

Unproductive Meetings? Maybe It's Your Agenda

Just 10 minutes into the meeting, participants were already “checking out.” Scott was browsing text messages. Wendy began multitasking, alternately typing emails and editing an unrelated presentation. The icing on the cake was when George, who arrived five minutes late, engaged the group in discussion of a topic not on the agenda.

We've all experienced varying degrees of meeting ineffectiveness. Poorly run and managed meetings are a waste of staff time and the organization's money, considering lost hours of productivity. How can you help make your meetings a success? The first step, says Andy Goodman, director of [The Goodman Center](#), a communications firm focused on helping organizations have more impact, is to create a great agenda. “If you read the literature about meetings, almost everyone agrees that a well-planned agenda is critical to a meeting's success,” says Goodman. “It's a plan of action, a blueprint, and the more time you put into it, the better use you make of the time at the meeting.”

But the agenda has to have all the elements outlined below to be more than simply a list of topics to be covered. Besides spelling out the mundane, like time, date, location, and meeting participants, Goodman suggests that it also needs to describe those things participants need to know to effectively prepare and contribute, including the following.

- **Meeting objective:** “You'd be surprised how often people struggle when asked to state the meeting objective in a single declarative sentence,” Goodman says. “Often the objective comes out as something fuzzy beginning with ‘to discuss’ as opposed to something action oriented like ‘to reach a decision.’” For the person who owns the meeting, the objective clarifies what needs to get accomplished. For participants, it eliminates the “why are we here?”
- **List of topics, owners of those topics, and how each topic will be handled:** Describe each topic, note who will be leading the discussion of each, and give each topic a set timeframe. Add to this whether the topic is simply to inform the group (I), needs discussion (D), or whether there is an action to take, like a decision to be made or proposal of next steps (A).

- **How to prepare and what to bring:** This section of the agenda gives participants a chance to get ready to engage in discussion.
- **What won't be discussed:** Create a "parking lot" area on the agenda, explicitly stating those topics that won't be discussed, even though they may be related.

To avoid overcrowding your agenda, Goodman recommends a winnowing process.

- List all of the potential topics.
- Remove those that can be addressed outside of the meeting.
- Prioritize the remaining.
- Determine the process for covering each (I, D, or A) and then assign a timeframe for discussion of each.

How do you create a good meeting agenda? The template below provides an outline of what it could look like.

SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA

Title

Date and Times *(beginning and ending)*

Objective(s)

Participants *(name and location, e.g., on-site, dialing in, video conference)*

Prepare Prior to Meeting *(please note any attachments)*

Topic	Leader	Inform/ Discuss/ Act	Time

Bring to Meeting

Parking Lot *(for future discussion)*

Next Steps *(to be completed at meeting)*

“It’s also worth noting that the agenda be circulated in advance to get feedback to ensure you have the right topics, in the right order, and the right people in the room,” says Goodman. Creating the agenda should be an iterative and inclusive process, he adds. “It can help create buy-in before people arrive in the room.”

While a meeting agenda won’t eliminate all of your meeting frustrations, using one that clearly sets expectations and invites participation can help keep things on topic and make the meeting more effective. Most important, it sets the stage for less wasted time and a more productive meeting.



Andy Goodman is a nationally recognized author, speaker, and consultant in the field of public interest communications. Along with *Storytelling as Best Practice*, he is author of *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes* and *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*. He also publishes a monthly journal, *free-range thinking*, to share best practices in the field.

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