



Facilitate Meetings

■ *Scope*

This unit examines the need for managers to be competent at chairing and contributing to meetings efficiently as a substantial means of disseminating information, agreeing priorities, discussing and solving problems and decision making.

The unit has two elements:

D2.1 Lead Meetings

D4.2 Make Contributions to Meetings

Points to Ponder

Meetings, well planned and executed, are vital to promote communication of information and decision making; however meetings often happen simply because they have always been done! Most organisations spend a great deal of time holding meetings; in the UK alone an estimated four million hours are spent in meetings each day. This means many thousands of people are sitting in meeting rooms listening, making suggestions, solving problems and making decisions. More significantly, similar numbers of people are engaged at meetings chewing nails, being bored, staring through the window or drawing idly on paper!

Why do meetings go so wrong?

Is a meeting 'a group of people that keeps the minutes and loses the hours' or 'a group of the unwilling, picked from the unfit to do the unnecessary'?

Problems? - Those who participate feel that they are not as effective as they could be in contributing to or chairing the meeting? Is it being handled too firmly or not firmly enough? Do people talk too much or don't say enough? Does the meeting not have an agenda or there is one, in theory, but not in practice? Perhaps the chair does not allow any deviation from the agenda or there are far too many deviations? Whatever the cause may be, 'waste of time' is the recurring theme. People feel they go to too many meetings.

The elements often quoted by gurus to organise productive meetings are:

- **Adequate preparation**
- **Agreement on follow up action**
- **Staying on the subject**
- **Clearly set objectives**
- **Beginning on time**
- **Physical environment**
- **Ending on time**
- **Having a written agenda**

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Meetings can be exciting and stimulating, creating ideas, generating commitment and enthusiasm and motivating teams. Without meetings communication will be a lot more difficult and creativity and innovation suppressed.

So, the trick is to get the balance right. How? Generally meetings fail because:

- **Failure of preparation – details of the requirements of the meeting are not circulated beforehand**
- **Failure of purpose – it might be important for people to get together but there must be a purpose why they are doing so**
- **Failure of communication – the purpose, subject matter, urgency before the meeting, poor listening skills during the meeting, and late and inaccurate minutes after the meeting**
- **Failure of full utilisation of available resources – ‘experts’ are a major resource available at meetings; they have to be utilised skilfully via the chairperson who should work hard to ensure that the maximum benefit is gained from the experts, both the quiet and the loud ones. Another expensive resource that is frequently wasted at meetings is time: often time spent at meetings is inversely proportional to the importance of the subject**
- **Failure of decision – often happens as the failure to distinguish discussion from decision. This happens due to failure to confront hidden agendas or failure to recognise reality**
- **Failure of implementation – ‘the New Year resolution’ syndrome occurs because there is no mechanism to implement or there is no will to use the mechanism**

Meetings need to be planned; the person chairing the meeting has the responsibility to ensure that it runs smoothly, for its tone, control and climate. Imagine this scenario – half the people needed to be there were not invited or have not turned up; the agenda is a set of standing items or non-existent; people have not had the opportunity to gather their thoughts or read and understand relevant document beforehand; the room is small, stuffy and cramped; there are constant interruptions, nothing has been decided at the meeting, people got ratty with each other as each want to discuss something different... a waste of time. Sounds familiar? Perhaps an exaggeration but only just!



Good preparation gets you a long way towards a successful meeting:

- **Know your objective (purpose) and send relevant, pre-meeting materials out in good time**
- **Decide who should be there and invite only those who need to be there**
- **Prepare an agenda (this is the backbone of a meeting – title, date and place of meeting, apologies for absence, minutes of previous meeting, matters arising from previous meeting, other items to be discussed and decided, any other business, date, time and place of next meeting)**
- **Arrange the time and place (room size, heating, ventilation, to smoke or not to smoke, tables and chairs, layout)**

Even the most informal meetings should have some sort of written notes, any decisions made will need agreed written records as a prerequisite for implementation; relying on yours or someone else's memory will be very dangerous indeed.

The role of the chairperson is a crucial one; the overall objective is to get the best outcome possible from the meeting. The major tasks of the chairperson are:

- **Opening the meeting and setting and keeping it on course**
- **Structuring the meeting, with reference to the agenda, time and the over all purpose (facilitate discussion; strike a balance between allowing participants enough time to discuss proposals and suggest ideas, and allowing too much time so that suggestions become tedious and repetitive)**
- **Summarising at intervals and at the end (recap, clarify decisions and actions and people responsible to do them, check commitment)**
- **Ensuring that an accurate, unambiguous and brief record of decisions and actions is made and followed through**

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Leadership skills – vision, communication and appropriate control – come into play to make a skillful chairperson. Ask the views of others before giving your own. Telling people what you think before they get a say leaves people with the idea that the outcome is already decided.

Facilitate discussion by:

- **Listening**
- **Questioning**
- **Encouraging**
- **Harmonising and conciliating**
- **Praising and complimenting (acknowledge the strengths and achievements of others)**
- **Building and integrating**
- **Make sure that all members contribute**
- **Be ready to compromise**
- **Be aware of undercurrents and hidden agendas**
- **Know when to insist on continuing the discussion until the point has been thrashed out**

Know your 'problem people' – the whisperers, the whingers, the 'why me's?', the wanderers, the wizards, the worriers and yourself! Identifying the way you use control at a meeting can be a very useful piece of management development work. If you can improve the efficiency of your meetings by improving the way you chair them, you are indirectly increasing the efficiency of your department.

Most people go to a meeting to get something done or to hear and understand something they didn't know. Power, politics, expertise and position will all have an effect on how much a person will speak up in a meeting.

An appreciation of the behaviour that happens in meetings helps the chairperson in many ways:

- **It helps to understand what is going on in the meeting – people don't often say what they really mean**
- **It is much more constructive and productive to recognise and eliminate unproductive conflict before it destroys the whole meeting**
- **Working with others, a group, is a lot different from working with one or two members of your own team**



A number of management writers have identified the following behaviours that are visible during meetings:

- **Task (concerned with getting the task done) – initiating activity, seeking and giving information, building and celebrating, co-ordinating, summarising and testing understanding**
- **Maintenance behaviour (concerned with helping individuals in the group achieve the task) – encouraging, gate-keeping (making sure that everyone, even the quieter ones contribute), standard setting, following – accepting other people’s ideas, expressing group feeling)**
- **Task and maintenance behaviour – evaluating, diagnosing, testing for consensus, mediating, relieving tension**
- **Non-functional behaviour – being aggressive, blocking, self-confessing and sympathy-seeking, competing, seeking recognition, negative humour, withdrawing**

Contributing effectively to a meeting is pretty much similar to behaviours used by skilled negotiators:

- **Signal your intention**
- **Ask questions**
- **Test understanding**
- **Summarising**
- **Say how you feel**

Avoid:

- **Using irritators (verbal and non verbal, ‘with respect, ‘...our very reasonable offer’, sighing, rolling your eyes)**
- **Diluting your argument**
- **Making counter proposals**
- **Getting into defence/attack spirals**

As a **valuable contributor**, you will ask questions to gain information, get further details, clarify and test understanding, show that you are taking an idea seriously, defuse anger and conflict and to assert yourself as a contributor.

Get your timing right; many useful and valid points are brushed aside because they are not made at the right time.

To make an impact on a meeting, prioritise your issues on which you wish to have a say rather than have something to say about everything; then make it short and snappy, ask for reactions, and use examples or visual aids if there is a need.

When you don’t agree about an issue under discussion, give reasons, prioritise, ask questions, change your mind or give in gracefully.

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A lot of managers hate going for meetings let alone chairing them. Meeting with a few people they know is fine but going to a meeting with strangers from other departments, some of whom might be a lot senior, with different priorities, wants, knowledge and power, is rather a form of refined torture! You feel awkward because you are the only woman or man, you are too junior, you have something to say that others are not going to like or welcome or you are just not used to meetings.

■ *Why do you lack confidence?*

Everyone experiences the internal critic, the nagging voice from inside saying, 'you better not do that in case you got it wrong'? Tell it to go back, that you know what you are doing and will go ahead and do it. Learn to listen and ask for reactions; use assertive non-verbal behaviour and agree actively. Be persistent. You can learn to behave confidently by identifying in advance the issues which cause you to feel unsure of yourself.

In order to **influence** at meetings, you need to know:

- The person. People generally fall into four categories: **helpers** who enjoy looking after others with little personal reward; **activists** who like achieving, taking control and using power; **thinkers** who are self-reliant and like to review the logic behind a situation before taking action; and **generalists** who might share some of the characteristics of the other three
- Yourself (do you like inclusion, control or affection/openness?)
- The circumstances and need – the culture and norms of the organisation. What style is dominant in the culture, the 'push' or 'pull'?

All meetings should have some sort of outcome and that needs to be communicated or implemented. It makes sense to think about who the information should be communicated to and choose the best way of doing it. Some information is best disseminated by written memos, some face-to-face. When certain decisions need to be implemented, financial, political and resource restraints should be considered or cleared prior to the meeting. Details should be checked and responsibility allocated at the meeting, which should also take into account any likely reaction to the decisions. After the meeting, commitment can be assured by rightful ownership, recognition and support to those who are carrying out the activities. Any actions should be monitored regularly and necessary adjustments made; success evaluated at the end and celebrated.

Investigate

1. ***Write a reflective log of a recent meeting you have chaired or attended. Consider the chairperson (you or another person) and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses. What was successful and what went wrong? What was the general behaviour of the participants and why did they behave that way? Was it a successful meeting or otherwise? Give reasons.***

Unit D2



■ *Guidance for Gathering Evidence for this Unit*

All elements call for a personal narrative covering the performance criteria, indicating clearly where you have provided supplementary work evidence.

Possible Sources of Supporting Evidence

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<i>Possible Source of Evidence</i>	<i>Used</i>	<i>Location in Workplace/Portfolio</i>
Supported by relevant documents such as the agenda, minutes or a witness testimony, the exercise should also cover most of the PCs		
Evidence of you clarifying issues with others prior to the meeting, agendas you prepared, minutes you have written or authorised		
Memos you have sent after a meeting informing others of decisions made		
Evidence of you supporting or checking up follow up actions		
Witness testimony from colleagues explaining your ability to chair or make contributions at a meeting		
Candidate's Signature		
Assessor's Signature		

Comments:

