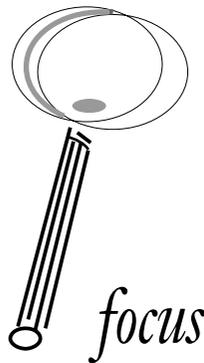# 1

The Importance of Workplace Meetings

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- List the benefits of well-planned and well-conducted workplace meetings.
- Describe the seven most common types of workplace meetings.
- Explain the particular meeting challenges in today's business environment.
- List six to eight qualities of an effective meeting.
- Apply the formula for determining the cost of a meeting.
- List the four questions used to determine whether or not a meeting is necessary.

Most meeting experts agree on at least two things: (1) There are too many meetings in the workplace, and (2) most of those meetings are a waste of time. This is due most often to poorly planned and poorly run meetings. The organization and the participants gain little or no value when meetings don't go well. In fact, a cycle of failure can quickly set in: People start to expect meetings to be unproductive, and so they are.

It doesn't have to be this way. When they go well, meetings often produce many valuable results. For instance, as a result of sharing expertise and perspectives in meetings, complex organizational issues can be addressed and resolved. Effective meetings often produce buy-in to organizational changes. If the process has been objective, decisions made in meetings are usually superior to ones made by individuals, because meetings have the advantage of multiple brainpower.

You are likely taking this self-study course in order to improve meetings

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over which you have some control or influence. You may have experienced the frustration of meetings that haven't produced the results you wanted. Intuitively you know meetings in your organization can be better and that you can make a difference. You know if you can improve your planning and facilitation skills, you'll be better equipped to utilize the valuable communication resource of meetings. This requires a broad set of skills. This course is designed to assist in building your skills by providing a practical set of tools and perspectives that you can begin using immediately.

This first chapter introduces several foundational concepts regarding meetings. This chapter also sets the stage for the specific topic coverage of upcoming chapters. Foundational concepts covered include exploring the many benefits meetings can bring to organizations, listing the types of meetings most common in the workplace, and examining the challenges organizations face with meetings in the twenty-first-century workplace. You'll also have a chance to assess the current quality of meetings in your organization, giving you a baseline of where the problem areas exist.

Another key focus is determining the cost of meetings. They are an expensive resource and need to be used judiciously. You'll learn how to use a formula to calculate the cost of meetings. This is one way to determine if a meeting is worth calling or not. If you're not likely to gain more from the meeting than it's going to cost you, it's not worth the investment of time and effort. Building on the idea that meetings are costly and should not be improperly used, one who regularly schedules and plans meetings needs a set of questions to help determine if a meeting is warranted. A section in this chapter is dedicated to the main questions one needs to ask to determine if a meeting is warranted.

Finally, this chapter overviews the basic ingredients for a successful meeting. These ingredients are detailed in future chapters, but a description of each is offered here. Plan to have a broader view of workplace meetings as a result of your study of Chapter 1!

WHAT MEETINGS CAN ACCOMPLISH

What's your first response when someone says, "Let's call a meeting"? If you're like most people, your reaction ranges from outright abhorrence to mild amusement. What most people *don't* think is: "A meeting? Good idea. We're sure to get something accomplished." Most people experience unproductive and ineffective meetings on a weekly (and sometimes daily) basis. If this course is successful, you will feel more positive about meetings. You will have a renewed sense of purpose regarding the meetings you plan and conduct. You will feel as if you can influence meetings you must attend simply as a participant, even if you have little or no direct control.

Better Decisions

Have you ever been to a meeting where people could not make a decision? To be fair, sometimes there are pretty good reasons why they can't make a decision: The right people or the right information isn't there. Other times, how-

ever, it seems as if participants have no excuse. They just won't make a decision. Or, one person at the meeting, usually the most senior individual, makes virtually all the decisions, and others feel they can only voice agreement; no dissention is allowed. Either extreme leads to poor results.

When meetings work, however, better decisions *are* made. They are better for at least two reasons. First, the issue decided on has been delineated and better understood by the input of individuals who see the issue from their own perspectives. In the case of issues that cross departments, such as changes in policies, individuals representing different departments may bring contradictory, but often equally valid, information about the potential impact. This information allows the group to think more broadly and make a better decision.

Second, better decisions are often made in meetings because differences arise that set the stage for creative solutions to be developed that would not otherwise be discovered. The kinds of sparks that arise between individuals outside of a meeting setting don't always get resolved effectively. In a well-managed meeting, however, differences can be explored in a professional and productive way. An entire section of this course is devoted to decision-making tools and techniques that are helpful in achieving better decisions in meetings.

Broader Buy-In and Consensus

In today's business world it's important that employees at all levels *buy in* to the major decisions of their organizations. This is because the success of those decisions is dependent on everyone's support. The employees have to carry out the decisions, often with little supervision or checking. Smart employers realize they need their employees to be involved in the decisions that are made. The result, if there is a good decision-making process, is usually better decisions. Smart employers also realize they need their people to support decisions, ideas, and initiatives in order for them to be successful. Meetings are a terrific arena for achieving buy-in. Questions can be raised, doubts expressed, and issues clarified. Once people are satisfied that their issues have been addressed, or at least heard, they begin to buy in. Further, if they are invited to help create the new idea, initiative, or solution, then buy-in comes even earlier in the process.

Consensus is another important theme in business today. Like buy-in, consensus is a sign of the participatory workplace. Consensus means everyone agrees with the basic tenets of an idea, even if they did not get everything they wanted. There was give and take. A quick way to see if you have consensus in a meeting is to ask two questions:

- Can you live with it (the idea, decision, or solution)?
- Can you support it?

If all attendees can answer yes to those two questions, you have consensus. The value of consensus is based on this: People support what they help to create. This level of decision making and agreement has tremendous business value. Consensus, of course, is best achieved face to face—in meetings.

Better Understanding of Complex Problems and Issues

The modern workplace is characterized by complexity. Important issues have many dimensions. If an individual solves a complex problem without input from others, the risk is that his or her understanding of the issue is limited, and therefore the solution is inadequate at best. Meetings provide a forum for broadening everyone's understanding of important organizational challenges by seeking everyone's point of view. This naturally leads to better strategies, decisions, and solutions. Some organizations even select someone to play a devil's advocate role for their meetings in order to broaden their perspective and avoid *groupthink*, the tendency of teams of people to all think alike. The devil's advocate is empowered by the group to be especially critical of proposed solutions and ideas in order to get people to really think through what they are proposing. Of course, some groups don't need to appoint a devil's advocate; they've got to control the many who come by that skill naturally! This tricky issue is addressed in Chapter 6, when we cover facilitation skills.

More Complete Resolution of Conflicts

Conflict in organizations is to be expected. However, destructive conflict that goes unresolved often eats away at the fiber of the company. When this occurs, a clearing of the air must take place, and one of the best forums is a well-managed meeting of the affected parties. In a safe setting where the issues and accompanying emotions can be shared, true resolution can take place. In fact, if these meetings are well managed and successful, there is often a spillover effect where employees will apply some of the conflict resolution skills they've learned in one-on-one conflict situations as well.

More Thorough Follow-Up and Follow-Through

One of the most powerful benefits of meetings doesn't always occur at the meeting at all, but afterwards. When meetings "end with a beginning" and people leave with a clear sense of what they need to do, that is a powerful benefit. The group members will accomplish more if they leave the meeting focused and anticipatory about their follow-up items or to-do lists. When managers give assignments individually, employees often miss out on an understanding of how their assignments fit into the larger project. As a result, they often take less ownership or are unclear how to proceed if they get stuck. On the other hand, if assignments are made in a meeting, people have a better sense of why their individual contributions are important and how they fit into the big picture. They also have a better sense, based on seeing what other people were assigned to do, of knowing who to go to for help or collaboration. There is also an underlying social obligation. If a person accepts an assignment publicly, he or she feels a higher obligation to accomplish it.

There are other benefits to a well-run meeting. People have real opportunities to work on their interpersonal communication and presentation skills. It is vitally important to the success of the organization that employees can articulate their ideas, ask meaningful questions, and listen effectively. Additionally, people often learn in meetings how to work together better and how to manage conflict more productively, as well as to show professional respect to

their colleagues. These desirable benefits result in a more purposeful, productive, and capable organization. They make the trouble of learning how to plan and conduct more effective meetings really worth it.

SEVEN COMMON TYPES OF WORKPLACE MEETINGS

This course is primarily meant to assist you with day-to-day or week-to week workplace meetings. A meeting is defined as "three or more people called together at a predetermined time and place to address issues." Notice that this definition leaves out one-to-one meetings. While it's true that the planning portions of this course will be applicable for meetings between two people, the dynamics in that setting are very different from those in a multiperson meeting and go beyond the scope of this course. This course also does not focus on organizational retreats or large group gatherings (100 or more participants), although some of the planning tools and group dynamics ideas presented here may be helpful in those settings.

There are seven types of meetings you may participate in on a regular basis in your organization. These are (1) regular staff meetings, (2) project team or group meetings, (3) cross-departmental meetings, (4) problem-solving meetings, (5) information-sharing or update meetings, (6) combination meetings, and (7) impromptu meetings. Each has a different purpose, possibly a different set of participants, and therefore a different set of dynamics. Each of these factors—purpose, participants, and dynamics—must be understood and managed by the meeting leader.

Regular Staff Meetings

This is the most common and traditional type of workplace meeting. A manager or supervisor is often the one who plans and calls this type of meeting. It is likely to be at a regular time and of a regular length each week or two. The focus of a staff meeting is often simply a status report—updating people on what is going on. Sometimes special problems are addressed, accomplishments are celebrated, or initiatives are kicked off. The participants are the staff members themselves, with an occasional visitor or guest participant from within the organization. A human resources specialist, for instance, may attend another department's staff meeting to explain the new company policy on vacation.

The dynamics of a regular staff meeting are impacted by the fact that this event occurs on a regular basis. Habits and rituals have developed. Some of these may be affirming and constructive, while others may be negative and distract from the purpose of the meeting. In this course, regular staff meetings are a major focus because these often require the most work to improve.

Project Team or Group Meetings

Increasingly employees are required not only to accomplish their regular duties, but also to serve on special projects or initiatives. Some employees may feel their entire job is made up of serving on a variety of special project teams! Project team or group meetings are the modern version of a committee

meeting. Of course, some organizations still have committees built around specific themes. For example, there may be a recognition and rewards committee that focuses on creative ways to recognize exemplary employees and their contributions. Common threads with all of these types of groups are the following:

- The life of the team or group is limited to the length of the project. In the case of committees, most members serve for a period of time, usually a year, in which the committee is trying to achieve certain initiatives.
- The project team, work group, or committee is made up of people from various parts of the organization, not simply a staff team that is used to being together. This means that the group may take some time to develop its own meeting dynamics. Also, each team member may bring his or her own meeting habits built from previous experiences. Some of these habits may be effective, while others may not.
- The leader of the project may not have supervisory authority over most or all of the team assembled. This fact clearly impacts the dynamics of the project team meetings. A leader has to utilize buy-in and consensus a lot more when he or she does not have managerial authority over the members of the group.
- Depending on how long the group or team has been together, unique dynamics may have developed. It's not uncommon for members of groups with some history together to be less formal with one another and to have a greater comfort level in speaking their minds. While this level of collegiality can often be productive, since the formalities are out of the way, some of the interpersonal habits and routines of an established team may also be counterproductive to effective meetings. It's important for the team leader to assess the group dynamics quickly to determine what is productive and what is unproductive. The second task is to decide what is going to need to change in the team meetings and how to introduce those changes so that the buy-in will be there.

Clearly, leading project team, work group, or committee meetings presents unique challenges. This course introduces several tools specifically designed to help manage discussions and decisions in these types of meetings.

Cross-Departmental Meetings

The modern organization has a lot more communication between and among its many departments. It used to be that different departments within companies had little to do with each other. If they did need to interact, their managers would usually meet and work out any issues, then report back to their respective departments. Now it is more common to have occasional cross-departmental meetings that largely focus on matters that affect two or more departments.

These meetings often are designed to work out agreements regarding work handoffs between the departments as well as to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each. Occasionally cross-departmental meetings are convened to address problems that have arisen or to brainstorm and choose new

and better work processes. These kinds of meetings can be characterized by a high level of conflict. It is often the case that when problems are raised, one department simply places blame on the other. It's up to the meeting leaders to see that the conflict does not become destructive. In fact, one of the unique challenges of cross-departmental meetings is the question of who is in charge. Staff members tend to be loyal to their own department managers, and the success of cross-departmental meetings often depends on the degree to which managers at the session have developed good working relationships. This course will help you when you find yourself planning and conducting cross-departmental meetings.

Problem-Solving Meetings

Problem-solving meetings are called at all levels within the organization. Their purpose is to address, sometimes once and for all, issues that have been causing difficulty to many within the organization. To the rank-and-file employee, it may seem that when senior managers call these meetings, they do so rather capriciously. In fact, the intention is usually to bring enough attention and authority to the situation to help achieve a solution. When a manager within a unit or department calls a problem-solving meeting, he or she is doing the same thing: bringing enough attention and authority to an issue that needs to be addressed. Common topics for such meetings include removing barriers to strategy implementation, determining why goals or targets are not being achieved, and determining how to handle a major change in the business, such as the loss of a major account or the possibility of entering new markets.

The participants invited to such a meeting don't necessarily fall along departmental lines. For this type of meeting, what's most important is knowledge of and experience with the problem being addressed. The meeting attendees should reflect the breadth of the groups affected by the problem, with at least one representative from each group. These meetings also often benefit from the involvement of an outside facilitator. The facilitator does not have to be external to the company, just outside of the problem or issue being addressed. The facilitator must be neutral regarding a solution and focus on guiding the assembled group through a step-by-step problem-solving process. This type of meeting is increasingly being called because of the value it can yield for the organization.

Information-Sharing or Update Meetings

Communication is the lifeblood of any organization. When everyone within an organization knows the same key information, and knows what to with it, that alignment can bring tremendous results. One way many organizations still seek to share key information is through a meeting. It doesn't have to be a dramatic companywide event. Managers of small groups find meetings to be an effective means of information sharing. When information-sharing or update meetings are called, they are often anticipated with either dread or optimism. It's important to manage people's expectations prior to the meeting, without inadvertently starting or fueling the rumor mill.

It is important to share updates regarding current work in meetings as well. This is especially true when something has been changed. For instance, if a sales department in a software company receives notice that the names of recently upgraded products have been changed, this information needs to be shared immediately. Usually people need to know not only the *what* of the change, but also the *why*. Careful planning is the key to a successful information-sharing meeting.

Combination Meetings

Many of us attend meetings that combine elements of each of the above types of meetings. For instance, a staff meeting may involve problem solving, information sharing, or even a cross-departmental issue for a portion of the meeting. When this occurs it's even more important for the meeting leader to plan clear transitions from one topic to the next. Combination meetings often get bogged down because attendees are unclear about how to participate in each segment. If the meeting leader is also unclear and unprepared, then the meeting can quickly become counterproductive. The techniques taught in this course will help you better prepare for the combination meeting.

Impromptu Meetings

The impromptu or ad hoc meeting is usually quick (15 to 30 minutes), focused on a single topic, and designed to either share important information with many people at once or gather feedback from the participants to help inform a pending decision. Some organizations even call these *standing meetings* (and remove all the chairs from the meeting area) because they want to emphasize the quickness of the meeting or the urgency of the issue. Attendees at impromptu meetings usually vary, depending on the topic and people's availability. Although the planning for an impromptu meeting is usually "on the fly," it is important for the meeting leader to know what the objective of the meeting is and to plan an agenda that will help ensure that the objective is achieved. Some of the tools covered in this course will not apply to impromptu meetings, because there is simply not time to use them. The suggestion here is not to rely overmuch on impromptu meetings to address all your organization's meeting needs. However, once you've practiced the tools and techniques covered in this course for a while, seek an opportunity to conduct an impromptu meeting. Impromptu meetings are often effective, and they can be a refreshing change for the participants.

These seven types of meetings—staff, project team or group, cross-departmental, problem-solving, information-sharing or update, combination, and impromptu—probably cover 95 percent of the ones in which you participate either as a leader or attendee. In Exercise 1–1, calculate which meetings you spend the most time planning and attending in an average month. This will give you a sense of how much time you spend both planning and attending meetings and which types of meetings are most common for you in your present role. This information can help you direct your learning in this course, allowing you to spend more time focusing upon the tools, techniques, and ideas that will be most helpful to you now.

Exercise 1–1

Seven Common Types of Meetings

DIRECTIONS: Calculate how often you attend each type of meeting in a given month, and how much time each meeting takes.
(***Note:*** If you are conducting some of these meetings, add your preparation time to the number of hours each type of meeting takes.)

	How Often	*How Many Hours per Meeting*
1. Staff meetings	_____	_____
2. Project team, work group, or committee meetings	_____	_____
3. Cross-departmental meetings	_____	_____
4. Problem-solving meetings	_____	_____
5. Information-sharing or update meetings	_____	_____
6. Combination meetings (several of the above combined)	_____	_____
7. Impromptu meetings	_____	_____

MEETING CHALLENGES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Anyone attempting to have more effective meetings in his or her organization is going to face certain challenges. There are trends in today's business world that a meeting leader must be aware of and take into account when planning and conducting meetings. These trends are the speed at which we work, the use of multiple sites, changing organizational structures, high employee turnover, and the need for adaptability. Let's examine each a little more closely. Our purpose here is to recognize and understand these challenges. Solutions are offered in later chapters.

The Speed at Which We Work

It used to be that meetings were easier to schedule and attend. Finding a time to meet is much more difficult now. The demands on our time and energy, driven by the speed of work today, are incredible. People are working harder and longer. Business travel (both domestic and international) is more likely to be part of their jobs, and they are more likely to be out working with customers. They are harder to reach directly and have less time for meetings. The challenge for meeting planners is to account for all this. This means fewer, shorter, and better meetings. If you gain the reputation of conducting this type of meeting, people will make more time to attend. If not, people will try avoid your meetings because they are too busy.

The Use of Multiple Sites

It used to be that large organizations that had many plants or factories would treat those entities as separate, self-contained units. Any site could function

on its own with little involvement or interference from other divisions within the larger organization. Sites only had to be concerned with the bottom line and with ensuring that their local efforts were meeting the corporate goals set for them by headquarters. The trend today, however, is for direct collaboration between business units that may be located at different sites. These units may have common goals and business plans. They may need to share resources, ideas, maybe even bosses! In short, they need to communicate and work together in ways that are new and even a little uncomfortable to them. The phenomenon of multiple sites creates several challenges to those who plan and conduct meetings.

The main challenge is how to get everyone together. Fortunately, technology offers several possibilities beyond the traditional face-to-face meeting. Many people now regularly use phone conference calls, videoconferencing, and networked presentations as a means of connecting people from different sites. Logistical meeting management challenges are addressed later in this course.

Changing Organizational Structures

Organizations today are much flatter, with fewer layers of management from top to bottom. This has led to much more productive companies where managers lead less by authority and more by influence, knowledge, and people skills. The impact this has on meetings is that they are more democratic, with everyone responsible for coming up with workable ideas, solutions, and decisions. Thus, meetings require a higher level of participation by all attendees, as well as a meeting leader who can effectively manage this participation. To do this properly takes time, a commodity already mentioned as scarce.

High Employee Turnover

It used to be that employee longevity within an organization was a given. No more. Organizations now accept a much higher level of turnover. Also, with a good economy and growing organizations, there is a consistent influx of new employees. How does this impact units, project teams, departments, and their meetings? More time needs to be spent bringing people up to speed, orienting them to the issues at hand, and integrating them into the fabric of the group. This is a necessary use of meeting time, but it can be frustrating to those who are already familiar with the issues and just want to get on with the meeting. Carefully balancing the needs of seasoned employees with those of the newer ones will be a continual challenge.

The Need for Adaptability

Workplaces today deal with a high level of change. Resilient organizations that adapt and are flexible are going to survive and thrive. However, rigid organizations that are unwilling to respond to change are doomed to failure because of their lack of resiliency. Adaptability, however, has several impacts on meetings. First, people will sometimes be asked to change direction quickly, abandoning projects and initiatives for which they have worked very hard. These announcements often occur in meetings. A manager has to know how

to raise this issue with sensitivity and clarity. Second, group members can become hesitant about making decisions, feeling that something will probably change (over which they have no control), and that they will just have to start over anyway. This attitude manifests itself in meetings where people seem to be stalling instead of deciding to move forward. There are meeting tools, such as contingency planning, that can help. However, meetings that are called to focus on change continue to be a challenge.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF MEETINGS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

Most people feel that they can recognize whether a meeting they experience is effective or ineffective. They already sense what criteria to use to measure meeting quality. As this course begins, it's important to establish basic guidelines for determining the quality of a meeting. Once you know these criteria, you can assess any meeting and gain a clearer picture of what is going well and what needs improvement. Since you are just beginning this course, this is a good time to assess the quality of meetings held in your organization. This will help you concentrate on areas that need the most work. It will also provide you with a "before" picture against which to measure the quality of meetings after you have completed the course and integrated some of its tools and ideas. There will be an improvement between the "before" and "after" pictures because of your efforts in this course. You may also consider sharing these criteria with several people who are regular attendees at your meetings so that you can get their opinions as to what's working and what needs improvement. That information could further direct your learning in this course.

This course focuses on ten criteria for conducting effective meetings. You may already be familiar with some of them. Although there may be other criteria to consider, these ten should be considered fundamental.

Quality meetings are conducted when attendees:

- Assist in achieving the meeting's objectives.
- Stay on track.
- Manage their time well (including starting and ending on time).
- Include a healthy discussion of the issues.
- Include objective and participatory decision making.
- Adhere to an agenda.
- Include the right people for information sharing and decision making.
- Manage conflict so that it leads to more positive outcomes.
- Have a sense of shared responsibility and feel valued for their contribution to the meeting's success.
- Have consistent follow-up and follow-through on meeting decisions and action items.

What do you think? If these criteria were fully adhered to in meetings you attend and lead, would they bring about more effective meetings and better re-

sults? By the end of this course, you will have the right tools and the right perspective to achieve these criteria more consistently in meetings you plan and conduct. Exercise 1–2 is an assessment tool you can use for your individual assessment or ask others to fill out to give you feedback. Either way, it provides a baseline for where your organization is in terms of meeting the ten criteria and a way to measure improvement as you apply what you learn in this course.

Exercise 1–2

Assessing the Quality of Meetings in Your Organization

DIRECTIONS: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 meaning "Never" and 10 meaning "Always"), determine the overall quality of the meetings within your organization. Consider giving this assessment to several colleagues to get their opinions.

1. Our meetings achieve the stated objectives.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

2. Our meetings stay on track.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

3. Our meetings start and end on time.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

4. Our meetings include a healthy discussion of the issues.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

5. Our meetings include objective and participatory decision making.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

6. Our meetings have an agenda, which is adhered to.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

7. Our meetings include the right people for information sharing and decision making.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

8. Our meetings include well-managed conflict that leads to more positive outcomes.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

9. In our meetings, participants have a sense of shared responsibility for its success and feel valued for their contribution to the meeting's success.
   Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

10. Our meetings include consistent follow-up and follow-through on decisions and action items.
    Never   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Always

Key to Scores

7 to 10 "Always" ratings = Excellent; your organization conducts *very* effective meetings.
85 to 100 = Great; your organization consistently has effective meetings.
70 to 84 = Good; your organization often has effective meetings.
55 to 69 = Okay; your organization has some effective meetings, but needs more consistency.

40 to 54 = Poor; your organization has too many ineffective meetings and needs to address the issues.

39 or less = Chronically deficient in key indicators for effective meetings—address issues quickly.

7 to 10 "Never" ratings = Uh-oh; your organization has a negative culture regarding meetings that needs to be changed immediately.

If the total score for your organization is less than 40, then you probably have a poor meeting culture to overcome. The good news is that though things have to change, many people within your organization will likely welcome and support your initiative because they are tired of the way it is, and they know meetings could be better—they just don't know how to make them better. As you complete this course, you will be equipped to make your organization's meetings better.

The High Cost of Meetings in Time and Money

Meetings are expensive. In fact, they are one of the most expensive means of communication available to organizations. If a manager calls a two-hour meeting of all six people on his or her staff, that is taking at least 14 hours of the staff's available productivity time (not counting the time spent preparing for the meeting). Because all seven people are in the meeting, they aren't getting their other work accomplished. Customers and other coworkers trying to reach them are forced to wait; deadlines for other important matters are possibly not being met; and the overall energy and focus of the seven people is on the meeting. It may be entirely appropriate for the manager to call a two-hour meeting for all six staff members. The issues discussed there, and the decisions made about them, may well be worth the cost of other matters going unattended. All these factors and more must be considered when calculating the true cost of a meeting.

Why should we care about the cost of a meeting? Isn't it just an inevitable expense over which we have little control? Many people feel that way. That mindset, however, is one of passive resignation, and it reflects an attitude that says we really don't have much control or even influence over meetings. With that attitude, people will always feel that meetings control them, rather than the other way around. The better mindset is to seize upon the truth that meetings are simply another resource available to organizations (albeit an expensive one). Like all other resources, one must determine when and how to use meetings. Just as with resources like equipment, materials, and people, one must determine when and how to use meetings to achieve business goals.

Will knowledge of the true cost of meetings encourage some to call fewer meetings? Hopefully so. In fact, one of the most demonstrable ways to increase the overall value of meetings in any organization is to significantly cut the number of meetings. For instance, a company that normally holds four-hour weekly staff meetings should cut the meeting to two or three hours. An

organization that requires managers to normally attend eight to ten meetings a week should cut the number to five or six. What will this do? It immediately makes the remaining meetings more valuable. It is simple economics. When a commodity is made more scarce, its value naturally increases. People tend to waste time in an excessive-meeting environment because they don't value the meeting time. What isn't decided at this meeting can always carry over to the next one. However, the cliché "time is money" applies to meetings as well. We want to use this resource carefully, so we need to consider the cost of a meeting before we ever call it.

Determining the Cost of Meetings

The formula for determining the cost of a meeting is rather easy. Here are the steps:

1. Add up the number of participants that will attend the meeting.
2. Determine a collective hourly worth for that group based on their annual salary (including their benefits package) prorated to an hourly basis.
3. Multiply that figure by the number of hours the meeting will last.
4. Add a few more hours of cost for any planning and preparation (usually at least two hours).

The figure you calculate is the cost of the meeting, and it does not even include the cost of the work not getting accomplished while everyone is at a meeting!

As an example, consider this scenario. Leslie is the director of a research unit for an institute at a state university. Her group focuses on the potential impact of Supreme Court decisions on human resources within organizations. The court's June decisions are of particular interest. Each year, Leslie's group scrambles to produce analysis and projection reports by the end of June for the university's major periodical. Leslie wanted to pull her staff of ten people together for a two-hour meeting in late May to finalize the workflow for the hectic month ahead. She wanted to know the cost of that meeting to determine if conducting it was going to be worth the staff's time. Exhibit 1–1 shows Leslie's calculations. She determined that $1,000 in productivity was a fair price to pay for the value of getting a clear handle on the difficult month ahead. Based on her reasoning, Leslie then scheduled the meeting and began her planning.

Knowing the true cost of a meeting allows a manager or supervisor to make one of several determinations:

- Hold the meeting because the value of the proposed outcomes of the meeting make the use of time a good investment.
- Do not hold the meeting because the cost in productivity is not worth the time that would be invested. Seek other means of accomplishing the meeting objectives.
- Postpone the meeting until a time when the issue is more urgent, making the use of time a better investment, or when the participants are less busy, making the investment of time less costly.

E | xhibit 1–1
The High Cost of Meetings

<u>10</u>

Number of people at the meeting

×

<u>$40 per hour per individual</u>

Total compensation package of group divided to an hourly wage
(Suggestion: $5 per for every $10,000 in annual compensation package per individual)

×

<u>2</u>

Number of hours the meeting runs

+

<u>$200</u>

Preparation and planning time
(Suggestion: $100 for each hour the meeting is expected to run.)

=

<u>$1000</u>

Total expense of the 2-hour meeting
(Not including the cost of the work not getting done because everyone is at a meeting!)

- Cut back the time allotted for the meeting to its bare minimum.
- Cut back the number of attendees to those who absolutely need to attend.

For an additional resource to use when considering whether to call a meeting in the first place, see Exhibit 1–2.

The High Cost of Unproductive Meetings

Using the same formula for calculating the cost of meetings, it's easy to figure out the amount of productivity dollars wasted at unproductive meetings. This is important information to know if you are in a position to influence or determine which meetings in your organization will be regularly scheduled and which will be planned on an as-needed basis. Start by determining which meetings are producing valuable results and which are not. Of course, this formula is only one means of ascertaining this, but it is an important one. You will also want to survey the opinions of other meeting attendees as to the overall effectiveness of your organization's meetings.

In one organization, for example, to help prevent meetings being a waste of time, the meeting leader announces the rough cost of the meeting. He or she may say something like, "This is a $2,000 meeting, now let's make certain we get at least $2,000 in value out of it!" That type of announcement sets the proper tone for a productive meeting.

? Think About It . . .

Reflect on a recent meeting you attended that you considered an overall waste of time. Using Exercise 1–3 as a worksheet, determine roughly what that meeting cost your organization in lost productivity dollars. Consider whether that meeting simply should not have been called or just should have been better run.

HOW TO DECIDE WHETHER A MEETING IS NECESSARY

Now that you better understand the cost of meetings, you need a way to determine under what circumstances to call a meeting at all. In general, there is a need to consider a meeting as one of several communication resources at

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E xhibit 1–2

Calculate the Cost of Your Next Meeting

_____

Number of people at the meeting

×

$_____

Total compensation package of group divided to an hourly wage
(Suggestion: $5 per for every $10,000 in annual compensation package per individual)

×

_____

Number of hours the meeting runs

+

_____

Preparation and planning time
(Suggestion: $100 for each hour the meeting is expected to run.)

=

$_____

Total expense of the meeting
(Not including the cost of the work not getting done because everyone's at a meeting!)

Exercise 1–3

Calculate the Cost of an Unproductive Meeting

DIRECTIONS: Calculate meeting costs by completing the following equation.

_____

Number of people at the meeting

×

$_____

Total compensation package of group divided to an hourly wage
(Suggestion: $5 per for every $10,000 in annual compensation package
per individual)

×

_____

Number of hours the meeting runs

+

_____

Preparation and planning time
(Suggestion: $100 for each hour the meeting is expected to run.)

=

$_____

Total Cost of the Meeting
(Not including the cost of the work not getting done because
everyone's at a meeting!)

your disposal. One should decide to call a meeting after other options have been considered and rejected for one reason or another. Remember, this keeps meetings a more valuable commodity within your organization. Your colleagues will recognize that you respect their time by not calling unnecessary meetings. They will respond by respecting your meetings and their purpose when you do need to call them.

There are at least five questions to ask when trying to determine whether a meeting is warranted. Each question assists in considering other communication means first before resorting to scheduling a meeting to handle the issue at hand. The five questions are as follows:

- Is the issue something better addressed in an e-mail or memo?
- Is the issue better addressed by sitting with individuals and discussing it with each of them?
- Is this issue something that can or should wait for another time? (Perhaps there is not enough information to address it, or an upcoming event will help clarify it.)

- Is this an issue that requires the multiple perspectives of a meeting setting?
- Can this issue be added to the agenda of an upcoming meeting that is already scheduled, or does it warrant its own meeting?

You may want to add other questions that are particular to your organization. Exhibit 1–3 shows a graphical flow chart representation of the thinking process used to determine whether a meeting is necessary.

？ Think About It . . .

Write out several current issues in your organization about which you have been considering calling a meeting. Take each issue through the flowchart in Exhibit 1–3, asking yourself each of the five questions. For each issue you considered, jot down a few sentences about what you have determined about whether a meeting is appropriate.
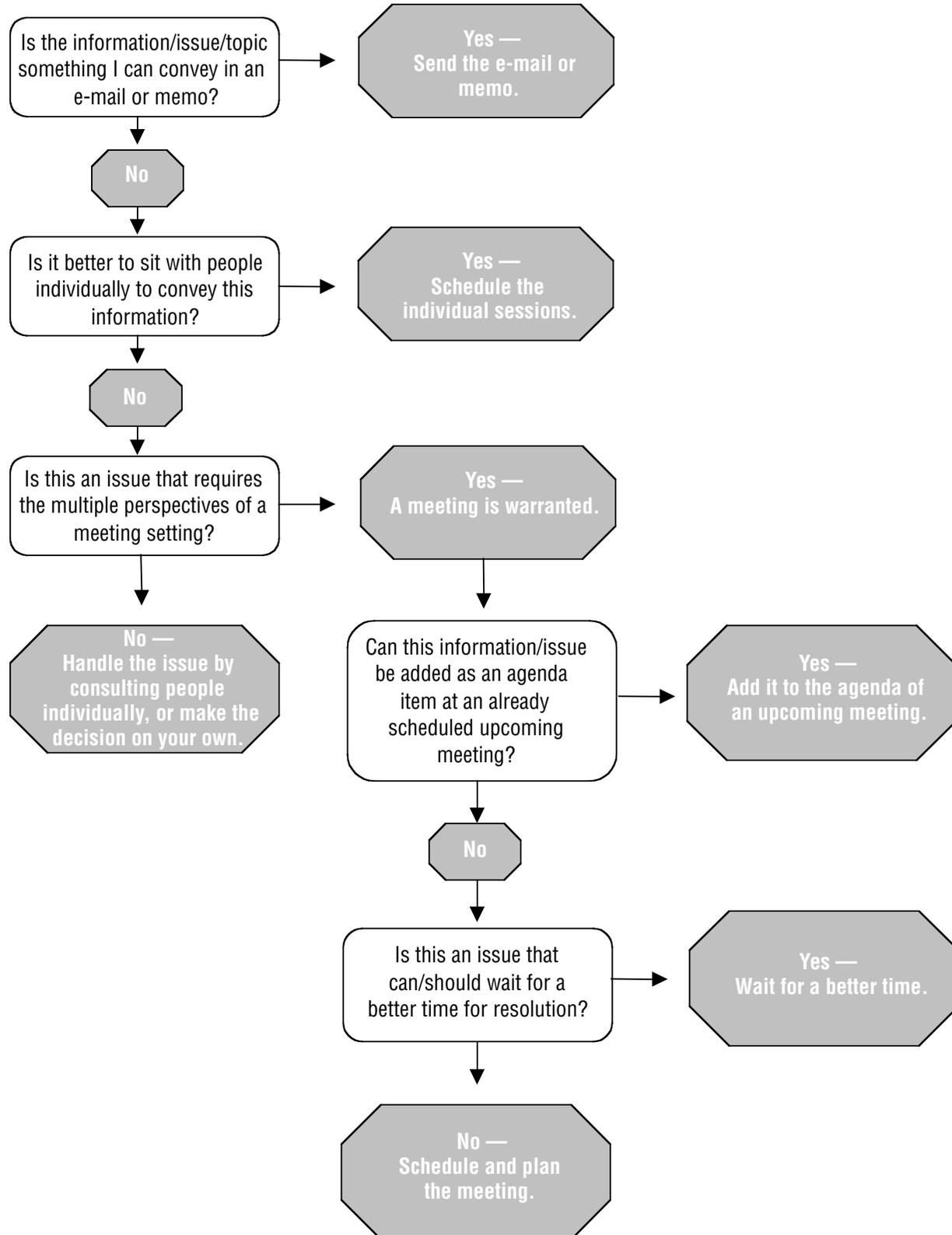
_____

_____

_____

HOW THIS COURSE WILL ASSIST YOU

As this first chapter closes, hopefully you have an even stronger conviction that meetings are a powerful (yet expensive!) resource that must be utilized properly to gain the intended benefits and results. You may even feel a bit overwhelmed by the prospect of equipping yourself to tackle the meeting challenges you face in your organization. This section will give you a sense of what's coming in this course and how it's going to assist you in achieving your goal.

First, in terms of what to expect in the overall content, this course is more practical than theoretical in nature. You will see many checklists, planning guides, and other tools designed to walk you through each of the key concepts. Second, the illustrations are from the real world and draw from a variety of workplace settings. Third, there is an emphasis on application, trying these ideas out at meetings while you are taking this course. Each chapter has an application component, assisting you in transferring what you are learning back to your workplace.

The course content can be summarized by the following three words: *before*, *during*, and *after*. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on what is done to get ready *before* a meeting—both preparing yourself as the meeting leader and preparing all aspects of the meeting. Chapters 4 through 6 focus on all aspects of what to do *during* the meeting. This includes time management, techniques for gen-

E | xhibit 1–3

Meeting Decision Tree

Is the information/issue/topic something I can convey in an e-mail or memo?

→ **Yes — Send the e-mail or memo.**

No

Is it better to sit with people individually to convey this information?

→ **Yes — Schedule the individual sessions.**

No

Is this an issue that requires the multiple perspectives of a meeting setting?

→ **Yes — A meeting is warranted.**

No — Handle the issue by consulting people individually, or make the decision on your own.

Can this information/issue be added as an agenda item at an already scheduled upcoming meeting?

→ **Yes — Add it to the agenda of an upcoming meeting.**

No

Is this an issue that can/should wait for a better time for resolution?

→ **Yes — Wait for a better time.**

No — Schedule and plan the meeting.

erating discussion, decision-making tools and techniques, and basic facilitation skills. Chapter 7 focuses on what is done *after* the meeting—making certain good follow-up and follow-through occur. Chapter 8 examines the use of media and electronic tools in meetings, how to choose the right media, and some dos and don'ts for each. The course is designed to be comprehensive without being exhaustive. Hopefully it achieves the proper mix of topics.

recap

This introductory chapter covers a number of areas. First, an overview of the primary benefits of workplace meetings is addressed. This is a way to keep your overall goals in mind when trying to improve meetings. The benefits of meetings include better decisions, broader buy-in and consensus, a better understanding of complex problems and issues, more complete resolution of conflicts, and more thorough follow-up and follow-through. These benefits, and the business results they lead to, make an investment in improving meetings a worthy investment indeed.

There are several types of workplace meetings; each one is designed to achieve different goals and has to be planned and conducted differently. Developing a full range of meeting management skills will allow the meeting leader to be fully equipped to handle each type of meeting, depending on what is needed.

There are special challenges to the planning and execution of meetings, brought on by the realities of the workplace of the twenty-first century. The challenges discussed are the speed at which we work; the use of multiple sites and the logistical challenges it brings; changing organizational structures, bringing a need for a more democratic, less authoritarian approach in meetings; high employee turnover and the constant influx of new employees; and the need for adaptability. These challenges, properly managed, can be overcome.

A section of this chapter focuses on assessing the quality of meetings. Ten criteria comprise the main set of measurements of quality meetings. They mainly focus on observable behaviors and attitudes seen within a meeting. Applying these criteria to your organization's meetings is a great way to establish a benchmark from which to measure the progress your meetings make as you proceed through the course.

Meetings are expensive! They are the most expensive noncapital means of communicating within an organization. The formula for calculating the cost of meetings allows a means of documenting the expense. This helps organizations better determine when and where to expend this valuable, but expensive, resource. Five essential questions that help determine whether a meeting is warranted are outlined. Each question allows the meeting planner to consider other ways of communicating before setting up a meeting to address certain issues.

Review Questions

INSTRUCTIONS: *Here is the first set of review questions in this course. Answering the questions following each chapter will give you a chance to check your comprehension of the concepts as they are presented and will reinforce your understanding of them.*

As you can see below, the answer to each numbered question is printed to the side of the question. Before beginning, you should conceal the answer in some way, either by folding the page vertically or by placing a sheet of paper over the answers. Then read and answer each question. Compare your answers with those given. For any question you answer incorrectly, make an effort to understand why the answer given is the correct one. You may find it helpful to turn back to the appropriate section of the chapter and review the material of which you were unsure. At any rate, be sure you understand all the review questions before going on to the next chapter.

1. Which of the following is one of the five questions a manager should   1. (a)
ask himself or herself when determining whether to hold a meeting?
(a) Is this an issue better addressed by meeting with individuals?
(b) Will I get a lot of opposition in this meeting?
(c) Do people really need to know about this issue?
(d) What is the best location for this meeting?

2. When determining the cost of a meeting, you should factor in: 2. (d)
(a) the cost of an entire series of meetings.
(b) what is to be accomplished at the meeting.
(c) how much time you spent explaining the need for the meeting to
     your supervisor.
(d) the collective hourly worth of the participants.

3. Which of the following is a long-term cost of unproductive   3. (a)
meetings for an organization?
(a) Meetings rarely start and end on time.
(b) There are fewer meetings to attend.
(c) Issues are resolved in an effective manner.
(d) Most managers want to send their people to cross-departmental
     meetings.

4. Which of the following is one of the ten criteria for an effective   4. (c)
meeting?
(a) An effective meeting always uses an outside facilitator.
(b) An effective meeting allows the manager to stay in charge.
(c) An effective meeting includes the right people for decision mak-
     ing.
(d) An effective meeting uses multimedia presentations.

5. What is one of the valuable outcomes mentioned in the chapter
   that meetings can achieve when they are done right?
   (a) People want to attend meetings.
   (b) Meetings achieve a better understanding of complex issues.
   (c) The organization always saves money.
   (d) Managers get good training on how to facilitate better meetings.

5. (b)