

MAGIC MEETINGS

KEEPING MEETINGS ON TRACK

All too often meetings are destined to fail from the outset because there is a lack of clear outcomes. People need to have a clear sense of the results needed to succeed, says **Katherine Woods**



HOW TO AVOID COMMON PITFALLS

1. Make contact with the participants before the meeting. This will help you to pick up on any issues that may send the meeting off track. Explain which meeting you want to talk about and when it is taking place. There are three questions you should ask:

- What do you personally hope to achieve from the meeting?
- What could prevent us from achieving these things?
- Is there anything else they would like to make you aware of?

2. Design the outcomes and the agenda before the meeting. Circulate the agenda before the meeting, restate your objectives and topics to be discussed at the start of the meeting and make them visible throughout the meeting. Communicating clear aims can help to gain people's commitment to the meeting, and manage expectations. A public record of the aims of the meeting can be referred back to if the meeting starts to go off track.

3. Don't just focus on the content or subject matter. Pay attention to how the discussions will be managed in order to make your meeting more efficient. For example, if you want to share some information and get feedback in a session, you need to make time to set the session up, share the information, allow people to give feedback in an agreed

format and then close the session. Breaking down each agenda item in this way will enable you to work out realistic timings for each section, which will make your agenda far more robust and mean you're more likely to cover all of your topics.

EMERGENCY MEASURES

There are a number of actions you can take if you notice your meeting start to slide away from the agenda. Don't be afraid to acknowledge that this is happening and make the group aware you're veering off topic. If you approach it in this way, then you can use a coffee break to informally discuss any changes that may need to be made to the agenda.

1. Stay on topic. When you hear an 'off topic' item being raised, politely but firmly bring the group back to the agenda and the outcomes. For example you could say, "we are starting to talk about topic C which is on the agenda after lunch (point to the agenda). Can we come back to discussing topic A?" Alternatively you could point out, "If we continue with this discussion now, we are likely to overrun. Do we need to re-visit the agenda and look at changing our finishing time?"

2. Share and enforce the 80:20 rule. Some discussions could go on all day, but if you get 80% value in 20% of the time then quit while you are ahead.

3. Make sure you take time out. Always build plenty of breaks into the agenda. This gives you some slack should you need it, plus space for people to clear their head and discuss any agenda changes or side issues.

4. Park any issues that aren't on the radar. Use a mental 'car park' for important issues that are raised in the meeting but won't help to achieve the agreed outcomes. Ensure there is a clear and agreed process for following up on each topic that's been parked – perhaps by adding it to an agenda for a future meeting.

THE MORAL

- Make good use of your time in meetings by making time in advance to prepare properly
- Focus on outcomes, not agenda items
- Prioritise what really needs to be discussed face to face
- Work out realistic timeframes for each item

Katherine Woods, founder of Meeting Magic Ltd, works with groups to help them maximise their business conversations. www.meetingmagic.co.uk