



New Tips for Fast Meetings

The productive half hour meeting is doable – here's how to plan it, stay on track, and accomplish what you need in record time.

By Jean Van Rensselar

A half hour meeting that accomplishes exactly what you need is feasible. But it requires smart (not time-consuming) planning; discipline during the meeting (yes, you'll have to be the heavy sometimes); and a laser focus on achieving results (getting what you need in 30 minutes).

Ideally, after the meeting people should be saying two things:

1. Wow, that meeting was rigid.
2. I can't believe we got all that done in a half hour.

The information that follows applies to the most common meeting type - physical gatherings of 10 people or less. Most of this applies to non-physical meetings - such as teleconferences – as well, but not to extraordinary meetings called for extraordinary purposes.

Plan Ahead

A good reason to call a meeting is any time an issue or project calls for fast-paced roundtable input or you want to gauge reactions. More specifically, four good reasons to call a meeting include:

1. To define and/or solve problems
2. To make a decision or gauge reaction to a decision already made.
3. To disseminate or collect verbal information
4. To accomplish tasks

The worst reason to call a meeting is that you want the group to accomplish something that you or someone else could have easily accomplished another way. To avoid this, draft the agenda and review each item before you schedule the meeting.

The biggest timesaver is advance planning and the best way to communicate efficiency to the participants ahead of time is with a straightforward, but thorough agenda that includes a clear purpose. If you don't have a strong enough purpose for a meeting, you can never do enough planning to compensate. If you're sure you have a purpose, here's where to start.

There are three kinds of meetings:

1. Participatory – where participants are encouraged to share opinions and insight
2. Informational – where the facilitator conveys information
3. Combination – the facilitator first conveys information and then opens the meeting for discussion.

Bear in mind that the goals of a purely informational meeting can often be accomplished in a more time-efficient way, for example through written materials.

If it's going to be a participatory meeting, decide on the tone of the discussion ahead of time and note it on the agenda. The choices are these:

- Possibilities – encouraging creativity and generating ideas
- Opportunities – narrowing down a field of options
- Action – making a decision and committing to action.

Only invite people who have a stake in the outcome, have something to add to the discussion, or must be invited because of protocol. It's better to approach the uninvited and offended ahead of time with your reasons, than have the discussion run off track.

Once you've decided on the participants, send each an email with the date, time, and a brief description of the purpose and goal. Let them know that a complete agenda will follow shortly. Expect an RSVP and specify the timeframe to respond. For example, *Please RSVP by 4:00 tomorrow (Tuesday)*. If they don't RSVP by then, send the same email again and ask for confirmation that they received it. If you need certain participants to prepare something ahead of time, let them know once they've confirmed.

Then email the agenda along with attachments (keep each piece to one page) and ask participants to read everything ahead of time. Prepare print copies of the agenda and all attachments to distribute at the meeting.

The One-Page Agenda

Limit the agenda to one page even if you have to use a smaller font – see *Meeting Agenda Template*. Doing this sends a message from the start that you are organized, no nonsense, and plan to keep things moving.

In front of each item on the agenda, put the clock time, not minutes allowed. For example, if the meeting starts at 9:30 and the first item will take 10 minutes, put “9:30 – 9:40”, not “10 minutes.” This is another indicator to participants that they need to arrive on time and that you're serious about keeping the meeting short and concise.

Schedule the moderately intense items first before the more routine items. Anything that's potentially volatile and not open for discussion should be last on the agenda. Doing this will end the meeting on a sour note, but it won't poison the whole meeting.

For a meeting where participants are physically gathered, staple attachments under the agenda and put one packet in front of each chair. If you have many attachments, put everything in a basic folder with the agenda paper-clipped on top. The idea is to make it as easy as possible for participants to find the information they need after the meeting – it all needs to stay together and fit into a basket or hanging folder.

What to Bring

Here are the basics to bring to a physical gathering:

- Enough agendas and attachments for participants, plus two more
- A legal pad for notes (a laptop creates a wall, but a smaller netbook is OK)
- A stack of blank index cards that participants can use for a variety of things
- Extra pens
- A one minute timer – stopwatch
- A speaker's token (we'll get to this in a minute)

Stay on Track

Assign a note-taker. If it's a small group (five or less) consider taking notes yourself. Notes should cover the following 5 areas:

1. Who was present
2. The substance of all relevant comments
3. The general tone of the discussion
4. The specific decisions and how they were reached
5. Follow-up actions; who is responsible for accomplishing them, and when they need to be accomplished

Expect that everything will run smoothly, but be prepared to handle logjams. Assuming that everyone is civil, here are the four primary time-wasters:

- The discussion is vague, scattered, and frequently off topic
- One unimportant aspect gets beaten to death.
- One person dominates the conversation.
- Participants defensively focus on their own personal agendas

Keep a sharp eye out for signs that any of these four things are happening and get the discussion back on track. One of the trickiest situations is limiting comments. Unfortunately, there is no good way to cut someone off. Whatever you do will involve interrupting. But if you tell everyone at the beginning of the meeting that comments are limited to one minute, you'll only need to point to the timer. The best way to get the discussion back on track is say, "That's interesting, but how is that relevant to..." If someone launches a personal attack, say, "Do you really want that in the notes?"

One minute is plenty of time for a constructive comment, but not enough time for a rambling anecdote or a string of disconnected observations – which is exactly the point. If you don't give people time to argue or get off track, they won't. Some experts suggest using a speaking token –

you can't speak unless you're holding the token. Others suggest requiring everyone to stand up for the entire meeting.

For project meetings, consider requiring the following one-minute comment format:

1. What did the person complete since the last meeting?
2. What is the person working on now?
3. Where does the person need help? (actual help comes after the meeting)

Accomplish What You Need

As the meetings ends, there are four ways to arrive at decisions:

1. The facilitator makes the call
2. Majority vote – for groups where members have entrenched positions
3. Informal consensus – for small groups where most members are amenable to compromise
4. Delegation – selected group members decide

After making a decision, read the highlights of the meeting notes to the group and ask if anyone has anything to add. If there is follow-up action, be sure that participants know what they need to do and when it needs to be done. Then reiterate tasks and deadlines in an email.

If you have a clear purpose for another meeting and need to schedule one, this is the time to do it. If it looks like the meeting is going to run long, wrap it up without a decision. Then assess what still needs to be done before scheduling another meeting. You may find that you can accomplish it another way

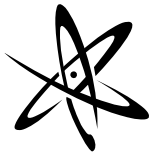
At the very end of the meeting, have the courage to ask participants:

- What worked well in this meeting?
- What can I do better next time?

Lack of planning and unproductive discussion will turn what should be a 30-minute meeting into a 90-minute meeting. As the facilitator, the 60-minute difference is you.

About the Author

Jean Van Rensselar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized tech-oriented B2Bs. You can reach her at Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com or 630-363-8081.



SMART PR Communications
PR Communications for Technical Organizations

Meeting on Logo Options

Wednesday Jan. 6, 2010

9:30 – 10:00

Place/Medium: Conference room 2002A

Access Instructions: None

Participants: Emily Warner, Janelle Reich, Kevin Wisniewski, Paul Abbott, Anthony Camiatta, Kevin Ritter, Kumar Patel.

Facilitator: Jean Van Rensselar

Contact Information: Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com, 630-363-8081, (ext. 81)

FYI: No cell phones or laptops; bring agenda and attachments

Purpose: This will be a participatory meeting to discuss logo options.

Goal: Narrow the logo choices down to no more than two

Agenda

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 9:30 – 9:35 | Review six existing logo options |
| 9:35 – 9:45 | Presentation of pros and cons – Kevin and Emily |
| 9:45 – 9:55 | Discussion and consensus vote |
| 9:55 – 10:00 | Review notes, actions, recommendations |

Meeting Subject

Date

Start/End Time:

Place/Medium:

Access Instructions:

Participants:

Facilitator:

Contact Information:

FYI:

Purpose:

Goal:

Agenda