A 'Thinking Environment'[1] Approach to Meetings

Meetings are where the heart of an organisation beats. Organisational life flows from there. Effective meetings energise you and feeling you've accomplished something – the opposite is true of long unfocused meetings.

A meeting run as a Thinking Environment is different. It produces better ideas in less time, provides the participants with courage to act and leaves the group feeling good about itself.   So what makes a meeting effective?

1. They achieve the meeting's objective.
2. They take up a minimum amount of time.
3. They leave participants feeling that a sensible process has been followed.

If you structure your meeting planning, preparation, execution, and follow up around these three basic criteria, the result will be an effective meeting.

1. The meeting's objective

An effective meeting serves a useful purpose. This means that in it, you achieve a desired outcome. For a meeting to meet this outcome, or objective, you have to be clear about what it is.
Too often, people call a meeting to discuss something without really considering what a good outcome would be.

- Do you want a decision?
- Do you want to generate ideas?
- Are you getting status reports?
- Are you communicating something?
- Are you making plans?

Any of these, and a myriad of others, is an example of a meeting objective. Before you do any meeting planning, you need to focus your objective.
To help you determine what your meeting objective is, complete this sentence:
At the close of the meeting, I want the group to ……
With the end result clearly defined, you can then plan the contents of the meeting, and determine who needs to be present.

2. Use time wisely

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[1] The Thinking Environment developed by Nancy Kline is an approach to effective communication and interaction – see www.timetothink.com

Time is a precious resource, and no one wants their time wasted. With the amount of time we all spend in meetings, you owe it to yourself and your team to streamline the meeting as much as possible. What's more, time wasted in a meeting is time wasted for everybody attending. For example, if a critical person is 15 minutes late in an eight person meeting, that person has cost the organization two hours of lost activity.

- Ensure everyone respects the time allotted – start and finish on time.
- Latecomers – do not spend time catching them up – 1 sentence back frame (in terms of where you are in the meeting and what is being discussed now) and they will need to find out what they missed later.
- Starting with your meeting objective, everything that happens in the meeting itself should further that objective. If it doesn't, it's superfluous and should not be included.
- Only what needs to be covered and stick to relevant activities - create an agenda. The agenda is what you will refer to in order to keep the meeting running on target and on time.

3. Agendas

To prepare an agenda, consider the following factors:

- Priorities – what absolutely must be covered?
- Results – what do you need to accomplish at the meeting?
- Participants – who needs to attend the meeting for it to be successful?
- Sequence – in what order will you cover the topics?
- Timing – how much time will spend on each topic?
- Date and time – when will the meeting take place?
- Place – where will the meeting take place?

With an idea of what needs to be covered and for how long, you can then look at the information that should be prepared beforehand:

- What do the participants need to know in order to make the most of the meeting time?
- And, what role are they expected to perform in the meeting, so that they can do the right preparation?
- If it's a meeting to solve a problem, ask the participants to come prepared with a viable solution.
- If you are discussing an ongoing project, have each participant summarize his or her progress to date and circulate the reports amongst members.
- Assigning a particular topic of discussion to various people is another great way to increase involvement and interest. On the agenda, indicate who will lead the discussion or presentation of each item.
- Use your agenda as your time guide. When you notice that time is running out for a particular item, consider hurrying the discussion, pushing to a decision, deferring discussion until another time, or assigning it for discussion by a subcommittee.

4. Process

Ensure participants feel that a sensible process has been followed

Once you have an agenda prepared, you need to circulate it to the participants and get their feedback and input. Running a meeting is not a dictatorial role: You have to be **participative** right from the start.

Perhaps there is something important that a team member has to add.
Maybe you have allotted too much, or too little, time for a particular item.
There may even be some points you've included that have been settled already and can be taken off the list for discussion.
Whatever the reason, **it is important you get feedback and agreement from the meeting participants about your proposed agenda**.

At the beginning to get everyone's voice in the room
- Give everyone a turn to speak with NO interruptions for – 2 mins maximum (depending on the size of the group)
- Ask everyone to say what is going well in their work, or in the groups work.
- Depending on the type of meeting it may be appropriate to ask participants what's going on in their lives at the moment – 1 min and work 1 min

Throughout the meeting ensure maximum satisfaction for everyone, there are several things you should keep in mind:
- If certain people are dominating the conversation, make a point of asking others for their ideas.
- At the end of each agenda item, quickly summarize what was said, and ask people to confirm that that's a fair summary. Then make notes regarding follow-up.
- When people are speaking all to give their full attention – ask people to be mindful of the time and to be aware of how much their voice is in the room
- Ask people to ask questions to clarify or to challenge with respect to examine
- If contentious – go around and give everyone a chance to say what they think
- Note items that require further discussion.
- Watch body language and make adjustments as necessary. Maybe you need a break, or you need to stop someone from speaking too much.
- Ensure the meeting stays on topic.
- List all tasks that are generated at the meeting. Make a note of who is assigned to do what, and by when.
- At the close of the meeting, quickly summarize next steps and inform everyone that you will be sending out a meeting summary.

At the end of the meeting quick debrief
- what went well, what could have been done better
- Evaluate effectiveness based on how well you met the objective
- Ask each participant for their feedback - what they thought went well in the meeting and what they respect in each other.

5.   **Follow Up**
After the meeting a summary / minutes to forward to all participants + stakeholders. Have a note taker of you are too busy.
- What was accomplished
- Who is responsible for doing what
- Time frame the actions