

AGENDA PLANNING 101

By Inez O. Ng

One of the biggest complaints in Corporate America is how much time people are spending in meetings. I think the sentiment is so strong because most meetings are not very well-run, nor very productive. It is the responsibility of the person calling the meeting to make sure that the result is worth the time-investment of the people involved. Involving people in a productive, effectively ran meeting gives them a sense of accomplishment and contribution. They don't walk away feeling like their time has been wasted. They generally form stronger bonds with their teammates and have a greater sense of community. Both are highly valued benefits of conducting effective meetings.

In order to have a well-run and productive meeting, it is crucial that the agenda is well-planned. This is a task that takes careful thought and anticipation.

First step: Establish priorities

If the meetings you are planning have a very narrow focus or objective, then planning the agenda should be fairly simple. Often we are involved in meetings that have a long list of objectives. That's when your skills in meeting agenda planning is really put to the test.

First determine the order of importance for the list of objectives. To do that, ask this question: "if I only have time to accomplish one thing at this meeting, what will it be?" The answer is your number one priority objective.

Then ask the next questions: "if I only have time to accomplish one more thing at this meeting, what will it be?" That answer is your second highest priority item. You can continue with this same question until you have ranked all the objectives that have been identified for this meeting.

Second Step: Plan according to the priorities

Now that you know what the most important objective for the meeting is, you need to put the agenda items that contribute to achieving this objective first on the agenda. Make sure that you have allowed enough time for a satisfactory resolution. List agenda items based on their priorities and you can be assured that if your meeting goes way off schedule, at least the most important objectives have been achieved.

Third Step: Check to make sure important elements are included

Now you are ready to put together the agenda. Make sure you have included the essential elements such as date, location, attendees, items on the agenda, time allotted, discussion leader, desired outcome etc.

Other Important Considerations:

- **Plan frequent breaks**

People's attention span will only last as long as they can sit still. Plan frequent breaks to get their blood pumping, or to give their backside a little relief. I recommend one short break every 60 to 90 minutes. Make sure that they understand that it is a "one task break" of 10 minutes. They can check messages or run to the restroom, but they don't have time for both.

- **Establish Meeting Ground Rules**

Before you start your meeting, it is always beneficial to have agreement among the group for a set of ground rules that everyone will obey during that meeting. Very typical rules generally include:

- Be on time

- Cell phones and pagers off or on vibrate
- No side-bars
- Everyone participates

Add others as appropriate for your group, and get agreement that the group will abide by these ground rules. Rules serve no purpose if they are not enforced.

- **Watch out for agenda overload**

Most people can only be away from their office for a few days. If a realistic assessment of the time needed to cover all the agenda items is 7 days, and you are planning a 4-day meeting, then you must be ruthless in trimming out any items that are not crucial, or can be accomplished another way. Resist the temptation to extend the meeting to accommodate all the items. People will be too burnt-out to be effective after a few days. Or they are so concerned about the work that is being stacked-up while they are gone that they are not mentally present at the meeting.

Some people offer up agenda items because they think it is convenient while everyone is already gathered together to cover a topic. Often, if the objective is information sharing, this can be accomplished via a distribution of the information, or a short conference call. Then you can save your precious face-to-face meeting time for items that truly require the collaboration and sharing that the meeting environment can provide.

- **Train your presenters to abide by your agenda**

Communicate with your presenters so that they manage their time properly. Ask them to make sure that they allow time for questions. Try your best not to let a presenter or discussion leader encroach on someone else's time. If you allow each presenter to take another 5 minutes, and you have 5 presenters, the last presenter will be out of time before she can even begin.

A well-planned agenda should have a flow to it. The order of the items should make sense. Similar subjects are generally grouped together. It should be clear to everyone why an item is on the list. The time allocation should be realistic. If your agenda passes all these tests, then you have mastered agenda planning, which is one of the crucial steps to having a well-run productive meeting.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Are you struggling with the responsibility of management? Personal Coach Inez Ng has worked with professional seeking a smooth and rapid transition from manager to inspiring leader. While focusing on specific areas, her coaching positively impacts all areas of her clients' lives. Learn more about coaching with Inez at <http://www.RealizationsUnltd.com> Be sure to sign up for her ezine. And don't forget to check out her information packed ebook "Master Email without Breaking a Sweat!" at <http://www.easyemailstrategies.com>

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