



7 simple ideas for

BETTER MEETINGS

Try these strategies to engage your team
members in productive discussions.

BY ZACH BROOKE

Much of work culture is specific to each country, industry and office, but there is one constant shared by millions of workers across the planet: meetings. Long or short, crowded or intimate, remote or in person, recurring or ad hoc, these employee huddles anchor the workweek.

Because meetings, and the planning and follow-up they require, consume so much worktime, there are several reasons to dissect meeting procedure for efficiency's sake. But equally as important is how meetings reflect on the people who run them.

"It may not be fair, but managers tend to be seen as good or bad by how they run a meeting," said Lee Gimpel, founder of Better Meetings, a company that designs, facilitates and offers training for meetings.

Few managers have the skills to run an effective meeting, Gimpel said, and even fewer take time to learn. "The reality is that many bosses are only doing what their bosses did before them, and no one really ever learned how to run a good meeting," he said. "It's often a case of the blind leading the blind. Even a small amount of training on how to hold meetings can pay dividends for years and years for the manager as well as other employees who then model what that manager is doing."

With so many different types of meetings, there's no single checklist that guarantees peak collaboration. But there are several tools available, as well as general planning strategies, that can bring meetings to the next level.

1 Make quick updates count

Some reasons to hold meetings are obvious. A change in direction or imminent project execution require quick, collective strategizing. But what about holding meetings just for the purpose of holding meetings? That's where the line becomes less clear. Regular check-ins can be vital, especially for remote workers. But too many of these gatherings can be a detriment to productivity.

"It's admittedly a tough balance to strike," Gimpel said. "Holding too many meetings, especially if they're not seen as a valuable use of time, frustrates employees. On the other hand, if you don't hold any meetings, it probably decreases the sense of cohesion and teamwork within an organization."

One option available to managers is to only create meetings where everyone is expected to participate. Psychologist and leadership expert R. Michael Anderson said he would start meetings with a brief check-in from all present.

"At the beginning of all my regular meetings, we would do a culture exercise and a values exercise," he said. "They'd only take two minutes,

but everybody would be involved, and everybody would be reminded of what we're about as an organization."

The simple act of speaking about culture and values can produce new insights or motivate employees to redouble their efforts. And holding full-participation meetings sets the expectations that employees won't only be talked at by managers.

2 Create a schedule and stick to it

As with the "Why?" question, there is no one-size-fits-all answer for the "When?" of scheduling meetings. Specific needs dictate the frequency, time and duration. Quick updates can be as short as 15 minutes.

"I'd rather do a 15-minute check-in on Mondays and Thursdays, because I think that meetings that are quick and to the point are able to communicate more," Gimpel said. "You might want to think about short daily or weekly meetings to tackle quick tactical decisions, but maybe a longer meeting to settle something bigger like a marketing plan every month or every few weeks."

Gimpel suggests a quarterly or annual meeting to look at long-term strategy — but cautions

against throwing too much into check-in meetings.

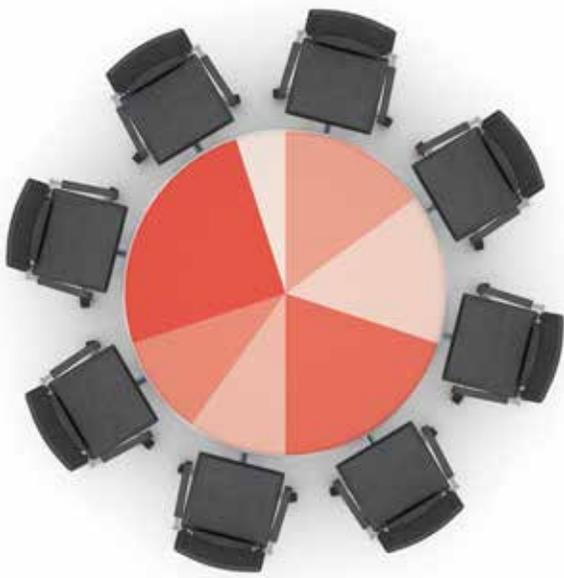
"It's really frustrating to set a quick tactical meeting on 'what we're all doing this week' and then, in the middle of it, try to tackle a big problem that's outside that scope and takes longer to figure out."

3 A little preparation goes a long way

Anderson recommends setting expectations for meetings before they start. That means making sure everyone understands the goal of the meeting and proper meeting etiquette.

"Don't click the link to join my meeting — if we're doing a virtual meeting — when we're supposed to do the meeting," Anderson said. "Click it three minutes before [it starts], because I'm going to start on time."

Also take care when setting the guest list. Nobody wants to be kept out of the loop, but realistically many issues only require discussions between a few people. Filling meetings with unnecessary staff will, at best, confuse a lot of bystanders, and at worst, drag on with unnecessary explanations or veer toward unproductive discussions. ▶



Instead of agendas, create pie charts where each slice includes items up for discussion. The amount of time that should be spent on each topic can be reflected by the size of the slices.

R. MICHAEL ANDERSON is an entrepreneur, leadership mentor and psychologist. Contact him at rmichaelanderson.com.

LEE GIMPEL is the founder of Better Meetings (bettermeetings.com), a meeting design, facilitation and training company in Washington, D.C., USA. He works on in-person and online meetings and conferences.

4 Give meetings a personality

After you begin, employees will respond to the energy you are putting out, so be sure to start enthusiastically.

“If you’re leading the meeting, you want to come in so that people meet and feed off of that energy,” Anderson said. “Don’t expect people to do things that you’re not doing yourself.”

Similarly, try to add an element of novelty to stimulate people in the middle of their workday. “It’s also up to the leader, especially if they’re weekly meetings, to add some variety to it,” Anderson said. “There’s so many little apps. You can do something where everybody types something in and it pops up on the screen, or you can do surveys, polls or anything else.”

5 Focus on the right things during and after

For many meeting planners, organization begins and ends with agendas. These documents can shape the conversations but often fail to manage time. Instead of agendas, create pie charts where each slice includes items up for discussion. The amount of time that should be spent on each topic can be reflected by the size of the slices.

“This more visual approach helps us understand that, for example, the lion’s share of the time should be spent on brainstorming new product ideas versus doing departmental updates,” Gimpel said. “Also, creating a pie chart may drive home the point that what one is trying to tackle in a meeting is simply unrealistic. If the pie has lots of little slices in it, the chances are good that many of those items won’t get covered or won’t get the time and attention they probably deserve.”

Finally, don’t rely on instinct or intuition to assess how well a meeting went, particularly if you are the one doing most of the talking. Gimpel said managers tend to overestimate how good a meeting was.

“Think about whether everyone participated and got a chance to speak and contribute, or if people were mostly sitting passive and inert,” Gimpel said. “It’s also helpful to think about the mood as people are leaving a meeting. If it seems like people are energized and excited, then it was probably a good meeting.”

6 A roadmap for productive brainstorming

The larger the meeting group, the greater the potential to lose focus. This is especially true if the meeting is geared toward developing new ideas. Encouraging people to flex

their creative muscles is good, but rather than thinking aloud together as one group, consider breaking members into smaller groups and let them each come up with their own suggestions. This will ensure that the thinking will not be dominated by a few people, and that the issues at hand will be approached from several angles.

Also consider allowing employees to submit feedback that cannot be traced back to them. “It’s fine and good to say that all answers are valued, but the reality is that employees know that something may not be the proper thing to say even if it’s the right thing,” Gimpel said.

7 Know when to sit back

Part of being a leader is recognizing when it is appropriate to take a step back. Employees understand their managers are busy people who cannot spend their time planning every detail. There are also cultural reasons it might not make sense to have meetings conducted only by people in a position of authority.

“It can be really helpful to not have the most senior person steering the discussion because it may limit what people are willing to say,” Gimpel said.

Plus, some employees may relish the opportunity to lead a meeting of their own. Handing off the responsibilities to other facilitators gives leaders the rare opportunity to participate from the sidelines. Such experiences can be learning opportunities to further sharpen meeting instincts, while also being enjoyable for the manager.

“It can be quite liberating as a manager to show up to a meeting as a participant instead of always having to be the person at the head of the table,” Gimpel said. ☺