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Nine Tips to Create More Effective Meetings

The statistics on meetings are astounding: More than 55 million workplace meetings take place each day in the United States at a cost of \$1.4 trillion per year. On average, non-managers participate in eight meetings per week while managers have 12 meetings per week.[1] In Canada, 40 to 50 percent of managers' time is consumed by meetings.[2] In 2019, Arts Consulting Group surveyed 25 arts and culture organization executives in Canada and the United States (including Chief Executive Officer, President, Executive Director, Managing Director, or equivalent roles) about the number of meetings they attend in a week. The reported average was 15 meetings per week.

Meeting time represents an enormous investment for organizations, including salaries, benefits, meeting space, refreshments, and, most importantly, time and energy taken from other priorities and productivity. However, research indicates that many of these meetings are not only ineffective but are often considered to be a waste of time and a source of frustration and resentment. One respondent to ACG's survey described them as "endless, unnecessary, and circular." Many organizations and their leaders simply do not manage meetings well. In a survey of more than 350 nonprofit executive team members, only 17 percent of respondents strongly agreed that they had effective meetings[3] and only two-thirds of nonprofit boards use effective meeting practices.[4]

This article provides nine easy-to-apply tips for increasing meeting effectiveness, inspired by research, data, and practices set forth in *The Surprising Science of Meetings: How You Can Lead Your Team to Peak Performance* by Steven G. Rogelberg.

Benefits of an Effective Meeting

Running an effective meeting is difficult. However, it is an important skill for many reasons. As Rogelberg states:

"Meetings make it possible for individual attendees to connect in a highly human way, serving to build relationships, networks, and, most important, support. Meetings serve as vehicles to efficiently bring together ideas, thoughts, and opinions and should enable each person to perform [their] job in a better, more coordinated, and cooperative way. Meetings help both leaders and employees to better 'make sense' of organizational life, challenges, ambiguities, and opportunities—to create a shared understanding that promotes efficiency and teamwork.

Meetings foster commitment to goals and initiatives that connect jobs, as well as commitment to broader departmental and organizational aspirations...”[5]

Given the potential benefits, it is essential that arts and culture organizations and their leaders build the knowledge and capacity to increase meeting quality, efficacy, and return on investment (ROI).

Key Recommendations to Increase Meeting ROI

Avoid Cookie-Cutter Agendas

Arts and culture organization leaders do not meet with major donors without significant preparation. That same level of intention should be applied to all meetings—even routine, internal meetings. Rather than relying on a standard format, careful thought should be put into the agenda for each meeting. Researchers have found that the hierarchy of items on an agenda plays a role in meeting effectiveness. Items that occur at the top of an agenda receive an inordinate amount of focus, sometimes at the expense of significant issues placed later on an agenda.[6] As organizational priorities evolve over the course of the year or a performance season, board and staff meeting agendas (including weekly development and marketing department meetings) should also change.

Tip 1: Put the most critical items at the top of the agenda. Topline items should include long-term strategic issues rather than urgent (but not necessarily strategic) matters facing the organization this week.

Tip 2: To use time more efficiently and create a natural flow for meeting participants, place related items together on an agenda in categories—such as strategic, operational, and informational.

Strategically Select Meeting Participants

Arts and culture organizations often pride themselves on a culture of openness, transparency, and inclusion. Some organizations tend to include more, rather than fewer, participants in meetings. Furthermore, “many organizations have reached one of two points, or both: A culture in which meeting invitations are seen as a sign of one’s prestige and importance, and collaboration happening for the sake of collaborating, a.k.a. collaboration overload.”[7]

However, research demonstrates that meeting effectiveness decreases as the number of meeting participants increases. This includes studies reporting that “for each additional person over seven members in a decision-making group, decision effectiveness is reduced by approximately 10 percent” and “larger teams reported poorer quality group experiences and higher levels of counterproductive behaviors.”[8] Thus, it is important for anyone convening a meeting to give careful consideration to the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- Who has expertise and/or information about the issue being discussed?

- Who has the authority to make decisions about this issue?
- How does this issue affect other departments, functions, or projects?
- Who will be responsible for implementing the resulting decisions or actions?

Tip 3: Know the purpose of the meeting and then determine how many people and whom to invite. Keep in mind that a smaller targeted group is better if the desired outcome is solving a problem or making a decision. If the purpose of the meeting is to provide information or make announcements, invite more participants as appropriate.

Tip 4: In a meeting where several critical issues affecting different team members will be discussed, use a timed agenda and provide participants with the choice of attending the entire meeting or only the timeframe that relates to their responsibility within the organization.

Start and End on Time

Research indicates that meetings start late about 50 percent of the time. This lack of punctuality typically leads to frustration and affects the quality of the meeting. Researchers have noted that when meetings start 10 minutes late, attendees interrupt each other more often. Running late may have an even more negative effect than starting late. Breaking an implicit contract between the meeting organizer and attendees, participants are disgruntled as they leave the meeting and then carry that emotion into their subsequent activities and interactions.[9]

Tip 5: Consider a shorter meeting time, such as 50 or 80 minutes instead of 60 or 90, to allow for intellectual, emotional, and physical transition time between meetings. With effective techniques, the same amount of work will be accomplished and participants can arrive at their next meeting on time and refreshed.

Tip 6: “Set a timer and stop when 10 percent of the time remains. The discipline at the end of your meetings will support better execution.”[10] Use the remaining time to review next steps and confirm accountability.

Consider Movement and Silence

Human nature tends to create routines. While some habits are beneficial, meetings can often become stale. Sticking to the same agenda, day and time, people, room, and pattern of dialogue can stifle engagement and creativity. Making thoughtful changes to meeting formats can foster greater energy and engagement.

In one study, people in walking meetings were 8.5 percent more likely to report high levels of engagement and were more creative at work. Other studies have indicated that walking may encourage innovative thinking. While walking meetings may have factors that limit practicality—such as group size, technological needs, and reference materials—another study revealed that standing meetings result in the same quality as a traditional meeting in less time. Standing meetings have also been shown to result in greater engagement, collaboration, and willingness to consider the ideas of others.[11]

Meeting discussions tend to focus on the group's shared knowledge more than information known exclusively to one individual. Multiple studies on brainstorming have shown that participants who interact with each other produce "significantly fewer and lower quality ideas than the non-talking meeting participants." Other research indicates that "only a few people do 60 to 75 percent of the talking in traditional brainstorming meetings." To create interaction among all participants, use silence as a meeting tool by providing writing or reading activities.

Consider the following situation: A team has been tasked with responding to multiple suggestions for a revised mission statement. With each option written on a separate poster on the walls of a meeting space, participants proceed in silence to write their comments, thoughts, and responses to what others have written, creating a group discussion in writing. Reading silently can also enhance meeting effectiveness by presenting a new concept or project that participants read during the first part of the meeting and discuss afterwards. This method typically results in a more efficient understanding and retention of content and leads to more engaged and deeper discussions.[12]

Tip 7: If standing, walking, writing, or reading are not possible for your group, consider a different meeting room set-up or an entirely different space (gallery, backstage, outdoors) when possible.

Tip 8: In typical speaking meetings, rotate the person responsible for leading the discussion so participants can experience different communication and facilitation styles, vocal timbre, pace, and group dynamics, with the added benefits of enhancing participant skills and generating greater buy-in to outcomes.

Meeting Effectiveness and Leadership

Creating an organizational culture that values meetings and sets expectations for meeting effectiveness starts at the top. As Rogelberg shares, "meetings can be stages for leaders to truly lead, share their visions, be authentic, and inspire and engage their team. At the same time, meetings are a form of localized democracy where ideas and innovation can emerge through employee interaction...Perhaps most important, meetings are sites for promoting consensus, thus serving as a focal point for collective drive and energy." [13]

One final but critically important research finding is that "meeting leaders consistently rated their meetings more favorably than non-leaders." Additionally, people tend to rate the meetings that they initiate as more productive than meetings initiated by their peers,[14] indicating a need for greater self-awareness, feedback, and even prioritization of training and professional development for arts and culture executives and board leaders. This will maximize the return on the extraordinary human, intellectual, creative, emotional, financial, and temporal investments that arts and culture organizations make in meetings on a weekly, monthly, and annual basis.

Tip 9: Prioritize meeting leadership skill development starting with an objective assessment of the organization’s meeting quality and effectiveness.

[1] Steven G. Rogelberg, *The Surprising Science of Meetings: How You Can Lead Your Team to Peak Performance*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 4, 9.

[2] Ray Williams, “How meetings kill productivity,” *Financial Post*, April 18, 2012, <https://business.financialpost.com/executive/how-meetings-kill-productivity>.

[3] Libbie Landles-Cobb, Henry Barmeier, and Kirk Kramer, “How to Create Better Nonprofit Executive Teams,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, October 17, 2018, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_to_create_better_nonprofit_executive_teams#.

[4] “Preparing for More Effective, Focused, and Strategic Board Meetings,” *BoardSource*, 2017, <https://boardsource.org/strategic-board-meetings/>.

[5] Rogelberg, *supra* 16-17.

[6] Rogelberg, *supra*, 59.

[7] Tim Herrera, “4 Ways to be More Effective in Meetings,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/business/four-ways-to-be-more-effective-in-meetings.html>.

[8] Rogelberg, *supra*, 70.

[9] Rogelberg, *supra*, 45, 51.

[10] Liane Davey, “A Step-by-Step Guide to Structuring Better Meetings,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 20, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/04/a-step-by-step-guide-to-structuring-better-meetings>.

[11] Rogelberg, *supra*, 85-89.

[12] Rogelberg, *supra*, 106-116.

[13] Rogelberg, *supra*, 17.

[14] Rogelberg, *supra*, 27-28.

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