

Guidelines for Promoting Effective Staff Meetings

Wellness at Work Partnership Group (Cork/Kerry)



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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to promote a culture of regular and inclusive staff meetings where the contribution, knowledge and skill of all grades of staff is drawn upon and valued. Given the link between staff participation, job satisfaction and wellbeing in the workplace, the Wellness at Work Co-ordinator has put together the following set of general guidelines under the direction of the Cork and Kerry Wellness at Work Partnership Group (see page 14) to support both the manager and staff member in maximising involvement, effectiveness and satisfaction at meetings.

Meetings can be a department's most efficient and effective communication and consultation tool, but only if all involved plan carefully and pay attention to details before, during and after the event. The challenge is to ensure that meetings are inclusive, well focused, well chaired, on time, on target, creative, and productive.

Finally, the overall emphasis of the document is to promote team working at meetings where delegation, rotation and effort is encouraged throughout the planning, chairing, recording and follow up of the meeting.



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The Team Value of Meetings

For the manager

- Improves the planning and co-ordination of activities that have a department-wide impact.
- Creates a sense of unity and connectedness among your team.
- Brings a wide variety of voices and collective wisdom to bear on important issues/ problems and changes facing your workplace.
- Overall improved efficiency and effectiveness.
- Provides an opportunity to get to know your team.

For the staff member

- Enhances your sense of ownership and importance by ensuring meaningful and productive participation in decisions that affect your team.
- Provides an opportunity to keep informed on what is going on.
- Enables you to understand, appreciate and support each others work.
- Improved job satisfaction by being more involved.

Remember ; Wellness at work is enhanced through “ whole team” communication and participation.



Questions to help you focus

Whether your department/work area wants to improve the current way you run staff meetings or you need to get ideas as to how to begin, there are eight important questions the team needs to explore in regard to the overall approach to ensure maximum value and benefit:

- 1) What is the purpose of the meeting?**
- 2) What is the agenda?**
- 3) What atmosphere do we want to create?**
- 4) As chairperson how do I run the meeting efficiently and effectively?**
- 5) As a participant, how do I best get involved in the meeting?**
- 6) As minute taker, what do I record?**
- 7) How should I follow up the meeting?**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING?

One of the pitfalls of poor planning for staff meetings is that they become meetings for the sake of meeting, resulting in bored participants and time wasted. Each staff meeting should be viewed as a valuable opportunity to develop both the work of the department/unit and the team, in equal measure. While the underlying theme of promoting inclusion and participation should remain consistent throughout all meetings, each individual meeting should have a specific focus or topic that is relevant, planned, well thought out and communicated to all staff. Specific focus and planning is critical to maintaining energy, interest and progress during the meeting.

Consider the service your team provides and decide which of the following purposes your next meeting might have:

- Solving specific problems?
- Brainstorming new ideas?
- Keeping staff informed?
- Airing issues?
- Making decisions?
- Presenting a proposal for discussion?
- Discussing areas of change?
- Seeking feedback?
- Consulting vested interests?
- Promoting team spirit?
- Planning future service?
- Providing direction?
- Giving support?

Remember : If you fail to plan, you plan to fail!

All of the above should be looked at during the meeting schedule for the year.

WHAT IS THE AGENDA?

Very simply, an agenda is a list of items or issues to be discussed at a meeting. Having put clear thought into the purpose of each staff meeting, the subsequent written agenda should be short, simple and clear, listing upfront the content of the next meeting.

Remember; Vague agendas can lead to muddled discussion and misunderstandings, so clarity and advance consultation with participants about what is to be discussed is important.

Take note of the following points -

- When setting the agenda keep in mind the overall purpose of the meeting.
- Be mindful of promoting involvement at every stage and ensure staff have an opportunity to place items on the agenda for discussion.
- Once the agenda is agreed, it is helpful to document the amount of time you plan for each area of discussion, as time set aside for meetings is precious and you need to ensure the discussion keeps moving in the right direction.
- Plan the meeting to run for no longer than an hour as participants will lose focus and attention beyond this time.
- Remember not to cram an agenda with too many items as this will take from meaningful discussion on important issues
- When finalising the agenda always look to start with a positive item.
- Circulate the agenda at least one week in advance of the meeting.
- If anything needs to be read in advance of the meeting, ensure a copy is circulated beforehand.
- Ensure that there is clarity regarding the date, venue and time of meeting.

WHAT ATMOSPEHERE DO WE WANT TO CREATE AT THE MEETING?

The overall manner, spirit and tone in which the staff meeting is conducted, is critical to achieving meaningful participation and productive outcomes. It can be said that the overall atmosphere of a department/unit can demonstrate itself during the course of a staff meeting. At the outset of a series of meetings, in the interest of fairness, it is important that time is spent with the team on establishing some general ground rules that can be applied throughout the course of the meetings. These rules can be drawn upon to act as an anchor when things veer off course. It is important to note that the most effective ground rules are those which the team has collectively set out together. Five powerful basic ground rules which a team might consider are to :

- participate
- respect others
- stay focused on the agenda
- maintain momentum and
- get things done.

Remember; The generation of ideas and discussion is far more productive and creative in a positive atmosphere where staff participation is encouraged and welcomed.

Important points worth noting:

- Always take the opportunity to acknowledge success and achievement.
- Try to draw everyone into the discussion.
- Acknowledge and reinforce constructive contributions.
- Recognise and allow for the skill set and specific experience within the group.

AS CHAIRPERSON, HOW DO I ENSURE THE MEETING RUNS EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY?

The chairperson plays a primary role in setting the tone and pace of the meeting. It is often a good idea, particularly in the context of regular staff meetings to alternate the chairperson position so as to maximise learning and understanding. Some helpful points for the chairperson:

- Always start and finish on time; this lends credibility to the meeting and sends out a message to colleagues who may be regular latecomers. It takes some pressure off the chairperson if a timekeeper is appointed who will highlight time remaining for each agenda item.
- Welcome all participants and thank them for taking time out to attend, as it is important to open each meeting in a mannerly and positive fashion.
- Read out previous notes/action points to ensure progress from the last meeting.
- Read out the agenda at the beginning of each meeting, reminding participants of all proposed major topics.
- As you work through the agenda, promote inclusiveness with questions that encourage participation:
 - How do the rest of you feel about that?
 - Would anyone like to add to that?
- Keep the discussion on track and remind participants of the agenda.
- Periodically, check in with your timekeeper so as to ensure you are keeping to agreed times.
- Head off private conversations and maintain a group focus.

- Think ahead, ask questions and explore implications of suggestions or proposals -
 - *Should we identify a lead person for carrying out that task?*
 - *Do you think we have the time to make that idea work?*
 - *Can anyone see something that we might be overlooking?*
 - *Has anyone experience of this type of approach before?*

- Provide a summary of the discussion every now and again to maintain the focus and move discussion forward.
- Touch base occasionally with the note taker, whose role is to accurately summarise by excluding irrelevant material and distilling the key points.

Concluding the meeting: Make every effort to end the meeting at the scheduled time. Begin closing your meeting at least five minutes before adjournment, using the following stepped sequence:

- Signal that the ending time is near (for example: “We have just a few minutes left”)
- Emphasise major points of agreement, and recognise those points not resolved.
- Assign responsibilities for follow-up activities and attach deadlines to each activity
- Agree date, time and venue for next meeting.
- Thank the group and acknowledge their efforts.
- Set time aside to link in with the note taker to agree contents of notes/action points before circulating.

Remember; The chairpersons purpose is to achieve the meetings goals in as timely and inclusive a manner as possible, so that the task is to keep the meeting focused, participatory and productive.

AS A PARTICIPANT HOW DO I BEST GET INVOLVED AT THE MEETING?

Remember; As a participant, colleague and team member, you have a part to play in ensuring the meeting is productive and meaningful.

- By the time the meeting begins, you should know the agenda and have prepared any necessary information that may be required of you.
- Always arrive on time. It's likely that that it takes effort on everyone's behalf to be there, however collective efforts can add up to an efficient worthwhile meeting with a productive outcome.
- If you have other commitments that prevent you from arriving on time, let the chairperson know in advance, so that he or she can tell the group at the start of the meeting.
- During the meeting, actively participate without dominating it and ask questions that move the discussion forward.
- Support and co-operate with the chairperson by keeping focused and sticking to the agenda
- Respect other colleagues at the meeting and be open to the views and opinions of others. The art of listening is equally important as the art of speaking. Listen first with the intent to understand and secondly with the intent to reply.
- Share the workload by getting equally involved in proposed tasks and volunteering to undertake pieces of work as appropriate
- When the agenda is being planned for the next meeting, consider what you think would be important to discuss and propose placing it on the agenda.

HOW DO I TAKE NOTES AT THE MEETING?

Notes/action points are taken to provide an accurate and objective summary of the meeting. A person reading the written notes/action points, whether a day or a year later, should be able to understand what actions were taken and who was to carry them out. For many note takers, making sense of a discussion with many different aspects is a problem. Before the meeting starts take a few minutes to gather your thoughts. Review a copy of the agenda to understand what the meeting is about. You can also use the agenda as a format for the notes. Before the meeting starts prepare an outline using the topics from the agenda and leave plenty of space for points to be made.

Remember; The idea of effective notes taking is to 'capture key points only' and not the content of entire discussions or irrelevant material.

Key points for note takers:

- Record where and when the meeting was held.
- Record who was present and apologies for who should have been there but was not.
- Record simple, short statements that capture decisions passed and actions agreed under each of the agenda headings.
- If you are unsure on a point always ask e.g. *"For the purposes of the notes, can you clarify the action you have agreed?"*
- Notes of the meeting should serve as a snap shot of the decisions and discussions, so keep them brief and to the point.
- Any Other Business (AOB).

Write up the notes/action points straight after a meeting using your own notes taken during the meeting to guide you. Give the chairperson an opportunity to approve what you have written before circulating. Circulate notes (or place on staff notice board) within a week of a meeting and also outline date and venue for next meeting.

HOW DO I FOLLOW UP ON THE MEETING?

Meetings are a great forum to update, problem solve and keep progress maintained. However the efficiency and effectiveness of the meetings must be evaluated at regular intervals by both organisers and participants to assess if and where improvements are required.

Remember ; Managers have a core role in ensuring the meetings are effective, regular and productive.

As a manager you should;

- Evaluate the staff meetings. Check what is working? What needs improvement?
- Observe the general body language at meetings, do participants appear comfortable and get involved in discussions?
- Ensure participants are asked at the end of meetings “How do you think that meeting went?”
- Ensure notes are agreed and circulated as soon as possible after the meeting.
- Encourage tracking of progress on agreed tasks with individual meetings, phone calls and emails as appropriate.
- Monitor attendance levels.



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