

Ten common problems with meetings and how to fix them

Stop having bad meetings. Get more time back in your day and be more effective.

Is this your meeting?





More often than not, meetings can be inefficient and ineffective.



However, done right they can be an essential tool to share information, generate ideas, solve problems and make decisions.

This guide identifies ten common problems with meetings and their antidotes. It provides tips on what you can do as the meeting organiser or lead, and what you can do as a participant to save time and be more effective.

What's the problem with your meeting?

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1

The meeting is unnecessary



Problem

The meeting consists primarily of an information update, with minimal or no discussion.

Impact

The group's time could have been used more efficiently and effectively on something else.

“You could have just sent an email...”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- If the meeting is primarily an update that doesn't require any input or discussion, communicate the information in a different way (e.g. email).

What you should do as a participant

- Before the meeting, ask whether there will be any discussion. If not, suggest that the information is communicated using a different method.
- If communicating this to your boss, frame it as wanting to focus on work that is higher priority. “I'd really like to invest more time in project X, which will help us achieve our goal of Y.”

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2

The objective of the meeting is unclear The new meeting



Problem

The purpose of the meeting is unclear and you've not sure what your contribution will be.

Impact

The meeting lacks direction and outcomes are unclear.

“What’s the meeting about?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Provide a clear agenda before the meeting along with a specific objective. E.g. relationship building, idea generation, problem solving, decision-making.
- Be explicit about the type of input you would like from individuals.

What you should do as a participant

- Before agreeing to attend the meeting, ask the meeting lead for the agenda and what input they would like from you.

2

The objective of the meeting is unclear

The recurring meeting



Problem

There's a recurring meeting setup. At the start, there was a clear need and purpose. But, this has been lost over time.

Impact

The meeting is no longer relevant.

“Why are we still having this meeting?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- If engagement in the meeting has dwindled, evaluate whether the meeting is still needed or whether the agenda needs to be updated.
- Cancel the meeting if it no longer serves a purpose.

What you should do as a participant

- Suggest topics that are more useful to include on the agenda instead.
- If the meeting is no longer critical, discuss this with the meeting lead and get them to poll the team on the preferred way forward.

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3

The right group of people haven't been invited The wrong people



Problem

The objective and agenda are clear, but the wrong people have been invited to the meeting. They may not have the authority, range of knowledge or expertise to contribute effectively.

Impact

The group are unable to generate effective solutions because they lack different perspectives.

“Where’s Helen? She should be at this meeting”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Invite people who will be able to provide unique and diverse input to the problem at hand, and will have the authority to progress things.
- Review the invite list. When working on complex problems, invite people who represent a range of experience, expertise and opinions.

What you should do as a participant

- Review who will be attending the meeting. If a key decision maker or subject matter expert is not available, then ask the meeting lead to add them or reschedule the meeting.
- If you're not the right person to join the meeting, decline the invitation and recommend someone else who is better suited to join.



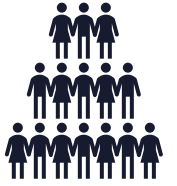
Diversity of thought:
**Differences in perspectives, insights,
experiences and thinking styles.**

Syed (2019).

**If you need to generate creative ideas or solve difficult problems
as part of your meeting, invite people who will bring different
perspectives.**

3

The right group of people haven't been invited Too many people



Problem

A long list of people have been invited to the meeting. There's a lot of duplication and there will be limited time for each person to contribute.

Impact

Each participant won't actually have enough time to share their view.

"It looks like a cast of thousands"

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Review the list of people you've invited to the meeting. How many people are there? Will each person have time to contribute? Are there a lot of people who have similar expertise, views and opinions? Cull the list to remove redundancy and reduce the cost of your meeting.

What you should do as a participant

- Review the list of people who have been invited to the meeting. If other people have been invited with similar expertise or views, decide between you who should attend.
- If the time allowed for the meeting is too short, then provide feedback to the meeting organiser to either extend the meeting, change the agenda or reduce the number of participants.

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4

No one has prepared



Problem

The group was given some reading or actions to complete before the meeting, but no one has completed them.

Impact

People are not on the same page. Progress on objectives stalls.

“Sorry, I haven’t read any of the documents”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Allocate 10 minutes at the start of the meeting for people to complete the required reading.
- For ongoing meetings, agree a set of meeting rules – for example, the price of entry to the meeting is to have completed the critical preparation or actions.
- Do a poll of who has completed their actions. Seek to understand why. If no longer important, then remove. If still important, gain commitment for completion.

What you should do as a participant

- Before the meeting, provide feedback to the meeting organiser about progress on critical preparation.
- If lack of preparation will hold up the group, then prioritise the work or recommend that the meeting is rescheduled.

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5

Poor time management People are consistently late



Problem

People consistently turn up late, wasting the time of people who turn up on time.

Impact

If you're joining a meeting with 8 people for example and you're 5 minutes late, then you've just wasted 40 minutes of other people's time.

“Sorry, I’m 15 minutes late. What did I miss?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- For ongoing meetings, agree a set of meeting rules. E.g. meetings will always start on time regardless of who is there.
- Consider making your meeting 50 minutes rather than 60 minutes to allow people attending serial meetings time to get to their next one.

What you should do as a participant

- Turn up on time. If going from meeting to meeting, then end your previous meeting 5 to 10 minutes before. Allow yourself enough time to move to or join the next meeting.
- Communicate when you have a hard stop.

5

Poor time management The last agenda items are rushed



Problem

80% of the time is spent discussing the first few agenda items. Discussion of important topics is rushed or skipped.

Impact

Important topics don't get enough air time.

"We have 5 minutes left, let's rush through the last items"

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Send out status or information updates before the meeting. Spend time on things that require collective input during the meeting.
- Allocate a specific amount of time to each agenda item. Create a visual that represents the agenda items on a clock or pie chart, showing the proportion of time allocated to each item. Assign a timekeeper.

What you should do as a participant

- Be respectful of other people's time. Be concise and succinct when talking about your topic.
- Keep an eye on the time and tactfully remind people about other important topics if overrunning.

5

Poor time management Irrelevant tangents or too much detail



Problem

During the meeting, participants go completely off topic or get lost in the details.

Impact

Important topics don't get enough air time.

“How is this relevant to the topic?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Bring people back to the objective. Ask them to link their point back to the objective or agree to take the sidetrack or details offline.
- People may sidetrack a meeting if they're concerned about something else and don't have a forum to address it. Check whether there's a different issue and setup a time to address it.

What you should do as a participant

- Acknowledge when you've gone off track and direct the discussion back to the main topic.
- Consider whether the level of detail is relevant. If not, take it offline with the relevant people.
- If you're concerned about an issue that's not covered on the agenda, then explain your concern and ask the meeting lead to cover it.

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6

People don't express their opinions openly



Problem

The majority of the group support a specific approach without having explored alternatives. The minority are hesitant to speak up.

Impact

The meeting will fail to take advantage of the collective intelligence of the team.

“Great, we all agree then...”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- There are many reasons that people may feel wary of speaking up: they feel others are more expert, they don't want their ideas to be shot down. Create a climate where diverse and challenging views are encouraged. Ask open questions. React positively to different views.
- Set team rules that state that bringing an opinion to the meeting is necessary and valued.
- Play devil's advocate. Ask why people may disagree, or why it may not work.

What you should do as a participant

- Sharing different views and perspectives generally help teams to generate more ideas and make better decisions. If you have alternative views, share them and help increase the collective intelligence of the group.
- Voice the reasons that people may be hesitant to share their opinions – the problem is very complex, you would like more information about the problem, or you feel like you don't necessarily have the expertise to provide a view.



Psychological Safety:

A sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.

Edmondson (1999).

Groups with high psychological safety share more information, make better decisions and perform better.

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7

Discussion is dominated by a few people The leader dominates the conversation



Problem

The most senior person in the room dominates the conversation. No one else speaks up.

Impact

The meeting will fail to take advantage of the ideas and collective intelligence of the team. Information sharing and creativity are stifled.

[Silence from the group]

What you should do as the meeting lead

- When starting the meeting, emphasise that it is a forum for the group to share ideas openly and explore different options, that the input from each person is necessary and valuable.
- Ask the senior person to listen and speak last.

What you should do as a participant

- You've probably been invited to the meeting because the lead values your perspective. Step out of your comfort zone and speak up. Share your unique experience and perspective.

7

Discussion is dominated by a few people Extraverts or the majority dominate the conversation



Problem

A few people dominate the conversation or people in the dominant location do all of the talking. The quieter members of the team or remote participants don't speak.

Impact

The meeting will fail to take advantage of the ideas and collective intelligence of the team. Information sharing and creativity are stifled.

[Silence from the introverts or minority]

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Ask individuals to speak on topics you know they'll have information or an opinion on.
- If the meeting includes remote participants, conduct video calls so that you can see non-verbal cues.
- If part of the team are remote, consider getting everyone to dial into the meeting so that the dynamic is the same for everyone.

What you should do as a participant

- Keep track of how much time you've been talking. Stop and invite others for their perspectives if you've taken up a large proportion of the meeting time.
- Invite others to speak when you notice they haven't contributed.

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8

The group are “multi-tasking”



Problem

People may be physically present, but mentally absent. They’re trying to multitask by responding to emails. This can happen with face-to-face or virtual meetings.

Impact

It’s not a good use of time for the group.

“Could you repeat that? I wasn’t listening”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Make sure your agenda is relevant and important enough to ask people to invest their time. If they feel like it isn’t a high priority, you won’t get their attention.
- Assuming you have the right agenda and right people in the physical or virtual room, have a policy about using devices during meetings. i.e. no phones or laptops for emails.
- Assign tasks to different participants to keep their attention.

What you should do as a participant

If you habitually multitask in meetings, ask yourself why.

- Are you the wrong person to be there?
- Is only part of the agenda relevant to you? Send a short update prior to the meeting, or attend part of the meeting, or ask for an update after.

If the meeting is relevant and important, be present – give it your full attention.

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The decision-making process is unclear



The Problem

A lot of different ideas and approaches may have been discussed, but the meeting is stalling because it's not clear how to make a decision.

The Impact

The discussion and progress stalls.

“Who makes the decision? How do we make a decision?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Make sure you've included people in the meeting who have the authority to make a decision.
- Alternatively, be clear about who will be able to approve the decision. Agree what the recommendations are with the group and discuss these with the decision-maker after the meeting.
- If the relevant people are in the meeting, then clearly communicate the decision-making approach: consensus, majority, or leader decision.

What you should do as a participant

- Ask how decisions will be made: consensus, majority, or leader decision.
- If the decision-maker is not in the meeting, suggest that the group summarise the recommendations and that the lead share them with the decision-maker following the meeting.
- Think about who the decision may affect and whether their view has been heard. If not, recommend that they are included before a decision is made.

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The Problem

There may have been a lot of discussion during the meeting. But, there are no clear actions or outcomes.

The Impact

No progress towards the objective.

“Great meeting... What did we agree to do again?”

What you should do as the meeting lead

- Keep notes during the meeting and summarise the main actions (who, what and when) at the end.
- Get individuals to publicly commit to their actions.
- Email a summary of the actions to the group (again - who, what, when). Communicate why the actions are important and how they help to achieve the shared objective.

What you should do as a participant

- If the meeting lead doesn't do it, summarise the main actions from the meeting (who, what, when) either during or after the meeting.

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