

Straight Talk®

# Managing Effective Meetings

Participant Workbook



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# Managing Effective Meetings

## Introduction

Welcome to this workshop on managing effective meetings. The goal of this workshop is to teach you how to create and manage effective meetings.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, you'll learn about:

- Types of meetings
- Agendas
- Group decision-making roles
- The role of the meeting leader
- Ground rules
- Other valuable meeting protocols

This workshop is part of the Straight Talk® series, designed to provide you with the tools to be an effective communicator, problem solver, and leader. These workshops were developed by Leading Resources Inc. (LRI) in collaboration with Eric Douglas, the author of Straight Talk.

You will find that other workshops complement this workshop, such as our workshop on Communication Styles and on Managing Productive Communication. Details are available at our web site: [www.leadingresources.com](http://www.leadingresources.com).

## Overview

Take a minute to think about how much time you spend in meetings. When you think about it, meetings consume thousands of dollars each year – in some organizations, hundreds of thousands of dollars. In fact, studies have shown that meetings are the single largest cost center for many organizations.

If that's the case, shouldn't meetings always be productive? How can the largest cost center not yield a high return on investment? The answer is that many people haven't learned the tools to manage meetings effectively.

Write below two reasons why you are interested in taking this workshop.

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<sup>1</sup> This workshop is drawn from the book: "Straight Talk: Turning Communication Upside Down for Strategic Results" by Eric Douglas, published 1998, Davies-Black Publishing, Palo Alto. The book, along with other management tools, is available at [www.leadingresources.com](http://www.leadingresources.com).

## The Value of Meetings

If there were to be a constitutional convention in which the rules of meetings were set forth, we believe this would be the most fundamental principle: A meeting must add value to the organization. If it doesn't, it should not be held. To put it another way, a meeting should generate more in value to the organization than it consumes.

How can meetings add value? Primarily in five ways:

- By advancing the goals and objectives of the organization (e.g. deciding on a new product);
- By improving the capacity of the organization (e.g. improving coordination between departments);
- By increasing institutional knowledge (e.g. learning what customers think about your products);
- By building teamwork and trust (e.g. building confidence that team members can rely upon one another);
- By resolving organizational issues (e.g. addressing an unexpected event).

How can you measure the value of a meeting? Here are some methods that organizations employ:

- A financial services company has a policy that all meeting leaders regularly ask how their meetings can be improved.
- An automotive parts manufacturer requires managers to sit down and review all their meetings each year – and eliminate those that are no longer returning value. (For more on “zero-based” meeting management, see page 18).
- A software company, faced with too many meetings, implemented a six-month system of internal chargebacks and relied on the internal “buyer” – the meeting leader – to then decide whether he felt the meeting was worth the cost.

Bottom line, there is no simple formula for calculating the value. People *need* to meet for all the reasons listed above. Some companies look at the hourly expense – and make sure people are aware of how much it costs to meet. For example, if you've got 12 managers meeting for an hour with an average salary of \$100,000 a piece, then the hourly cost of the meeting is \$600.

In our experience, reminding a group of their hourly meeting cost quickly focuses their attention on things that add value to the organization. And if you're the meeting leader, knowing the cost will help you focus the agenda on things that really matter to the company.



There are two corollaries to the fundamental principle of all meetings:

- Don't allow the number of people attending your meetings to grow too large.
- If you're in doubt that a meeting will add value, then the *potential* value should be quite high. This applies, for example, to meetings about prospective customers.

**Exercise:**

In the box below, write down two meetings you attend regularly. Calculate the cost of each meeting, using a rough estimate of the hourly wages of the people involved. Then write down how you think the meeting adds value. Finally, in the space below, jot down your thoughts about how the meetings might be improved to add more value.

Be prepared to share your conclusions with other participants.

Meetings you attend:	Hourly cost:	How does the meeting add value?

**Notes:**

## The Meeting Checklist

A useful tool for designing effective meetings is a checklist to guide the meeting leader in planning the meeting. Each key element on the checklist is described on the following pages. For purposes of illustration, this is a checklist from an actual meeting:



Item:	Example:	To learn more:
<b>Meeting purpose:</b>	Progress report on our strategic objectives.	See page 5
<b>Meeting leader:</b>	CEO	See page 6
<b>Coordinator:</b>	Executive assistant	See page 6
<b>Agenda items:</b>	Review performance to plan; review factors that necessitate changes to plan; review budget; decide on adjustments to budget.	See page 7
<b>Decisions items:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjustments to strategic plan.</li> <li>• Adjustments to budget.</li> <li>• Agree on next steps.</li> </ul>	See page 8
<b>Activities:</b>	Information sharing, brainstorming, problem-solving	See page 9
<b>Decision-making roles:</b>	Consultative and consensus (depending on agenda item).	See page 11
<b>Protocols:</b>	Agenda; balanced scorecard and financial statements distributed in advance, minutes to all senior vice presidents.	See page 13
<b>Ground rules:</b>	In place	See page 15

### Notes:

## Meeting Purpose

Once you have decided that a meeting adds value, then you should be able to define its purpose. Its purpose statement should be written down and communicated to everyone involved prior to the meeting.



Consider the following statements of purpose:

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"To celebrate our achievements and address our challenges in customer service."

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"To review quarterly financial performance."

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"To review market trends and their impact on sales and marketing."

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"To get progress reports on new products and to prioritize new product initiatives."

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Ask yourself: Which of these meetings do you think would add the most value to the organization? The least?

**Notes:**

## Key Meeting Roles

Two people have key roles in creating a successful meeting: the leader and the coordinator. Sometimes the same person holds both roles.

Meeting leaders run the actual meeting. They manage the agenda, decide what information is needed in advance, gain agreement on decisions, and define action steps.

### The leader's role is to:

- Decide the purpose of the meeting.
- Determine and distribute the agenda.
- Define what advance information is needed.
- Convene the meeting on time.
- Make sure everyone is clear on the agenda and decision items.
- Invite dissenting points of view.
- Push the group toward action.
- Ensure the group decides how to share information from the meeting.

### The coordinator's role is to:

- Arrange for the room.
- Monitor the clock.
- Keep the minutes.
- Ensure that minutes are distributed promptly.

The leader also may need to appoint a "pot stirrer" for the meeting – someone to provide a dissenting point of view. Not all meetings need a devil's advocate. But when major issues or problems are on the agenda, the team will benefit from listening to two or more opposing points of view.

Note: The leader should rotate the role of pot-stirrer from meeting to meeting so that everyone perceives that it's a role, not the personality of the person playing the part, to be the devil's advocate. Moreover, rotating the job can be a way to keep meetings lively and fun.

### Notes:



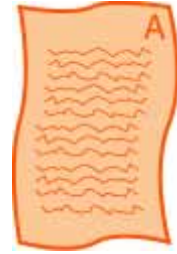


## Agendas

The meeting leader has the responsibility for maximizing the value of meeting time. A key element is an agenda, prepared and distributed before the meeting starts. Agendas force the meeting leader to consider how to best use the meeting time. This agenda format lists the topic, the discussion leader, and the allocated time.

### **Agenda Format A:**

- Welcome (Charles); 5 minutes
- Strategic performance review (Bob); 45 minutes
- Trends affecting strategic plan (Julie, Bob); 45 minutes
- Discussion of potential changes to plan (Bob); 30 minutes
- Break
- Budget review (Julie); 15 minutes
- Trends affecting budget (Julie, Roseanne); 30 minutes
- Discussion of potential budget changes (Julie); 30 minutes
- Communication of results, action steps (Charles); 15 minutes
- Evaluation of meeting (Charles); (10 minutes)



Every agenda should set aside time at the end for people to discuss communication: First, to consider how to communicate the results of the meeting to the rest of the organization – and second, to evaluate the quality of the meeting.

Talking about how to communicate what happened in the meeting is a crucial step because value is only created by increasing capacity, raising awareness, or making changes in actual products or services. Consider not only what needs to be communicated to internal stakeholders, but to external stakeholders as well, such as customers, vendors, consultants, and shareholders.

Evaluating the quality of the meeting is often over-looked, but it is the best way to provide immediate feedback to the meeting leader and help him or her maximize its value to the organization. By inviting feedback, the meeting leader also builds trust within the group by showing that he is aware of his role in managing people's time effectively.

### **Notes:**

## Decision Items

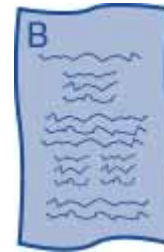
We like to encourage meeting leaders to go one step beyond this agenda format and also list the decisions they expect will come out of the meeting. By focusing on decisions, the meeting leader can get a good grasp of how much value he or she expects the meeting to generate. It also forces the meeting leader to consider what advance materials are needed – and who else may need to participate.

Ultimately, it may force the meeting leader to realize that he is not prepared to bring a particular agenda item forward until he collects additional information or clarifies his decision-making role (see page 10 for additional discussion about decision-making roles).

This format shows an agenda with decision items included:

### **Agenda Format B:**

- Welcome and progress review (Sylvia); 5 minutes
- Team leader's report (Bob); 5 minutes
- Database report (Julie); 30 minutes
  - Action items:
    - Decide on UniDisc as vendor.
    - Decide staff responsibility for database backup.
    - Decide final field configuration.
- Systems vendor update (Ellen); 20 minutes
  - Action items:
    - Decide financial benchmarks
    - Decide quality benchmarks
- Communication of results, action steps (all); 10 minutes
- Meeting evaluation (10 minutes)



## Types of Meeting Activities

Every meeting involves one or more of the following activities:

<b>1. Information sharing</b>	Exchange information.
<b>2. Problem solving</b>	Make decisions about how to solve a specific problem.
<b>3. Brainstorming</b>	Define objectives, generate ideas and decide next steps.
<b>4. Performance review</b>	Review individual and group performance. Decide areas of strength and areas of improvement.
<b>5. Strategic planning</b>	Wrestle with large issues cutting to the heart of the organization's future. Decide goals, objectives, strategies, action steps, timetables, and responsibilities.

Once you know the purpose of a meeting and its agenda, you can identify the types of activity the meeting involves. In the best meetings, everyone understands the activity they're engaged in – and why.

If a meeting is purely for information sharing, the meeting leader should ask himself whether the meeting is really necessary. There may be other reasons to hold the meeting – such as building teamwork or expanding capacity. But if the meeting leader asks the question, he might find that a particular meeting is unnecessary.

Many meetings lose their effectiveness because people try to cram too many activities into one single meeting. For example, an informational meeting about a new manager of information technology might drift into a brainstorming meeting about the need for a new database. But the people and information needed for the database discussion aren't present at the meeting, so time is wasted.

Bottom line: The more targeted the meeting, the better it will be. The meeting leader should limit the meeting to its stated purpose. Call a separate meeting when a new need arises.



### Notes:

## Meeting Styles



If you've taken our workshop on communication styles, then you may have already realized that each communication style prefers certain types of meeting activities. If you find that you gravitate toward certain types of meetings, this may be because these meetings are more compatible with your style.

You should guard against the tendency to tune out of meetings because they don't match your style. Your active participation may be essential. If the source of your displeasure is only the mismatch between your style and the meeting's activities, use it as an opportunity to get out of your comfort zone and stretch yourself.



Meeting Type:	Communication styles preferring it:
Information Sharing	Thinker, Harmonizer, Expresser
Problem Solving	Thinker, Director
Brainstorming	Expresser, Harmonizer
Performance Review	Thinker, Director
Strategic Planning	Director, Expresser

If you're the meeting leader, then adopting the style best suited to the meeting is an important tool for effective communication. In certain cases, this will be a stretch. For example, a Thinker may find it difficult to get people to loosen up in a brainstorming meeting. A Director may try to wrap up brainstorming meetings too quickly. An effective manager will learn to use all four styles so that he or she can lead each type of meeting effectively.



Similarly, certain styles may find that they simply choose not to lead a particular kind of meeting: Harmonizers, for example, may choose not to have strategic meetings. Again, by being aware of the types of meeting activities you enjoy and don't enjoy, you can better evaluate your effectiveness as a meeting manager.

## Group Decision Making

To add value, groups need to make decisions – or at least help make decisions. Group decision-making is a complex art. But it can be made vastly simpler if two rules of thumb are followed:

- Make sure the decision-making role of each person in the room is clear, especially the meeting leader.
- Make sure the decision-making role of the group is clear.

It's the job of the meeting leader to define the role of the group – and of key individuals within the group. This chart defines four different types of decisions – along with the individual and group roles that correspond to each.

A represents an autocratic decision.

C represents a consultative decision.

S represents a consensus decision.

D represents a delegated decision.

**A-I** You make the decision by yourself using the information you have available.

**A-II** You obtain information from the group and then decide by yourself.

**C-I** You involve others individually by sharing the issues and obtaining their ideas, suggestions or recommendations, then you decide.

**C-II** You involve others as a group by sharing the issues and obtaining their ideas, suggestions or recommendations, then you decide.

**S-I** You involve another individual by sharing the issues, then you both generate and evaluate alternatives and reach a decision by consensus.

**S-II** You involve others as a group by sharing the issues, then you all generate and evaluate alternatives and reach a decision by group consensus.

**D-I** You determine that another individual has the data and judgment to make the decision, so you delegate it and accept/support the decision made.

**D-II** You determine that a group has the data and judgment to make the decision, so you delegate it and accept/support the decision they make.

Typically, the decision-making role of the group – and of individuals within the group – will shift from agenda item to agenda item. As needed, the meeting leader needs to clarify the role of the group and the role of key individuals.

For example, the meeting leader might say: “For this item, this is a decision that has been delegated to me by my boss. It is mine to make. I want to consult with this group. Once I hear from you, I will make the final decision.”

Or he might say: “This is a decision in which I play a consultative role to my boss. In order for me to be effective, I need your input, and so I ask you to play a consultative role to me.”

Note: If you are the meeting leader and don’t know your decision-making role with regards to a particular issue or agenda item, avoid wasting meeting time on that issue until you get a clear understanding of your role.

One of the most frequent mistakes we observe meeting leaders make is to “market” a decision as a *consensus* decision when in fact it is *consultative*. The motive behind this is presumably to “empower” people. But once people realize their consensus-making role is a sham, they will resent the waste of their time. People don’t mind playing a consultative role, or even being asked for input in an autocratic decision. What they do mind is being misled.



If a decision is a *consensus* decision, then the meeting leader needs to know what consensus looks like. First of all, consensus means that every viewpoint has been heard and understood. Second, true consensus stands the test of time. If people are wavering or feel peer pressure to conform, that’s not consensus. Finally, consensus occurs when the vast majority of people in the group agree that a particular option is best. It doesn’t have to be 100 percent. But the vast majority needs to agree.

**Exercise: Decision-Making Roles**

In the chart below, think of three decisions that were made in meetings you recently attended. Write down your perception of the decision-making role(s) of the meeting leader and of the group. Ask yourself whether everyone in the meeting had the same perception, or whether there was confusion. Be prepared to share a couple of examples with the larger group.

Decision made:	Decision-making role of the meeting leader:	Decision-making role of the group:

## Communication Protocols

Communication protocols are additional resources needed to run an effective meeting. They include agendas, advance information, minutes, ground rules, whether it's okay to make the meeting virtual, and whether a facilitator is needed. The following chart shows the protocols recommended for each type of meeting.

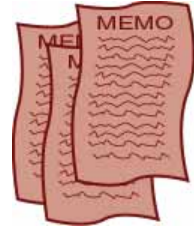
Meeting Type:	Communication Protocols:
Information Sharing	Agenda needed, advance information desirable, minutes optional, ground rules optional, okay to be virtual.
Problem Solving	Agenda needed, advance information desirable, minutes needed, ground rules optional, okay to be virtual.
Brainstorming	Agenda needed, advance information desirable, minutes needed, ground rules optional, okay to be virtual.
Performance Review	Agenda needed, advance information needed, minutes needed, ground rules needed, should not be virtual.
Strategic Planning	Agenda needed, advance information needed, minutes needed, ground rules needed, should not be virtual, facilitator needed.

Where the protocols say “ground rules needed,” it means that ground rules should be explicitly discussed and established at the start of the meeting. When ground rules are “optional,” it doesn't mean that the meeting should turn into a free-for-all. All groups benefit from having ground rules. It's not always necessary, however, to spend time reviewing them. (See next section for more on ground rules.)

The admonition that certain types of meetings should not be virtual may seem unduly restricting. For example, how does that affect a board meeting that is often held via conference call? It should raise a cautionary flag that the board should not try to resolve strategic issues without meeting face to face. Does this rule get violated? All the time. But when it does, it means the board will not be able to give its fullest attention to the strategic issues before it.

## The Meeting Memo

Once you've finished your checklist and agenda, a memo should be distributed to all participants so that they can prepare their thoughts or materials. The memo should include the meeting date, time and place, the statement of purpose, the agenda, and a list of participants' names and titles, along with any advance information.



## Impromptu Meetings

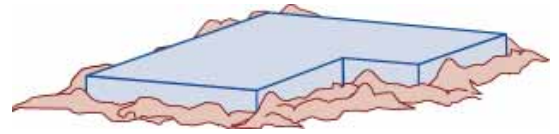
What about impromptu meetings? Often people will meet on the spur of the moment to discuss a proposal, talk through a new idea, or trade thoughts about a problem. While this may seem harmless, our experience is that impromptu meetings can have unanticipated, negative consequences: Key people will feel left out, decisions can be rushed, and follow-up communication may not be adequate.

Our recommendation is to follow this rule: If it's important enough that three people need to meet about it, then it's important enough to make sure you maximize the meeting's effectiveness. Call off the impromptu meeting and plan a scheduled meeting.



## Ground Rules

All meetings benefit from ground rules. These are rules that people in the group have agreed will help them communicate effectively.



We recommend that every group that meets regularly have ground rules. Why? Because every group needs to delve into sensitive territory, where people will often disagree, and where emotions are often intense. Ground rules assure that everyone's point of view will be heard and that disagreements get handled fairly.

The more sensitive the meeting, the more important the need for ground rules. But that doesn't mean that other types of meetings won't benefit. As you review the list of ground rules below, imagine the meetings you attend and which ground rules you'd like to see in force there.

### ***Potential Ground Rules***

Here are some potential ground rules. As you review them, put a check mark by the ones that you think would add the most value for your meetings.

- Keep discussions focused.  
This may seem simple enough, but discussions have a way of quickly spinning out of control. Stick to the agenda. Verbalize to each other the need to use the time effectively.
- Allow for process checks.  
Empower people to ask whether their time is being used well. For example, a member of the group might say: "Process check – do we really need to discuss this any further?"
- Permit one speaker at a time.  
It's a simple act of courtesy to place your attention on the speaker. If two people ignore the main conversation in favor of their own, it's a sign of disrespect. If it's important, raise the issue with the meeting leader.
- Agree on the meaning of key words.  
Words are limited in their ability to capture precise meanings. Be aware of jargon, of acronyms, or terms that carry multiple meanings. Define terms like "market share" and "return." Whenever possible, keep an updated glossary for everyone to use.
- Bring issues to the table (avoid "back room" discussions)  
Heed it as a warning sign if issues are being raised in the hallways that don't get brought up before the group. Participants should listen carefully to their own hallway conversations and raise any points that are germane to the work being done.

- Explain the reasoning leading to your conclusions.  
Give people the data that will help them understand your position. If your reasoning is sound, it will support the position you advocate. If data is missing, you will help the group understand what it needs to find out. Either way, the group wins, and you win.
- Inquire into the reasoning of others.  
In parallel with the rule above, pay full attention to the reasoning of others. What data can they cite to support their position? Where are the gaps in logic?
- Invite inquiry into your views.  
Along with offering your reasoning, you should also actively invite people to probe your point of view. Say things like: "I'm curious what I might be missing."
- Identify missing data.  
This ground rule reminds us of the importance of finding the missing data that might shed light on our assumptions. It adds the formal step of keeping a log of all the things the group doesn't know – and needs to know – in order to reach a fruitful conclusion.
- Make "undiscussable" ideas discussable.  
During the meeting, people should check on each other's thoughts. Ask each other: "Do you have any undiscussables?" Express these conflicts in the form of "I feel...", not as an attack on someone else.
- Tackle issues, not people.  
When challenging another's position, always state the issue or the behavior that is the subject of your concern. Then state the consequences for the organization if the issue or behavior is not addressed. Remember to guard against portraying yourself as the only person in the room who sees things clearly.
- Communicate results.  
Spend time deciding what the group needs to communicate to the rest of the organization. In that way, the meeting becomes linked to the communication pipeline.
- Turn off cell phones and pagers.  
This is the most important time you spend together. Respect it by keeping the communication centered in the room.
- What gets said in the room, stays in the room.  
When conflicts are getting worked out, it's best to keep that portion of the meeting to yourselves. Agree on what you want to communicate to the rest of the organization, and abide by that agreement.

## ***Setting a Group's Ground Rules***

Ground rules need to be developed by those who will use them. Use the following exercise to set ground rules for your group.

- Give each member of the group a copy of the ground rules listed above.
- Ask them if they think ground rules are a good idea. (If you get negative response, keep probing. Ask whether there are times when communication breaks down.)
- Starting with the first rule on the list, ask the group whether the group should adopt it.
- Continue down the list until there is full agreement.
- Ask people to suggest additional rules. Solicit feedback and continue until everyone agrees.
- Compile the rules into a list and ask whether everyone agrees "our interactions will benefit by having these rules apply to all of us."
- Ask the group to affirm by a show of hands that it is committed to upholding the ground rules. (Many groups ask members to sign a copy of the ground rules.)



Avoid voting or other averaging techniques in setting ground rules. Get everyone to commit verbally. Once established, you should disseminate the ground rules, post them visibly at meetings, and review them often. They reflect your group's operating principles and your respect for each other. They are part of your culture and something to be proud of.

## ***Monitoring the Ground Rules***

Once you agree on the ground rules, then monitoring the ground rules is everyone's responsibility. The leader should continually remind the group of each person's responsibility first to monitor their own behavior, and then to monitor others.

Every participant, not just the leader, should check out loud when a ground rule is breached. Just say "ground rule" when you think a rule is being breached. If the problem doesn't rectify itself right away, you can clarify. If someone contests, then the meeting leader should intervene, make a judgment, and allow the meeting to move on.

Note: The leader plays a key role in setting an example. He must set the tone by actively monitoring his own compliance with the ground rules.

## Zero-Based Meeting Management

Meetings grow stale, lose momentum, their sense of importance wanes. For whatever reason, it's useful to clean the slate and start from scratch every once and a while.

Imagine yourself capable of dictating exactly what meetings would occur in your organization. Ask yourself, in an ideal world, what would happen, who would attend, and how often would the meeting occur?

In the box below, list the meetings you think are most important for your organization.

Meeting purpose (name):	Regular agenda items:	Participants:	Frequency:

**Notes:**