mistake by the leader is failing to rein in off-track conversations. A common in-meeting mistake by participants is multitasking, which conveys a lack of interest and lack of respect.

Consider all the possible mistakes in the three phases and in the two categories. Ask your team to help identify mistakes and decide how to prevent them in future meetings. Create a plan to address these mistakes so you're not sabotaging your efforts at improvement.

3. Educate people on what “good” looks like.

Begin this step by collecting a list of current practices being used by people in your organization. Then look at what meeting principles and guidelines are being used by other organizations within and outside your industry.

Examples of best-practice principles:

- Identify decisions to be made in the meeting.
- Create a virtual table of participants for teleconferences.

Use the best practices you uncover to compile a list of new meeting standards.


4. Use meeting tools.

It's crucial to align the meeting's goals with the tools and processes to get there. For instance, if you're leading a

strategy-development meeting, there are more than 70 different strategic-thinking tools you can choose from to help your team think and plan strategically. The key is to select the handful of tools that make the most sense based on the meeting context and goals. Be clear on your meeting goals, and then choose the best process and tools.

5. Develop meeting checklists.

To change someone's behavior, research shows it's helpful to provide physical or environmental triggers. One such trigger is the use of meeting checklists. These physical reminders ensure that teams across the organization are aware of the basic meeting principles, techniques, and tools to optimize their meeting time. However, the checklists are valuable only if they're accompanied by the discipline to use them on a consistent basis.

Meetings can be energizing forums to help your team set direction, make decisions, and unify efforts. Ineffective meetings can be anchors that weigh people down with irrelevant information, didactic presentations, and unclear priorities. Which type do you attend today? Do you think it will be different tomorrow? 

Rich Horwath is a New York Times bestselling author on strategy, including StrategyMan vs. The Anti-Strategy Squad: Using Strategic Thinking to Defeat Bad Strategy and Save Your Plan. As CEO of the Strategic Thinking Institute, he has helped more than 100,000 managers develop their strategy skills through live workshops and virtual training programs. Rich is a strategy facilitator, keynote speaker, and creator of more than 200 resources on strategic thinking. To sign up for the free monthly newsletter “Strategic Thinker,” visit StrategySkills.com.

Meeting Up

Enhance your meetings with the wisdom in these articles (NonprofitWorld.org):

It's Not Over till It's Over: Five Strategies to Improve Your Meetings (Vol. 30, No. 1)

The Surprising Science of Meetings (Vol. 41, No. 1)

Increase Your Organization's Influence in Just 15 Minutes a Month (Vol. 38, No. 1)

Mastering Virtual Meetings (Vol. 42, No. 2)

How to Run the Perfect Board Meeting – While Inspiring Board Members to Raise Funds (Vol. 36, No. 4)

Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them (Vol. 39, No. 2)

Powerful New Communication Tool for Your Meetings: Engaging Both Sides of Your Brain (Vol. 26, No. 3)

Twelve Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings – And Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 3)