

# free-range thinking™



## The Single Best Predictor of a Successful Meeting is...

A well-crafted agenda can be the difference between a meandering, frustrating, time-wasting conversation and a genuinely productive meeting. And when you consider how much time you spend in meetings...

**On** paper this reads like a simple declarative sentence, but try this test: say it to a colleague and ask what it means. Respondents in my informal focus group were unanimously suspicious: the guy was clearly coming to the meeting *with an undeclared purpose*. There was something *he wanted*, so he *had an agenda*. I wanted only to convey that he was carrying a particular document, but the A-word carries its own baggage these days, and that's worth noting.

Even though business experts agree an agenda is a critical component of any meeting, I am constantly surprised how many meetings proceed without one. Maybe the word's negative connotations are partly to blame. Or perhaps some people assume an agenda is merely a list of topics, so they figure there's no reason passing one around if the list is short (as it frequently is) and everyone knows it anyway. And let's not discount the factor that explains about 90% of organizational problems: sloth. Whatever the reason, the message here is simple: *get over*

*it*. "A written agenda, distributed in advance, is the single best predictor of a successful meeting," says the 3M Marketing Team, authors of the book, *Mastering Meetings*, and I've seen no evidence to the contrary.

The next time you're invited to a meeting, insist on an agenda. (It's a fair trade: someone is requesting a portion of your time, so why not ask for a slice of his - prior to the meeting -- in return?) And when it's your turn to call a meeting, make sure your agenda includes the following items:

### **1. A clear and concise statement of the meeting's objective.**

If you can't state the purpose and desired outcome in a single sentence, you're not ready to call a meeting. "The purpose of this meeting is to determine an approach for our new website." Good: your participants know why they're convening and what you intend to decide.

### **2. Starting and ending times.**

Let attendees know *exactly* how much time you're requesting. Everyone

announces start times - that's the easy part - but including an end time gives yourself a deadline and helps your invitees plan the rest of their day.

### **3. The names of the meeting convener and all participants.**

Have you ever attended a meeting where, once the objective was made clear, it was embarrassingly evident that key people were absent? An agenda that includes the objective *and* a full list of invited participants *and that is distributed in advance* helps avoid this awkward, time-wasting problem.

### **4. List of topics, how the group will handle each topic, and anticipated length for each topic.**

Most meeting leaders have no problem listing the appropriate topics. For the sample objective noted above, the list might look like this:

- A. Different Models of Websites (e.g., content, community, activism)
- B. Competitive Profile - What Are Similar Organizations Doing?
- C. Financial / Staffing Considerations
- D. Brainstorming Ideas
- E. Next Steps

What's not evident here, however, is the *kind of interaction* planned for each topic. For most meetings, interaction among the leader and participants tends to fall into 3 distinct categories:

**Information** - a one-way download that doesn't require feedback (e.g., a manager bringing new information to her team)

**Discussion** - a solicitation of ideas and suggestions that is not intended

to culminate with a decision (e.g., brainstorming)

**Action** - making a decision or committing to a plan (e.g., next steps)

Designating item A above as "Information" alerts participants that this portion of the meeting will be a presentation requiring listening only. Adding "Discussion" to item B signals that comments will be requested (so come prepared). Finally, noting the anticipated time length for each item lets participants know what to expect and helps them see in advance what is being prioritized (since more important items tend to be allotted more time).

### **5. Speakers for each topic.**

"Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to talk about this." Have you ever heard that in a meeting? Identifying individuals who will lead the various segments in your meeting avoids this problem and helps ensure key participants will adequately prepare.

### **6. Instructions on how to prepare, what to bring.**

If there's research your invitees need to complete or materials they need to bring (e.g., memoranda, legal pads, doughnuts), your agenda can cover this ground as well. Those who run the best meetings leave nothing to chance, and item #6 is a good catch-all for preparatory steps not covered by #1-5.

When your agenda is completed, circulate it to all invitees a few days prior to the meeting and solicit feedback. You may discover that someone who should be invited has been omitted, an item you thought would only take ten minutes will

probably require thirty, or a particular invitee doesn't have the background materials that are required reading prior to the meeting. By collecting everyone's feedback, you can improve the agenda and expect more buy-in from your participants.

An agenda is much more than a list. Thoughtfully prepared, it is a road map that will get you where you want to go and will use everyone's time more efficiently in the process. "He came to the meeting with an agenda?" Good for him!

## free-range follow-up

### **Beyond the Agenda**

According to a study conducted by the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California, there are 6 reasons why most meetings fail. The absence of a written agenda is one of them. Here are the other five:

1. Lack of sufficient notification (i.e., no time to prepare).
2. Wrong people in attendance.
3. Lack of control - attendees had no real impact on decision-making process, or the leader didn't exert proper control of the meeting (or both).
4. Political pressure - attendees were forced to express views which they didn't endorse (or were reluctant to speak candidly).
5. Hidden agendas.

If you want to improve the quality of meetings you attend, consider investing a few hours learning how to create the conditions for success while avoiding common pitfalls. "Dramatically Better Meetings" is a half-day workshop specifically designed for public interest groups, foundations, or progressive businesses that want to get more from their meetings internally and externally. To find out more, please read the brochure enclosed with this newsletter.

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