

# Hosting a meeting? These tips can keep it from being a dud.

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## FULL TEXT

To attend meetings is to resent most of them. The ones that run too long and could have been handled by email. The ones marred by technological mishaps. The ones dominated by that loudmouth colleague who talks over everyone else. And the ones that fill your schedule to the point that you don't have any time to actually, you know, work.

Meetings are "the largest single cost that goes unevaluated and undiscussed on an organization's balance sheet," said Steven Rogelberg, a chancellor's professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and author of "The Surprising Science of Meetings."

Poorly run meetings waste attendees' time and "result in immediate frustration," Rogelberg said. "When we have a bad meeting, it sticks with us, and we ruminate, and it negatively affects our productivity." Plus, he said, employees constantly subjected to bad meetings have lower engagement overall, and sometimes wind up quitting.

The coronavirus pandemic, during which many employees have transitioned to working remotely, has increased the number of workers' meetings per day, according to Harvard Business School. And many employees have complained of "Zoom fatigue," or video-call-induced exhaustion.

But even in the best of times, meetings can create a strange dynamic: "When we attend a meeting, we relinquish our personal power and agency, and we give it to the meeting leader," Rogelberg said. "And that's a big deal, to literally give agency to someone else."

If you're the one with that agency, there are ways to make meetings less fraught and more efficient. Here are tips for hosting better meetings, whether in person or virtually:

*Adopt a "stewardship mind-set."* As the steward of the meeting, it's your job to facilitate it to the best of your ability - which includes how you prepare for it, how you manage people during it and how you conclude it.

Think about how you might prepare for and run a meeting with someone you want to impress, such as a key customer or your company's CEO. As Rogelberg puts it: "We would never want those people to leave our meetings saying that was a waste of time, right? But we tend to put that discipline and intentionality and thoughtfulness aside when we're meeting with our team or our peers."

*Create and distribute a detailed agenda before the meeting.* Typical agenda items include tracking and following up on goals and projects; resolving problems; and discussing complex issues, said Paul Axtell, a corporate trainer and author of "Meetings Matter." "You should only put something on the agenda that you need the group's input on," he added. And make sure the number of items is appropriate for the time you have available. Otherwise, the meeting could run long, which is one of meeting attendees' biggest complaints.

Rogelberg suggests organizing the agenda as a set of questions. You'll know if the meeting has been successful because all the questions will have been answered. And if you can't think of any questions to put on the agenda? Easy solution: Skip the meeting.

*Control the discussion.* It's your job to steer the conversation and interject if it's drifting off track, Axtell said. You also need to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. If someone is repeatedly cutting off another attendee, Axtell suggests saying: "Do you mind if I just hold you back for a moment? I want to make sure that Janine has finished what she's got, and then I'll come back to you."

*Don't over-invite.* It's best to keep meetings small - around six people, Rogelberg said. The larger the group, the more likely something will go wrong, and each attendee will have less opportunity to contribute. A tip for this virtual era: Record your meeting on Zoom, then make it available for nonessential attendees to watch at a convenient time.

*Keep meetings short, especially when they're virtual.* We all have shorter attention spans these days, so do your best to reduce meeting length, Rogelberg said. Scheduling just 15 or 20 minutes can be as effective as reserving a full hour. "When you dial meeting times back, you tend to create positive pressure," he said. "That leads to more focus."

Keep in mind that attendees probably have another meeting right after yours, said Erica Keswin, a workplace strategist and author of "Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic." If you schedule a meeting from, say, 10 to 11 a.m., "how is somebody going to have time to take a minute to breathe or stand up between that and the next meeting?" Ending at a less typical time, such as 10:45, is an easy way to show respect for your colleagues' busy schedules, she said.

*Open virtual meetings early.* Humans crave connection, especially while working from different places. Axtell always opens meeting rooms 10 to 15 minutes early, "so you can say hello and chat with people." It's a great way to foster connection and bond with your team. Plus, it prevents casual banter from eating up meeting time.

*Establish the rules at the start.* At the beginning of a meeting, ensure everyone is on the same page about expectations. For example, let attendees know whether you'll be calling on participants, so they're not caught off guard. Or you might ask them to put away their devices and not do other work.

It's also a good idea to address how you'll handle questions. Saving them until the end rarely works well, Axtell said, because you've lost the context. In a virtual meeting, encourage folks to enter their questions on the platform's chat feature and designate one attendee to monitor it and alert you. This way, you can continue hosting the meeting without distractedly watching the chat.

*Break up large meetings into smaller ones.* If you must host a large meeting, you can increase engagement by using your virtual platform's breakout room feature (or, if you're in the office, by sending subgroups to separate conference rooms). Assign each subgroup a task to discuss for, say, 15 minutes, then reconvene the larger group. "It primes the pump," Rogelberg said. "When people come back, there tends to be a lot more communication."

*Check in with your colleagues.* In the pandemic's early days, there was an emphasis on checking in with each other and making sure everyone was coping well. That's still important, Keswin said. One suggestion: During the first few minutes of a meeting, "have everyone go around and share one adjective that describes how they're showing up today." A colleague might say she's exhausted or overwhelmed or perfectly content. The exercise is "very inclusive," Keswin said, and helps team members feel connected. Plus, if you're a manager, it can indicate who you need to check in with later, one-on-one.

*Be mindful of the pitfalls of a hybrid workplace.* In this new era of work, some team members will remain remote, dialing into meetings, while others will join in person. It's important for everyone to feel included, Keswin said. She's heard from employees who call into meetings only to find their colleagues already chatting in a way that made them feel like outsiders. There's a risk for remote employees to "feel like second-class citizens," Keswin said. She suggested that, to "democratize" the situation, perhaps each person in the office could call in from their desk, rather than join from the same conference room.

*End the meeting well.* When there are just a few minutes left, start wrapping up. Axtell suggests asking: "Is there anything else anybody would like to add? Is everybody okay with where we are?"

Rogelberg said a good conclusion is an opportunity to recap what the group discussed and to identify the responsible individual for each task. Ending a meeting well "takes this investment everyone just made and says, 'It was a good one, because here's where we're at, and here's how we advanced the ball,'" he said. "People leave your meeting knowing what was accomplished."

*Collect feedback.* This is the most surefire way to improve your meetings, Rogelberg said: "It's really, in many regards, the ultimate act of stewardship." If you host regular meetings with the same group of people, periodically

distribute a survey that attendees can complete anonymously. Ask your team to indicate what's going well and what's not working, and to share ideas for improvement. "What you're trying to do, as a meeting leader, is create positive conversations around meetings," he said. "Right now, the only conversations we have tend to be grouching. What I want to do is change that, and make constructive conversations around meetings more normative."

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