

Who Called This Meeting?

Conduct Effective Staff Meetings

Meetings have an interesting place in the leader's toolbox – they can be the most maddening, time-wasting, energy draining hours of the week, or they can be among the most efficient and important activities the leader calls upon to move the agenda forward. Which is it for you? You no doubt attend a lot of meetings every week – maybe dozens or more (count them sometime; if you're up around 25 a week, it's time to take a hard look at how you're spending your time). If you're like most leaders, you attend (or lead) some efficient, well-run meetings, and probably a few really ill-defined, poorly led meetings. But meetings don't really deserve the bad rap they've gotten over the years; they are a time-honored and efficient way for a group of people to discuss topics and make decisions. It's not meetings that are to blame – its leaders who don't create a strong meeting purpose, structure and environment.

There are a lot of different types of meetings, of course, but in this chapter, we'll discuss how to efficiently bring all of your direct reports together for the classic team or staff meeting. Most leaders conduct staff meetings with their teams; it's where they share updates, solve problems, and produce alignment for the course ahead. I believe it's essential for the leader to hold regular staff meetings, and always recommend a specific schedule, timeframe and agenda that's easy to execute. But you have to be disciplined around all of these elements if you're going to make the weekly staff meeting work for you. Here's how...

Set the Agenda

First, if you have a team of direct reports, I believe you should conduct staff meetings every week, and think it's important to set and stick to the same day and time

(Mondays at 10 am, Thursdays at 3 pm, etc.) because it gives your direct reports a consistent schedule by which they can set their weekly calendars. Second, most staff meetings should be just you and your direct reports. This is important if you have a large team... it's hard to have a constructive discussion with a large group in attendance. At least three times a month, meet with just your direct team – if you want to invite guests or others from your extended team, do this no more than once a month.

Third, adherence to a consistent agenda can mean the difference between accomplishing your goals and wasting valuable time. I recommend this simple agenda, which can be used every week:

- **Leader's Update** (10-15 minutes) – this is a quick summary of important issues; it's your chance to provide details about what's happening higher in the department, or around the company. These updates are FYI in nature. Use this time wisely; make sure you're providing solid information that the team can use to do their jobs better, and remember to “explain the why” as you go. Do this segment right, and your team will start to look forward to the opening of your meetings, because they know they'll get meaningful information from you.
- **Team Member Round-Robin Update** (20-25 minutes) – each team member provides an update on one or two (no more) critical projects or issues in their world. Ideally, these issues should be of interest (relevant) to everyone at the table. These updates should be brief and FYI only. Monitor the clock in this section of the meeting – keep the ball moving around the table by encouraging your team to be brief and succinct.
- **Big Issues** (75 minutes) – the bulk of the meeting should be devoted to an open discussion of two or three critical issues that impact everyone on the team. These discussions can be led by any team member, and should follow one of three general formats: FYI, input, or decision. That is, each “big issue” topic is either intended as an extended FYI, a solicitation for input and feedback from others (gathering & seeking reactions), or as a means toward reaching a specific decision.

I recommend that you solicit agenda items from the team (both the round-robin updates and the Big Issues section) about two or three days before the meeting. Once you have chosen the specific items that will appear on the agenda, distribute it to the team at least a day in advance of the meeting.

What's the optimal duration of the weekly staff meeting? As you can see above, I think two hours is a reasonable amount of time to spend with your team each week in this kind of open dialog. This should be enough time to really dig into some of the big issues facing your team, and should allow you to keep things moving forward on a weekly basis. If you're augmenting the staff meeting with regular 1:1's with each direct report, that should be all you need to keep a steady hand on the management wheel, freeing up the rest of your week for significant contributions up, down, and across the organization. In other words, if you can pull off a productive weekly staff meeting, you should be able to cut down on several other meetings that you might otherwise have needed throughout the week.

The weekly staff meeting is a critical management tool when it's conducted in a regular, efficient manner. Don't be afraid to let your team debate and really wrestle with important issues. The more open the discussion, the better people feel about attending and contributing to your meeting (and the more likely you'll be to get great input). Take charge of your staff meetings by adopting a disciplined rhythm and cadence, and start bringing your people together around a respectful dialog about what's most important to the team's mission.



Conduct Effective Staff Meetings

1. Start with a focus on the agenda; really commit to soliciting discussion items and distributing the agenda in advance.
2. Run an efficient, disciplined meeting, using the same structure every week.
3. Let your team really dig into topics by allotting sufficient time to dive deep for meaningful discussions.