



## HOW TO MAKE YOUR MEETINGS MATTER

### Good reasons for holding a meeting

1. You need a particular group of people (such as your team) to think through an issue, solve a problem or make a decision. In such cases, you'll get a better quality result from 'more brains on the job.'
2. You need to share a concern, problem or issue with a whole group at the same time. An example of this type of meeting is the need to break bad news to staff members. You want to make sure everyone hears the same thing at the same time and also gets a chance to ask questions.
3. You need to clarify something significant, such as what has gone wrong in a critical incident, where different people hold different parts of the puzzle you need to unravel together.
4. You want fresh perspectives, innovative ideas and broad engagement.

### *Your meeting skills challenge*

Here's a question for you: what percentage of your time last week did you spend in meetings? If your work life is anything like that of our clients, then the answer is 'a lot!' In fact, a rule of thumb seems to be: the more senior you are, the more time you spend in meetings, with some of our CEO clients admitting they spend up to 95% of their time in meetings, especially during high pressure periods.

The key point is that meetings are often the setting where problems get solved and decisions are made. These activities are essentially what every professional (whatever your sector or function) is paid to do – and do well, consistently!

So this leads to our next question: how would you rate your 'meeting skills'? What score would you give yourself when it comes to meetings, where 1 = *I know the basics and get through*; to 5, where a score of 5 = *I believe I grasp the art and science of running a great meeting, where pressing issues are tackled, things get done and I influence outcomes*.

If you're anything like the professionals we've filmed in meetings over the last fifteen years, you're probably somewhere in the middle! Sometimes you run a great meeting and everyone leaves on an energy high. And sometimes things are – well – a bit blah. Sure, you got through that agenda you circulated ahead (you did send it out, didn't you?), but things somehow fell slightly flat and you have a suspicion not everyone judged it as time well spent!

A further point our clients underscore is that, while much of the day-to-day work of a leader gets done during meetings, 'meeting skills' generally don't rate a mention during most leadership programs. The very skill set that you'll need to draw on most often is conspicuously absent from the program!

UGM has been actively researching meetings for more than twenty years. We've accumulated several hundred hours of filmed data, enabling us to identify the skills sophisticated professionals deploy and the approaches that just don't deliver good outcomes.

### *Do you really need this meeting?*

It doesn't always make sense to hold a meeting. Meetings are for interaction. While there are often segments of a meeting where information is disseminated, if information sharing is all that happens, most of us these days would judge this to be a waste of our time.

It is the need for interaction that justifies holding a meeting. This can take various forms: discussion, debate, brainstorming, solving problems, making decisions, questioning, analysing options, gauging reactions. When people need to think together, then schedule a meeting.

Often meetings are held simply to provide reassurance that progress is being made on agreed actions. But if no input from others is required to move ahead, then it might be a better use of your time to do some strategic preparation by yourself. Sometimes this is all you need to move things along, together with one or two emails or calls. A decision checklist will help you to eliminate redundant and unfocused meetings – and increase the amount of work you get done!

### *No purpose, no meeting!*

Most of the poor quality meetings we've filmed share a crucial common denominator: the purpose of the meeting was unclear. Clearly stating the purpose of your meeting will help those attending to prepare more thoroughly and contribute more effectively. What do you want to achieve? If this meeting was evaluated as successful and worthwhile, what would need to have happened? How would you like those attending to respond, if a colleague asks them later, "what happened in that meeting?"

Whatever the size of the meeting or its level of formality, your first step needs to involve setting out its purpose and objectives in straightforward terms. Three to five dot points are sufficient. If the meeting is business critical, then ask a few stakeholders to review your list to ensure nothing is missing and nothing is unnecessary. Your agenda will then bring this purpose to life through a sequence of steps. Map each step against your stated purpose. Do they all help you to achieve at least one element of your purpose? Are any potential agenda items redundant? Are any aspects of your purpose missing when you review the agenda you've drawn up.

### *Who should attend?*

First, think about the most appropriate group size, given the objectives you've set. For instance, a swift decision might be best with a smaller group, but if you want broad buy-in or fresh thinking you'll need a larger group. Properly, every agenda item should be relevant to each person attending. Having people attend who are not involved in one or more agenda items is risky. It's a common cause of 'meeting irritation', a debilitating condition which can spread rapidly and erode confidence in you! Conversely, if the people you need (for a decision, for example) can't be there, reschedule the meeting or figure out some other mechanism to secure your outcome.

Successful meetings start with sound preparation. The purpose must be clear and the format must be appropriate. You need to be able to 'sell' the value of the meeting to attendees. Remember: while people are at your meeting, no one is back at their desk magically completing their work. Build a reputation for being someone whose meetings matter!