Setting a winning agenda

BY **ROS JAY**

We all know that the difference between a well run meeting and a poorly run one is enormous, in terms of the time it takes, the usefulness of the outcome and the effect on the dynamics of the team. And when you're the one in charge, it's down to you to make sure that yours is a well run meeting. Bit of a responsibility, eh?

But the techniques for making all your meetings effective are very simple; you just have to know what they are. Once you've mastered them, you'll be surprised how soon you get a reputation as a good chairperson, and your meetings become popular events—at least compared to other people's meetings.

Much of the work which goes to make an effective meeting actually happens before the meeting even assembles. And by far the most important part of any meeting is the agenda. Once you have a thoroughly useful and effective agenda, your meeting can't go far wrong. So here's the lowdown on producing the most helpful agendas any of your colleagues or team members have ever seen.

Most people write pretty pathetic agendas if the truth be told. They are little more than a list of items to discuss. I suppose that's better than nothing, but it is only really an aide memoire to make sure you miss nothing out.

The genuine article, however, will make your meeting faster, more productive and clearer for everyone. It will avoid confusion and time-wasting, and ensure that each item achieves a concrete result. You'll be able to zap through your meetings, scattering results, decisions and action points all around you as you go.

The agenda items

The first step is to establish which topics should be on the agenda. You'll have a mental list, no doubt, and perhaps requests from other people. The other key source of agenda items will be the minutes from the last meeting (assuming this is not a one-off meeting). This may well stipulate certain action points to be completed in time to feed into this meeting.

Once you have your list of items, the most common problem is finding that your list is too long. A regular team meeting shouldn't really run much longer than an hour—people have neither the time nor the concentration to do it justice. A project team or inter-departmental meeting might need longer, but shouldn't go beyond two hours as a rule of thumb. So if you need to slim down the agenda, here are a few tips:

- If this agenda is looking longer than usual, hold over any non-urgent items to the next meeting.
- See if any items can be covered by a sub-group. Either they can have decision making authority if necessary, or they can feed into the main meeting without the whole debate having to be repeated.
- It can be easier to schedule, and more productive in the long run, to hold more than one meeting.

Adding detail

What you have now isn't an agenda yet; it's still just a list of topics to discuss. Now you need to turn it into an agenda. And you do that by fleshing out the detail. An agenda needs clarity more than it needs brevity. It doesn't matter if your agenda runs to two or even three pages, so long as it helps everyone understand what the meeting is about.

That's not to say you should write an essay under each topic. But you should make it clear what aspect of the topic is in the spotlight, otherwise people won't be able to prepare effectively for the meeting. So instead of putting simply "new brochure" it is far more helpful to put "to discuss the format of the brochure in the light of the budget and costings"—and then attach the costings, of course. Otherwise most people won't know whether you're discussing the format, the design, the content or the schedule. So if you state your subject clearly, your agenda point might read:

To discuss the new sales brochure in the light of the budget and costings:

- *format;*
- *design;*
- *content;*
- *schedule.*

Now we're getting somewhere. Everyone can tell what exactly they are supposed to be discussing, and can prepare ideas or read background material accordingly. But there's more. We may all know what

we've talking about, but where is the discussion le ng?

Meetings aren't about open-ended discussions just for the fun of it. Who's got time for that? They have to go somewhere, have a point, achieve something. But what? There are only three reasons why you should include an item on your agenda:

1. For information.
2. For action.
3. For decision.

You will certainly need to discuss some items, but the discussion should leave you further on than you began. It is not just a vague conversation which leads nowhere. At the end of it you should make a decision, or agree an action point to take the matter further.

You may know where each item is leading, but it's no good keeping it to yourself. State it on the agenda so everyone knows. You will find that this can lead to a slightly longer agenda: good. All the more information so everyone can prepare for the meeting thoroughly. Your "new brochure" agenda item will now look more like this:

1: To discuss the new sales brochure in the light of the budget and costings:
For decision:
- *format—number of pages/size/colours etc.*

For action:
- *design—agree brief and invite designers to tender;*
- *content—agree pitch (paper attached) and agree to brief writer;*
- *schedule—discuss outline so schedule can be prepared.*

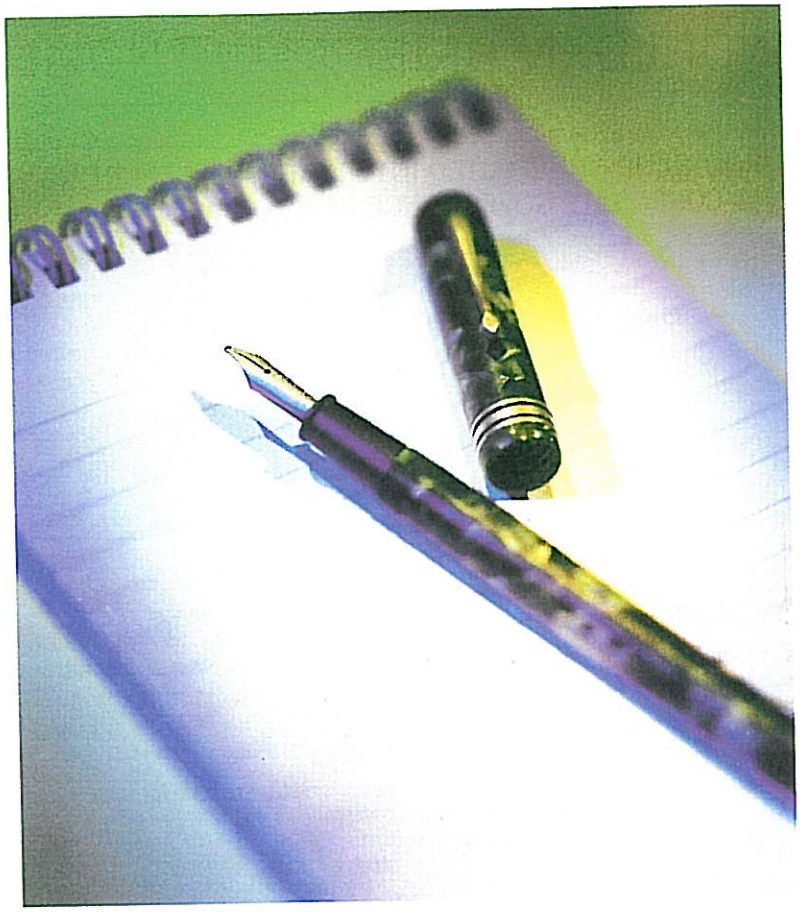
Allocating time

You're almost there. But there is just one more ingredient you need to add to create a thoroughly indispensable agenda. You need to allocate timings to each item. I know almost nobody else does it, but two wrongs don't make a right.

Suppose you have eight agenda items, and you don't want this meeting to run over an hour—you haven't the time and there's no need for it. How are you going to make sure the first item doesn't take too long and squeeze others out? By working out how much time you can spare for each item, that's how.

It's no good simply dividing the hour into eight equal sections, obviously. It takes far longer to consider the proposal to integrate the sales and marketing functions than it does to agree the date of the next meeting. So allocate time on the basis of how long it (a) needs, and (b) deserves.

Some relatively minor items genuinely take a few minutes to get through, and conversely some important items don't actually need very long. But judge your timings on experience and common sense



and make sure they add up to the total time you want to spend at this meeting.

Then write down your timings next to the agenda item, so everyone else can mentally prepare themselves for a meaty debate or a quick flit through the basics of the topic. The simplest way to do this is to write a start time next to each agenda item—it's also a quick way to check you're on course as the meeting progresses. So your finished agenda item now looks something like this:

1: To discuss the new sales brochure in the light of the budget and costings: 10.35am.
For decision:
- *format—number of pages/size/colours etc.*

For action:
- *design—agree brief and invite designers to tender;*
- *content—agree pitch (paper attached) and agree to brief writer;*
- *schedule—discuss outline so schedule can be prepared.*

And that's it. The art of writing a really effective, productive agenda. And the smart way to make sure everyone arrives at the meeting prepared for each item and knowing what to expect. So when it comes to running the meeting, you'll find that half the battle is won already.

Ros Jay *is the author of* Fast Thinking: Team Meeting, *one of the Fast Thinking business guides published by Pearson Education.*

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HOW TO HANDLE...

Taking the chair (without tears)

IN THE SECOND PART, **ROS JAY** PROVIDES SOME MORE HELPFUL HINTS

You can prepare perfectly for your meeting—a clear, detailed agenda circulated well in advance, all your background reading and research done, everybody briefed. But the problem with meetings is that you're never the only person there. And the others have seemingly endless ways of scuppering your well laid plans. They witter on for hours, they bicker (or worse), they try to take over... and you feel stuck in the middle desperately trying to maintain control.

What you need are a few simple guidelines for chairing meetings effectively. It can be done—honestly—once you know how. Your meetings can run to time, be good natured and achieve results. What more could you ask?

Structure

The first thing to address is the way in which you tackle each agenda item. It's no good arriving at an item randomly from any direction, leaving some people wondering where it is coming from, or where it is leading. You need to approach each item logically so that everyone in the meeting is clear about it. Some people may be deeply involved, while others haven't been concerned with the matter until now, or know nothing of it at all.

So each item should be introduced. You can ask the person most responsible for it to do this, or you can give an introduction yourself. Either way, the introduction should briefly cover:

1. why the item is on the agenda;
2. a brief background to it up until this point;
3. what needs to be established, proposed or decided at this meeting;
4. the key arguments put forward so far on both sides of the issue;
5. the possible courses of action this meeting could take.

The introduction should rarely take more than a minute or two, and you should explain this to other members of the meeting—and demonstrate it by example. For instance, suppose the agenda item is the new sales brochure. You might introduce it by saying: "We need a new sales brochure before the product launch in September, and we need to decide how best to spend what resources we have on it.

"The old brochure is out of date, and we get complaints that it isn't comprehensive enough.

"So we need to decide broadly how we can get the most out of the available budget.

"There is an argument that we should produce a lengthy and comprehensive brochure, even though this will mean a fairly simple and economical design. On the other hand, we could keep the main brochure short but glossy, and then back it up with a black and white catalogue listing of the more detailed product range.

"So we need to decide whether we have one smart but simple brochure, or two brochures—one glossy and one fairly cheap black and white.

"We also need to press on with the design and content, and outline a schedule so we can keep on top of the project."

Once the introductions are over, there is a four stage structure which will take you through the rest of the item without wasting time:

1. Examine the evidence. You need to go through all the relevant details which back up the arguments now. Anything substantial should have been circulated earlier so you don't have to waste time reading it all at the meeting. But you need to produce figures, costings, sample brochure styles, research results and so on—all the information necessary to carry the discussion forward.
2. Discuss the implications. This is the real debate. All the evidence has been put before the meeting, so now is the time to invite views and arguments and discuss what it means.
3. Arrive at a conclusion. Once everything has been

said which needs to be, people are inclined to start repeating themselves if you let them. Once you sense that everything useful has been said, steer the team towards forming a consensus about what the best course of action is.

4. Form a decision. Now summarise the conclusion and record it, along with any action points arising from it.

When it comes to your role in the chair, it's your job to make sure that the team follows this route through each agenda item. Keep reminding them what stage the meeting is at, whenever they start to stray. For example: "Hang on, we haven't heard all the arguments yet so we can't start drawing conclusions" or "We don't need to discuss the facts—we all know what they are. We need to move on and discuss their implications."

Handling people

There are various people problems you can encounter in your meetings, but you can help to minimise them by letting everyone know the ground rules. To make sure your meetings are both good natured and effective you need to foster a sense of respect for the meeting and everyone in it. So set out four "rules" for everyone in the team to follow:

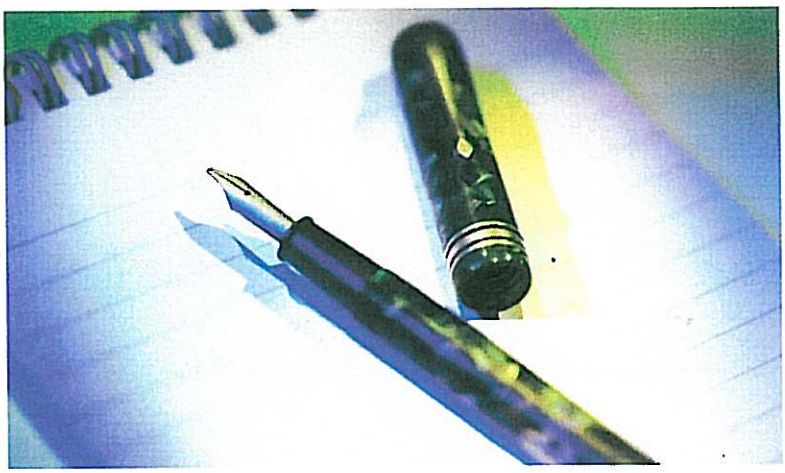
1. always ask for clarification if anything is unclear;
2. conversely, always be willing to give explanations or answer questions for other members of the meeting;
3. everyone can help to encourage quieter members of the team to have their say, and keep the more dominant members in check;
4. team members should listen to each other, and treat every idea with respect even if they disagree with it.

Aggression

One of the toughest problems to handle in the chair is the argument which becomes too heated. Ideally, you should be able to spot trouble brewing and stop it before it starts. It is much easier to keep the peace than to regain it once it has been lost. So as soon as the mood starts to heat up, take action. Respond to the first personal snipe you hear with: "Let's not get personal. We're not discussing what went wrong last time. We need to decide what lead times we need on this contract."

There is a four stage process for bringing overheated discussions back off the boil, and keeping the meeting moving forward in the process:

1. Let people let off steam. The first principle is that once strong feelings are aroused, it is counterproductive to attempt to repress them. So as soon as you sense heated emotions, ask the person concerned to express them. This opportunity to let off steam will help them feel that the group is at least listening to them, and will enable them to calm down



by themselves. Ask what's wrong, and insist that the rest of the team listens without interrupting for a few moments, until the person has got their feelings out in the open.

2. Be neutral. It is essential that you are seen to be on no one's side but the group's as a whole. Your focus is on resolving the debate amicably and sensibly, and without wasting time on it. So whatever you do:

- avoid getting drawn into the argument;
- don't start allocating blame;
- don't criticise anyone for having strong feelings: they are entitled to them so long as they express them without getting personal;
- don't lose your cool, or you will also lose credibility and respect.

3. Involve the rest of the group. When two angry people lock horns, they often lose sight of what is going on around them. One of the best techniques for diluting their emotions is simply to bring other people in to the debate. Of course, if you ask other people just to stick in their two penny worth you are simply encouraging the argument to expand and drag in the rest of the team. The trick is to change the subject subtly. You want to add new facts, bring in a new perspective or shed light on the cause of the problem.

4. Keep to the facts. This technique is another useful way to keep tempers from flaring. If people express their opinions, they are bound to take sides in some way, whether they want to or not. So avoid opinions, and stick to facts. They are much harder to argue with. Ask questions such as: "What have we done about this in the past?" or "How much more would two brochures cost?" If anyone tries to respond with an opinion, simply say "Let's stick to facts for the moment..." and then repeat the question.

A combination of the basic ground rules and these four techniques should ensure enjoyable and productive meetings, not to mention an enviable reputation for you as a chairperson.

Ros Jay *is the author of* Fast Thinking: Team Meeting, *one of the Fast Thinking business guides published by Pearson Education.*