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## ARTICLE MEETINGS

# How to Create the Perfect Meeting Agenda

*by Steven G. Rogelberg*

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# How to Create the Perfect Meeting Agenda

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Read any book on running effective meetings and, chances are, one of the first recommendations is going to be to set an agenda. Managers are often led to believe that having a written plan is the key for an engaging and successful meeting. Sadly, it's not that easy. [Research](#) has actually found little to *no relationship* between the presence of an agenda and attendees' evaluation of meeting quality. What matters is not the agenda itself but the relevance and importance of what's on it, and how the leader facilitates discussion of the agenda items.

Instead of designing your agenda as a laundry list of topics to be broached, consider creating your agenda as a set of questions to be addressed. In its simplest form, the meeting exists to answer a set of compelling questions in an allotted time. Here are some examples of what this could look like:

- Instead of a topic titled “Budget Problems,” consider a question such as, “How will we reduce our spending by 100K by the end of the fiscal year?”
- Instead of a topic titled, “Customer Process Improvement,” consider a question like, “What are the key ways of improving overall response time to customers by 25%?”
- Instead of a topic titled “Leader Succession,” try changing it to “Where are we vulnerable from a leadership turnover perspective and how might we address these vulnerabilities?”
- Instead of a topic titled “Continuing Our Strategic Planning,” try changing it to what exactly will be worked on in the meeting such as, “What is the key market threat we need to be aware of, how could it affect us, and what can we do about it?”
- Instead of a topic titled, “Miscellaneous Updates,” try changing it to “What key pieces of information do each of you have to share or need from one another?”

By populating the agenda with questions rather than topics, you’ll begin to think and act differently as you design the meeting. You’ll become strategic, thinking critically about the meaning of a topic and what your ultimate outcome is – the true reason to bring the collective together. In addition, this method fosters intentionality. A question-and-answer approach makes it easier to determine your invitation list, for one: it’s the people essential to answering the questions. This approach also better informs when to actually end a meeting – when the questions have been answered to satisfaction.

To reap the benefits of this questions-based approach, there are four keys to success.

### **Design questions that are specific and challenging.**

Think about creating agenda questions for meeting attendees like you would go about creating goals for your employees. Why? Goal-setting theory [demonstrates](#) that goals energize, focus attention, and promote persistence, all of which lead to better performance. Although much of this work has focused on individual goals and individual performance, [a robust literature](#) now exists showing that a groups’ goals also serve to promote group performance. This literature shows that specific goals (e.g., generate at least 5 new client retention strategies) are more effective than general vague goals (e.g., do your best).

The same should go for your meeting questions. Create specific questions like the examples above so that attendees are clear what the challenge or problem is thus better focusing collective meeting efforts. [Research](#) also shows that difficult, but doable goals, are the most motivating types of goals. Similarly, agenda questions should be designed to challenge, but not be so outlandish that attendees fail to take them seriously and experience frustration.

### **Collaborate to identify questions that truly matter.**

There is no formula for the ideal number of questions to address in a meeting. What is important is to have the *right* questions. To identify these, a meeting's leader should first generate potential questions from their vantage point.

Then, attendees should be asked for input as the agenda is being created. There are two reasons why this is important. First, because meetings are fundamentally collective experiences, allowing other voices is only appropriate. Second, when employees are encouraged to openly share their thoughts and ideas – and the leader actually listens to those ideas — they're more likely to feel a greater sense of commitment to the team and the organization. This, in turn, leads to a more engaged meeting attendee.

After identifying your own potential meeting questions and gathering attendee input, you need to carefully reflect on each question's value and strategic importance. Drop questions that do not make the cut (in other words, questions that don't rise to the level of my first tip above). Remember, if you deem an employee-generated suggestion to *not* be a good agenda question, get back to them in some fashion on the issue and explain why it won't be included in the meeting. Finally, drop questions that are only relevant to a small subset of attendees; in this case, it is best to pursue the question with a subgroup.

### **Privilege the most important questions first.**

[Meeting science shows](#) that content at the start of an agenda receives disproportionate amounts of time and attention, regardless of its importance. The implication is clear: put your most compelling questions at the start of the meeting. This will not only assure coverage of key issues; it is also a way of quickly grabbing attendee attention and conveying the value of the meeting. And while it is fine to start a meeting with 5 minutes or so of news and notes, after that concludes, go all in addressing the most challenging, important, and vexing questions.

If the questions are all of equal importance, consider privileging questions provided by attendees themselves. By doing so, you are living into a strong set of inclusion and shared-ownership values.

### **Execute on the agenda.**

After your set of questions is finalized, distribute the meeting agenda in advance so people have time to think about and prepare for the questions to be addressed. There is no “magic time” per se; vexing strategic questions likely require around a week of lead time, but for most other questions, three days lead time should suffice. I also encourage meeting leaders to include the meeting agenda right into the meeting invite so it's easy to locate.

Then a meeting leader needs to execute on the agenda. The most successful leaders not only consider *what* should be covered in a meeting, but also *how* to cover each item.

For instance, an agenda topic can be actively facilitated by you, or you can give that responsibility to someone else. It can be set on a timer or not, or addressed in a nonconventional manner such as [having people brainstorm in silence](#), using voting apps, working in pairs, etc. An agenda topic can be addressed in two deliberate phases separated by a break: deliberation and decision. Or it could even involve certain attendees role-playing key stakeholders (e.g., a customer) not present at the meeting, or different process-oriented roles like devils-advocate, tangent buster, or positive Paul.

Clearly, there are numerous approaches to consider. To pick the right tool for the job, think about the attendees, the tasks, the history, and the meeting's potential pitfalls. Let me share an example of this in practice for one meeting leader. This leader knows her team is composed of some very strong extroverted personalities and some quiet introverts. Plus, the introverts are the more junior folks on the team. Given this, the leader turned to a host of silence-based techniques. At the start of the meeting, one of the already-distributed agenda questions was presented to the attendees. Attendees provided responses to the question, in silence, using a meeting app. Next the responses were clustered together based on similarity and each cluster was named. This then led to the final silence phase, attendees voted on the top clusters to discuss. At this point, the silence phase ended. The meeting leader then facilitated an active discussion to derive the best possible answer.

Ultimately, a questions-based approach to agendas can bring focus, engagement, and better performance to your meetings. If you have never tried this approach, give it a go. It's OK to experiment, reflect, learn, and tweak your approach. This work will not only help make meetings better, but will also build a broader team culture of learning, taking reasonable risks, and non-complacency.

And remember: if you can't think of any questions to be answered in a meeting, that may be your sign that a meeting is simply not needed. Give back the gift of time to would-be attendees. They will thank you.

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