

The 6 Golden Rules of Meeting Management

Meetings are unpopular because they take up time--usually that of many people. However, there are good meetings and there are bad meetings. Meetings can be an excellent use of time when they are well-run. Unfortunately, the converse is also true, and it seems that time-wasting, poorly run meetings are far too common.

This article describes 6 rules of meeting management that can help make meeting more productive and less frustrating. Each of the rules requires commitment from all participants.

Golden Rule #1: *Run your meetings as you would have others run the meetings that you attend.*

This is the most fundamental Golden Rule of Meeting Management. Running an effective meeting--or being a good meeting participant--is all about being considerate of others. All the other Golden Rules of meeting management flow from this principle.

Golden Rule #2: *Be prepared and ensure that all the participants can be as well.*

Distribute the meeting agenda a day before the meeting and make sure everyone has access to any relevant background materials. Participants, of course, have the obligation of reviewing the agenda and background materials and arriving at the meeting prepared. If the meeting organizer has not provided information about the objectives of the meeting, the participants should take the initiative to ask. No one should arrive at a meeting not knowing why they are there and what is supposed to be accomplished.

If there is nothing to put on the agenda, the organizer should ask him/herself whether there really needs to be a meeting.

Golden Rule #3: *Stick to a schedule.*

Start the meeting on time and end it on time (or even early). Starting on time requires discipline by the organizer and the participants. Arriving late shows a lack of consideration for all those who were on time. But if all participants know that the organizer is going to start the meeting right on time, there is a much greater likelihood that everyone else will make the effort to be punctual.

Finishing in a timely manner is also crucial. If everyone agreed that the meeting would last an hour, the meeting should not run any longer than that. Keeping the agenda realistic is important, of course. Finally, if only 20 minutes are required to accomplish the meeting objectives, the meeting should end after only 20 minutes. It would be a waste of everyone's time to let it go on any longer than that.

The time for which the meeting is scheduled is also important. Scheduling regular meetings for inconvenient times (e.g. after the end of the official work day) can have a very negative impact on morale. Emergencies are a reality for most organizations and may necessitate meetings at odd times, but routine meetings should be scheduled at a time that is reasonably convenient for the participants.

Golden Rule #4: *Stay on topic.*

Most groups have at least one person who tends to go off on a tangent or tell stories during meetings. Whether this is the organizer or one of the participants, all meeting participants have the responsibility of gently guiding the meeting back to the substantive agenda items. This should not be done at the expense of all levity, of course, as that is an important ingredient for *esprit de corps*. Also, storytelling can be very useful if it is being used deliberately as a coaching or teaching tool. As a rule, however, someone needs to guide the discussion back to the agenda if the meeting becomes clearly off track.

Golden Rule #5: *Don't hold unnecessary meetings.*

Carefully assess how often routine meetings really need to be held. For example, if you have daily staff meetings, how productive are they? Can they be held less frequently? Or, perhaps, can they be held standing up someplace and kept to a few minutes? Staff meetings are crucial vehicles for maintaining good communication in the office, but it is important to find the right balance between good communication and productive uses of time.

Golden Rule #6: *Wrap up meetings with a clear statement of the next steps and who is to take them.*

If any decisions were made at the meeting (even if the decision was to "study the issue more") the meeting organizer should clearly summarize what needs to be done and who is going to do it. If the organizer fails to do this, one of the participants needs to speak up and request clarification of the next steps. This is crucial. If the participants leave the meeting and no one is accountable for taking action on the decisions that were made, then the meeting will have been a waste of everyone's time.

These simple rules can go a long way in making meetings more productive. Implementing them is not always easy, as they require preparation and discipline, but doing so can make a huge difference to the productivity of your organization.

*information provided by <http://www.govleaders.org>