Meeting Cookbook

The basics for effective meetings

I

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Introduction

We've been involved in a fair few meetings over the years. Some of them we have run, others we have attended. The quality has varied, shall we say, and over time we have become increasingly convinced that the success or failure of a meeting ultimately depends on the moderator and his or her skills.

WHY DID WE WRITE THIS BOOK?

A simple, practical manual for planning, structuring and running various kinds of meeting is something that's been high on our own wish list for quite some time now. And then one day we realised that all those piles of bits of paper, running orders and examples of meeting methods we had written down had grown into a book – and this is it.

WHO IS THE BOOK WRITTEN FOR?

The main character in this book is the moderator. The book is written for you. For the vast majority of people, the role of moderator is just one of the many tasks you have to perform. The rest of the time you might be:

– a manager/leader

– a project manager/coordinator

– a personnel officer

– a trainer/teacher

– a researcher/developer

– an events organiser

– a board member

– an ombudsman

You might work in the public sector, in industry or for a club or society.

You could be an employee, a consultant or a volunteer.

HOW CAN THE BOOK BE USED?

The book is about creating effective meetings and contains advice for you, in the role of moderator, on how to do that.

The book is written in two parts. The first part contains the basics you need to know as a moderator, including some simple meeting methods that we're going to call *basic methods*.

The second part presents *combined meeting methods*, put together to be used at everything from major conferences to recurring weekly team meetings.

The same as with cooking, if you follow the recipe, the food will be good, but the more confident you get in the kitchen, the braver you get at experimenting and trying out your own variations. Skilled chefs tend to use recipe books as a source of inspiration for creating completely new dishes. The recipes – the meeting methods – in this book can be used in the same way.

You only become an expert chef by practising and the same goes for moderators. Practice, get feedback, apply those opinions, risk experimenting and you'll soon be an expert at running effective meetings.

Good meetings

Types of meeting ▪ Definition ▪ Basic requirements ▪ The moderator

Good meetings

There are lots of different kinds of meetings and conferences. You might be running an annual conference for an industry where people are looking to explore the bigger picture and network with colleagues, or it might be a weekly staff meeting to plan work for the year ahead. Some meetings are good, others not so good. In this chapter we'll be looking in more detail at what makes a good meeting.

TYPES OF MEETING

In this book we talk about three basic types of meeting:

■ **PROCESS MEETINGS** are meetings where a group comes together to formulate ideas, solve problems or make decisions (working meetings), meetings where information is exchanged (information meetings), meetings where the aim is to bring the group closer together (teambuilding) or meetings for training purposes (workshops).

In process meetings the moderator tends to be a manager, project manager, trainer or another person from within the organisation. Most of the people attending the process meeting will be actively participating in the process.

■ **CONFERENCES** are meetings where a moderator leads a meeting with invited speakers and an audience.

At conferences the moderator is often someone from outside brought in to perform the role. Most of the people attending a conference are the audience and are less actively involved than in a process meeting.

■ **VIRTUAL MEETINGS** are meetings where participants meet via video, for example.

Virtual meetings are becoming increasingly common, as teams are often made up of people from a widespread geographical area and environmental considerations mean we are all trying to reduce the amount of unnecessary travelling we do. In virtual meetings the moderator tends to be a manager or another person from within the organisation.

DEFINITION

Good meetings involve as little one-way information as possible. There are other channels better suited to that, such as e-mail, websites or the intranet.

A good meeting focuses on multi-channel communication. Good meetings offer plenty of opportunities for interaction, between participants as well as between participants and any speakers. The kind of meeting we want the methods in this book to achieve is a meeting that gives everyone attending it the chance:

   – to meet and exchange experiences

   – to be seen and be able to contribute

– to develop and learn

– to be motivated and inspired

– to be part of something unique

A meeting that meets the above requirements is what we call, quite simply, a good meeting.

While none of the criteria above are particularly revolutionary, a surprisingly large number of meetings aren't managing to fulfil them.

The requirement that a meeting needs to be seen as something unique might sound a bit pretentious but you have to remember that it's uniqueness that forms the basis for all real meetings. Meetings that have nothing unique about them are quickly forgotten.

Good meetings bring people and ideas together. One plus one makes three. At the very least.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

The following basic requirements need to be in place for good meetings to happen:

– a clear purpose

– time for interaction and time to reflect

– things need to be clear and comprehensible

– variety and changes in tempo

– a tangible result

A clear purpose

To be successful, a good meeting needs to have a clear purpose. And everyone attending the meeting has to know

> ❝ *In Suzanne Osten's film 'The Mozart Brothers', the wardrobe mistress finally speaks out at a major meeting of the entire opera ensemble: 'The audience want coffee', she says briefly. The room falls silent. No-one else had thought about the audience. Fired by all their artistic ambitions, they had completely forgotten about them."*

what that purpose is. Lack of clarity and purpose is a good meeting's worst enemy.

Time for interaction and time to reflect

A good meeting provides scope for real 'meetings' and for interaction between the people attending it (despite the fact that the word meeting implies that people are meeting each other, it is not unusual for meetings to contain very little time in which they can actually do so).

There should also be time for people to rest and catch their breath so that they can process all the impressions they have to take in.

Clear and comprehensible

A good meeting must be clear and have a structure that is easy to understand.

This means that there must be a clear link running through the meeting from start to finish, and that the amount of information must be tailored to suit the length of the meeting. The latter is a difficult thing to achieve. Meetings are often crammed to bursting point with fact-heavy presentations and activities in a desire to make the best use of the time.

It is only too easy to have an overly optimistic idea of the amount of information the participants are able to take on board.

Variety and changes in tempo

A good meeting needs variety. After sitting still for a while, people need to do something active.

Physical activities need to be combined with mental stimulation such as music, poetry or drama.

Fast-paced, fact-heavy segments need to be balanced by slower-paced elements that speak more to the emotions.

A tangible result

Of course a good meeting ought to also achieve a tangible result in line with the purpose of the meeting.

The result then has to be communicated to the person or people concerned, as otherwise there's a risk that participants will see the meeting as having been meaningless.

THE MODERATOR

The moderator is the key to a good meeting. His or her skill is often all that stands between an ordinary meeting and what we've defined as a good meeting.

To help them, moderators can use various kinds of meeting methods, suitable meeting equipment and delegate responsibility for some of the roles involved.

A good meeting takes a great deal of preparation but it pays off. In return there'll be every chance that your meeting will be a really good meeting.

Meeting methods

Basic methods ▪ Things to remember ▪ Guidelines
Discuss ▪ Involve ▪ Inspire ▪ Process ▪ Assess

Meeting methods

By meeting methods we mean techniques for working with the group to create good meetings.

We draw a distinction between *basic methods*, which are simple and quick to carry out, and *combined methods*, which take up more time and are usually made up of several basic methods in combination.

This chapter looks in more detail at how the basic methods work. The following chapter presents an overview of a number of combined methods. These will then be presented in more detail in Meeting Cookbook II.

Some of the ideas for the methods come from close to home, others from further afield. We created some of them ourselves, while others have been modified and re-jigged to fit the way we work. It is impossible to say who originally came up with some of these methods. They generally tend to have been developed and elaborated on over a long period of time.

In several places we suggest variations and ideas for ways to further modify the method to suit you.

BASIC METHODS

As a rule, the basic methods are easy to use. Most of them need only a limited amount of equipment and preparation time. Some of the basic methods are good for starting a meeting, others for concluding it, but the majority of the methods can be used at any time during the course of the meeting.

With the basic methods at your fingertips, you are already well on your way as a moderator. Combining them gives you plenty of options for creating good meetings. If you are keen to learn more about meeting methods, you can always explore the combined meeting methods in Meeting Cookbook II, where there is a wealth of inspiration to draw on.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Adults can get scared when meeting methods seem too much like games or have names that sound too silly or too childish. However, in nine out of ten cases it is precisely these hands-on elements of the meeting that are the most appreciated. It seems to be the case that we enjoy playing games but we prefer not to admit that this is what we are doing.

However, do make sure that all the

meeting methods you use have a clear purpose and a serious intention underlying the fun. Like children's games, they are extremely serious. It is this playfulness that is the source of creativity, communication, understanding, and, last but not least, gaining new skills and knowledge.

GUIDELINES

The basic methods are divided into groups according to their function during the meeting: Discuss – Involve – Inspire – Process – Assess.

Each basic method has a name and they are listed under each function. Some may be familiar, while others will be completely new. Each method starts with brief details of the amount of time the exercise will roughly take and the ideal number of participants. This is followed by a brief description of the method and whether it requires any particular preparation. Step-by-step practical instructions are shown under the heading Instructions. Finally, possible variations are suggested, where available.

You may also consider using our iPhone app "WellMet" (that contains all the *basic methods*) to help you plan your meeting.

> " *I happened to slip a little bit on the words when I was instructing a group: 'If you've chosen to stand over at that spot in the corner, then stand at that point… that stand-point'; and thus a new method name was born – Stand Points."*

DISCUSS

The following methods can be used to get participants talking about a task or a question.

Beehive

DESCRIPTION

In the **Beehive** method between two and six people talk together. A good beehive is short and runs in parallel with other beehives in the meeting room. The method works well in most rooms, even with theatre seating. It's the buzz of voices that gives this method its name. However, the background buzz does mean that this method won't work for people with a hearing impairment.

Used as part of the combined meeting method *Secret Supporter*.

PREPARATION

A good **Beehive** question is one which arouses a lot of ideas. The better the question, the better the discussion, so it is worth putting some effort into finding a good question.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the participants to put themselves into groups with people sitting near them. Give them the following instructions:

   Discuss the question with the people sitting immediately in front of, behind or next to you.

2. Pose the question and ask the participants to start the discussion. While they are talking, you can walk around the room yourself and listen to the conversations so that you can start a round of questions on one of the topics you have heard being discussed, if you wish.

3. Stop the discussion.

VARIATION

Standing
The **Beehive** also works well if done standing up, in which case it becomes an energising activity.

Group Talk

DESCRIPTION

Group Talk is a bit longer than **Beehive** and is best for groups of six to twelve. Group Talk works well in a large room with several groups running in parallel. The best room set-up is to use islands, with enough space between them to prevent the groups from disturbing each other.

Used in the combined meeting method *How Shall We Do It?*

PREPARATION

The most important thing is to ensure that the task or the question is clearly worded and that you have a follow-up task ready for groups that finish quickly. If the task is complicated, the groups might need a written instruction sheet.

Appointing a Group Moderator and a Reporter for each group can be a good idea. See the chapter on Roles.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Outline the task, hand it out on paper, write it on the whiteboard or show it on the projector. It helps if the groups can see the task throughout the discussion.

2. Go round the room and help any groups that are having trouble getting started.

3. Stop the discussion and ask the Reporters to report back on how the discussion went and what was agreed.

VARIATION

Group rooms
One variation is to carry out the discussions in group rooms. There are several advantages to this: the groups don't disturb each other; and in the group rooms each group can have access to whiteboards and flipcharts, etc.

- **TIME** 15–60 minutes
- **PARTICIPANTS** 12–50 in groups of 6–12.
- **EQUIPMENT** Clock, instructions or white board or data projector.
- **ROLES** Group Moderators and Reporters.
- **SEATING** Islands or group rooms with a boardroom table.
- **REMEMBER** If you let the groups go off to group rooms, it is particularly important to make sure that the task is clearly defined, as otherwise there is a risk that much of the time will be lost in trying to agree on what the task actually is. You will also need to factor in the time it will take for everyone to change rooms.

Ping-Pong

DESCRIPTION

Ping-Pong is used to get everyone in the group to give their opinion or comment on something.

The major advantage of the method is that the participants themselves choose when they want to say something. This avoids the pressure which can arise if you go round the group in turn from one side of the room to the other. The person speaking sits on a chair at the front of the room.

Used as part of the combined meeting method *Who Are We?*

PREPARATION

Prepare a question in advance. It is important to make sure that the question is relevant and sufficiently complex.

The best layout is one with chairs placed in a semi-circle with one chair – the hot seat – facing the others in the centre of the semi-circle. There should be the same number of chairs as the number of participants in the room, including the moderator.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the question you have prepared and ask anyone who wants to respond to go up and sit in the chair in the middle to give their answer. You then take the chair in the semi-circle that is now empty.

2. When the first person has finished speaking, they stand up and wait until someone else comes forward to sit in the chair. The person who has just spoken then goes and sits in the new speaker's empty chair. (No-one goes back to the chair they were originally sitting in).

3. When the last participant has finished speaking, you sit on the chair in the centre and conclude the exercise by summing up the answers given by the participants or by giving a personal comment.

Round Table

DESCRIPTION

Round Table gets all the participants answering the same question. You can either go round the room or let anyone who wants to speak do so, no matter where they are sitting in the room. In this case, the conversation will jump around the room.

Used in the combined meeting methods *Wish List* and *Panel Debate*.

PREPARATION

Prepare a question in advance or identify an interesting question while the meeting is in progress.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the whole room – without addressing any person in particular – who would like to begin. Wait until somebody volunteers, even if it takes a while.

2. Try to get everyone to say something – but don't force anybody. Not everyone has to speak.

3. When the comments start to run out, say something yourself to encourage those who haven't spoken yet.

VARIATION

Taking turns

You can choose to have people answer the question in turn, working from one side of the room to the other. The advantage here is that everybody will speak, but the disadvantage is that it can make people so nervous that they can't get the words out.

- **TIME** 5–30 minutes
- **PARTICIPANTS** 5–20
- **REMEMBER** It is important to stick to your guns and wait for people to answer. Sometimes you might have to keep quiet for quite a long time before somebody rises to the challenge. Also be sparing with your own comments and avoid evaluating what the participants say.

U Upside-Down

● **TIME** 20–40 minutes

● **PARTICIPANTS** 7–12

● **EQUIPMENT** Clock, whiteboard or flipchart, whiteboard markers, tape or magnets

● **REMEMBER** Encourage participants to come up with as many silly suggestions as possible. Often it's the daftest suggestions that turn into the best ideas.

DESCRIPTION

Upside-Down is a method in which ideas are generated by coming up with solutions that are the opposite of what you are actually looking for. The method makes use of the fact that it is often easier to think of negative things rather than positive ones.

Used as part of the combined meeting method *Back to Front*.

PREPARATION

Identify a question you want to answer, e.g.: "How can we make the conference as good as possible?"

Then turn the question on its head: "How can we make the conference as bad as possible?"

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Explain the tasks, emphasise that people should try to find answers to the upside-down question as seriously as possible.

2. Open the floor for free discussion. Write the suggestions down as they come up. In our example, suggestions might be:

   Long, monotonous lectures; Poor sound; No coffee

3. Stop when participants run out of suggestions.

4. Then ask participants to turn the answers around and see whether they can answer the original question. In our example:

   Long monotonous lectures can be turned around to make:
   It's important to have varied and interesting lectures

   Poor sound can be turned into:
   It's important to have good lighting and technology

   No coffee can be turned into:
   Put extra effort into the coffee break buffets

5. Finish off by writing all the suggestions on a task list.

Adventure

DESCRIPTION

In **Adventure**, the participants head out on an excursion to gather inspiration for their own business. The trip can be to somewhere nearby or further away. It can last an hour or several days.

Used as part of the combined meeting method *Idea Hunt*.

INSTRUCTIONS

Varies depending on use.

VARIATIONS

Study visit

Participants can make a classic study visit to somebody successful in the industry, or visit a completely different organisation to see what can be learned from that.

Inspiration

Another alternative is to send them to an art museum, a concert or somewhere else where they can gain inspiration.

Home visits

Another variation of this method is for participants to visit their own business as if they were somebody who knew nothing about it whatsoever (**Role Change**).

● **TIME** At least 1 hour

● **PARTICIPANTS** Unlimited.

● **REMEMBER** The most important thing is to convey to the participants the importance of seeing the visit through the eyes of an explorer and attempting to be as open and curious as children, well-behaved ones that is.