

Highlight: Chairing Meetings

Summary

Chairing meetings requires thoughtfulness and skill that many people take for granted. Here, five phases of chairing meetings are addressed: getting ready, starting the meeting, maintaining meeting etiquette, ending the meeting, and following up.

Value

In many organisations, individuals spend up to 25% of their time in meetings. With an increasing emphasis on partnerships, more employees are being asked to chair meetings. The sheer cost of human resources involved in meetings demands that they are run effectively.

Description

Chairing a meeting involves clarity of both process and outcome, relationship strategies, efficient communication and the ability to distinguish process from content. Meetings can easily fail with the omission of any one of these characteristics. Without clarity, people do not know why they are in the meeting or how they should contribute. Without relationship strategies, the chair can let some dominate and others recede into the background. Without communication, messages will be confused or forgotten. Without distinguishing process from content, the meeting can easily become bogged down.

Process

Meeting chairs follow the stages that follow.

Getting Ready

Be very clear about the purpose of the meeting
Determine who needs to be there, when it will be, where it will be and what will be discussed
Identify the meeting leader or chair
Prepare the agenda, with important items first and with start and end times clearly noted. NOTE: If the meeting will involve consensus decisions, it is a good idea to split each issue into a "Discussion" agenda item and a "Decision" agenda item. Hold the "Discussion" items early in the meeting; hold the "Decision" items near the end
Arrange for space, equipment and supplies
Provide any needed information to meeting participants
Remind participants about anything they need to bring

Starting the Meeting

Start on time
Introduce the leader/chair
Allow participants to introduce themselves
Ask for a timekeeper
Ask for a recorder
Review the agenda as a group and make necessary changes
Set time limits for each agenda item
Review action items from the previous meeting

Maintaining Meeting Etiquette

- Encourage participants to raise their hands and be recognized by the chair before speaking
- Encourage participants to listen openly
- Discourage side conversations
- Discourage tangential discussions
- Encourage participants to be calm, brief and direct

Ending the Meeting

- Develop action items (specify who, what, when, where)
- Summarize decisions and discussions
- Establish date/time for the next meeting, if necessary
- Evaluate the meeting
- End on time

Following Up

Distribute minutes within 2 to 3 days, including date/location of meeting, names of all present/absent, agenda items discussed, decisions reached and follow-up on action items

Implementation

Individuals who learn to chair meetings rarely do so from a book or course alone. It is vital that individuals are exposed to effective chairs and experience what it is like to be in an effective meeting. It is recommended that individuals learning to chair meetings take notes at all meetings they attend regarding effective and ineffective strategies.

When starting to chair meetings, individuals are encouraged to bring someone in who can provide feedback on specific items. With appropriate feedback, the individual's strength and comfort will increase rapidly.

Finally, individuals need the opportunity to practice. Chairing meetings requires experience of both success and problems. Inexperienced employees and/or supervisors should be encouraged to chair internal meetings whenever possible.