



## Effective Meetings #5 Using Meetings Effectively

### Introduction

Meetings are often inefficient because they are used for purposes for which they were not designed. When should a meeting be used, and when is an alternative method of communication better?

### Purpose of Meetings: To Think Together

Human creations are typically designed for specific purposes. A pen is designed to put lines of a certain width on paper, for applications such as writing and drawing. Using a pen for a purpose it was not designed for, such as opening a can of vegetables, is generally inefficient.

A meeting uniquely enables rapid back-and-forth interaction. Such interaction is required for people to “think together.” We therefore suggest that the primary purpose of meetings is *to enable people to think together*. When the intended result of a meeting does not require that people think together, holding a meeting is likely to be as inefficient as using a pen as a can opener. The meeting should probably not be held.

Signs that people are thinking together at a meeting include the following:

- Most of the attendees actively participate.
- No one person dominates the conversation.
- No one talks too long.
- No one feels suppressed (wants to speak but holds back).
- Everyone learns from everyone else.
- There are many questions rather than many opinions stated as truths. The spirit is one of inquiry, not combat.
- Discussion stays focused on a single topic and goal.

### Avoid Using Meetings for Information Transfer

Avoid using meetings for one-way information transfer, such as giving a series of status reports (unless each one is brief and generates thinking together). Information transfer is generally better accomplished through e-mail, print media, voicemail, videotape, or audiotape. These methods give receivers the opportunity to process, review, and digest information at their own pace and time. As individuals have their own ways of absorbing and considering information,



these methods of transferring information tend to be more efficient than meetings.

There are exceptions to the rule of avoiding the use of meetings for information transfer. The exceptions include the following situations:

- Fast transfer, such as a “beginning of the day” 15-minute standup status review of high priority short news and coordination items for that day
- People sharing accomplishments and being acknowledged and appreciated
- Trying to figure out something (which is really thinking together) by describing something to someone else, for example trying to determine why some trouble is occurring by walking through the process to see what is being overlooked or misinterpreted
- A powerful speaker who generates thinking in the audience

### **Definition of Meetings: Thinking Together for a Common Purpose**

Meetings can be powerful tools for moving projects forward and for generating creativity. One guide for determining whether to hold a meeting is to apply the definition: *A meeting is a group of people thinking together to forward a common purpose.* Thus, holding a meeting is appropriate when the meeting participants have a common purpose, the intended results of the meeting forward that common purpose, and the intended results require thinking together. (Another criterion is that the cost of holding the meeting does not exceed the value of the meeting’s intended results.) Examples of common purposes include accomplishing a project, learning about a new topic that may become important to the organization, and investigating whether a particular product would be useful for the company to purchase. This definition encompasses formal and informal situations. A casual encounter in a hallway or a quick telephone call can be a meeting.

### **Intended Results for which Meetings Are Useful**

The following are examples of intended results that generally require thinking together and, therefore, holding a meeting:

- Making a decision: Most group decision-making processes are more efficient and effective when a meeting is used.



- Generating buy-in: When active ownership of a course of action by most or all of the participants is needed, especially when the decision-making process is compromise or consensus.<sup>1</sup>
- Building relationships: Team-building requires explicit attention to building relationships. Meetings can build the sharing of a reality (such as planning) and common value systems. Meetings are also appropriate for building esprit de corps in an organization, such as an annual sales team meeting held in Maui or a pre-game meeting of a football team to heighten unity and the conviction that “we can win and we will win.”
- Creating new alternatives, such as in brainstorming.
- Resolving obstacles to a common goal. Meetings are useful when creativity is needed, such as when the solution process is not clear, or when a breakthrough or new way of thinking is required. Meetings are highly useful in detecting and solving problems, particularly complex problems that require addressing the situation together from multiple perspectives to develop a feasible solution.
- Coaching on issues held by multiple members of a group. Everybody’s brainpower can be applied to the coaching, and several people may simultaneously benefit from the coaching of one. A sales department meetings focused on coaching individuals to improve their sales results is an example.
- Speculative exploration of a topic, for general learning or to determine if there are topics that should be considered in greater depth. For example, a project status meeting might be held in which the question is “What hasn’t anyone thought of yet that could cause this project to fail?”

## Putting This Article into Action

Before scheduling or attending a meeting, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the common purpose of the meeting participants relative to this meeting?
- What are the intended results of the meeting?
- Do the intended results forward the common purpose?
- Do the intended results require thinking together?
- Does the value of the intended results justify the cost of the meeting?

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<sup>1</sup> See *Effective Meetings #6: Selecting Group Decision-Making Processes*.



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If you do not know the answers, it would probably be useful to find out before scheduling or agreeing to attend the meeting. If the answers do not justify a meeting, consider not holding the meeting and more efficient methods to accomplish the intended results.

## Summary

A misused meeting is an inefficient meeting. The purpose of a meeting is to enable people to think together. A definition of a meeting is *a group of people thinking together to forward a common purpose*. This guideline can be used to ensure that meetings are used effectively. Ask first “Do the intended results of the meeting require the group to think together to forward a common purpose?” and you will have fewer and better meetings.