

Contributing to Meetings



Name: _____

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Introduction

Information and skills you will acquire

Contributing to Meetings is one of a valuable and user-friendly new series of easy-to-read booklets created specially to help you develop at work. The materials have been created from actual experience in workplace training. Experts have pooled their knowledge and experience to involve you in learning new skills and building on those you already have. The booklet is divided into clear sections, containing specially devised activities and a mini project, to allow you to practice as you learn.

Contributing to Meetings will enable you to:

- Understand the various reasons for holding meetings.
 - Understand the differences between informal and formal meetings.
 - Write an effective agenda and write up notes during and after meetings.
 - Improve your contributions to meetings and increase your confidence, enabling you to lead a small team meeting.
 - Ensure that the meetings you hold or attend are successful.
- ## Getting the most out of this booklet
- You may want to work your way through the booklet from start to finish or focus on an area of interest.
 - Once you have completed the questionnaire on page 4 you will be able to see clearly which topics you need most help with, and which areas you can safely leave out.
 - The questionnaire will also allow you to create your own learning plan for which an example and space is provided on page 5.
 - You may want to ask your supervisor or another colleague for their views on the areas you could work on, or for help with the activities in the booklet.
 - As you may want to use the booklet for future reference, you may want to write the answers out in rough first and then write them in the booklet.

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is to enable you to think about which areas of meetings skills you need most help with. Tick boxes as appropriate

What do you need most help with?

	How often do you need this information/do this in your job?				How confident do you feel?		
	A	B	C	D	1	2	3
	not at all	not very often	fairly often	frequently	not at all	fairly	very
SECTION 1: Understand why we have meetings							
Use techniques to help meetings to be more successful							
Understand the differences between informal and formal meetings							
Write an agenda							
SECTION 2: Increase your confidence at meetings							
SECTION 3: Lead a small team meeting							
SECTION 4: Write up notes during and after the meeting							

The most important areas for you to concentrate on are those which you have marked B, C, D, and 1 or 2.

Section I

MAKING MEETINGS SUCCESSFUL

Why do we have meetings?

From time to time we all groan at the thought of attending meetings. However if meetings are run properly they can be very useful. There are a number of things we can do more effectively by having a meeting than by seeing people individually, e-mail, telephoning or just sending out paperwork.

We have meetings for a number of reasons which include:

- getting people involved in decision-making and increasing their commitment to decisions
- getting the views of people on a certain issue
- coordinating and progressing a project, particularly if it involves a number of people
- helping people to work as a team
- making sure everyone gets the same message
- giving people the opportunity to discuss issues and raise questions with colleagues
- bringing out people's talents and experiences so that the whole group can make use of them
- making sure that people are aware of what effect their actions will have on other people within the group.

Without bringing people together it would be very difficult to do a lot of these things.

Ways to ensure that meetings are successful

There are a number of things we can do to ensure that every meeting we hold or attend is worthwhile. These are:

- having a clear reason for holding the meeting
- knowing in advance what the meeting is about
- no interruptions
- having the right people at the meeting
- effective chairing of the meeting by the leader
- effective listening and learning from other people
- a clear outcome; what the meeting should achieve
- a record of what was agreed.

Activity 1

What behaviours help to make a meeting more successful?

Tick each of the behaviours listed below to show whether they would be helpful or unhelpful.

	helpful	unhelpful
1. Listening quietly and nodding if you agree with things.		
2. Making sure that you say what you want even if it's not relevant.		
3. Reading reports and other material beforehand.		
4. Not taking part because you think the meeting is a waste of time.		
5. Asking your neighbour questions.		
6. Raising sensitive issues.		

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 20.

Activity 2

Formal and informal meetings

Think about each of the meetings given in the list below. Put a tick next to each one to show whether you think it is formal or informal.

	formal	informal
1. A council committee meeting.		
2. A meeting with the colleagues in your office.		
3. Your usual meeting with your manager/supervisor.		
4. A shareholders' meeting.		
5. A school governors' meeting.		

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 20.

You will now understand some of the differences in meetings. In the workplace there are informal meetings, team meetings and formal meetings. Chair persons, team leaders or members of the team lead or chair the meetings. We will look at these factors in more detail:

A written agenda: An agenda is a list of subjects which will be discussed at the meeting. This is circulated before the meeting. Informal meetings may not have a written agenda. Nevertheless the person leading the meeting needs to let you know what the meeting is about, and also the time it is likely to finish. Otherwise the meeting will be vague. Often an agenda is drawn up at the beginning of an informal meeting. For more formal meetings the agenda may include who is responsible for a particular item, a list of people who will attend the meeting and may also have copies of relevant reports attached.

How the seating is arranged: Informal meetings need to encourage relaxed contact and usually have no set style. More formal meetings are often round a table with the person leading the meeting sitting at the end or in the middle on one side.

Introductions: Whether formal or informal, a meeting tends to start with introductions if the people at the meeting do not know each other. People will give their name, role and organisation, if appropriate. At a formal meeting people often have name badges.

Taking minutes or notes: Formal meetings tend to have detailed minutes or notes which are circulated after the meeting to the people who attended. These will set out who attended, the main points of each item on the agenda and, if appropriate, the date and time of the next meeting. If you have to write up notes or minutes for meetings you attend, you will learn more about this in Section 3 of this booklet.

Chairperson or leader: At a formal meeting the Chairperson keeps tight control of the meeting, making sure that people stick to the agenda, calling on people to give reports, circulating papers and asking people to make contributions.

Procedural rules on how the meeting is conducted: An informal meeting is unlikely to have these. A formal meeting will have rules e.g. concerning how many people must be present, how confidential business should be conducted etc.

Section 2 IMPROVING YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO MEETINGS

What is an effective contribution?

There are certain things that you can do to make an effective contribution at meetings. These include:

- Make sure you are clear about what the meeting is about.
- Are you expected to make any specific contribution e.g. give advice, present a report?
- Make sure your contributions are relevant to the meeting. Don't bring up other subjects.
- Don't let your opinions run away with you.
- Think about how you say things – if you sound too bossy you will put people off.
- Remember your role as a listener and try to keep an open mind.
- If discussion gets out of hand, help the person who is leading the meeting by saying something to get back to the purpose of the meeting.
- Build on other people's contributions. We have already seen that one of the advantages of meetings is to share experience, skills and knowledge.
- Support what someone else is saying (even if you don't like that person) if you can see that it will help the meeting achieve its aim.
- You can also support other people's contributions by adding extra information and ideas.
- Disagree only if you think it is an important issue and should not be overlooked.

Activity 4

Helpful contributions to a meeting

Barry enjoys going to meetings, although his colleagues have noticed that the meetings never end on time when he is there. Recently Barry attended a meeting to discuss purchasing some new office equipment. Everyone had been given an agenda.

Here are four points that Barry made at the meeting. Make a note after each one as to whether Barry was making a helpful or unhelpful contribution to the meeting and why his contribution was helpful or not.

1. 'I think that particular photocopier is expensive rubbish'.

2. 'Instead of buying office equipment we would be better off giving ourselves a pay rise'.

3. 'I have real concerns about using this particular company. They have a bad reputation for taking a long time to come out to do repairs and do not stock the latest models'.

4. 'I don't know why we needed a meeting to discuss this – you should have just come and asked me'.

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 21.

Activity 5

What advice would you give to someone who is frightened of meetings?

Mr Shah is new to his job and has to attend his first team meeting this afternoon. He has to give a report on the progress to date on a particular project. He is not sure what he has to do, whether to stand up or sit down, whether he is expected to give people written information. He is terrified of just being there and talking.

What advice would Mr Shah find useful? Write your comments in the space below.

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 22.

Lack of confidence at meetings

Here are some of the reasons people often give when they are unsure of themselves at meetings.

'I am worried because I have to stand in for my supervisor': Ask your supervisor about the issues that are likely to be covered and the points s/he would like you to put across. If you are asked for your views on something at the meeting and you are unsure, say it is something that you would need to talk to your supervisor about.

'I am worried because I do not know enough about the subject matter': Before the meeting ask your supervisor or some other suitable person if they could explain the subject matter and surrounding issues. Do not be afraid to make notes and ask questions.

'Other people don't give me much chance to contribute and I am a fairly quiet person': Indicate to the leader that you would like a chance to come into the conversation, by moving your hand slightly upwards and attracting the leader's attention. Start by addressing the leader rather than the people who are crowding you out. Then look at other people once you have been given a chance to speak.

'I think that what I have to say will sound silly': Try to get used to speaking at the meeting first of all. A good

way of doing this is either by agreeing with another person or by giving some brief, factual information. Once you have broken the ice and said something, you will feel more confident about putting your own views forward. Don't blame yourself or get cross about feeling the way you do. This just increases the anxiety.

'Just being there makes me feel nervous because I hate group situations': Try to relax. Get there a few minutes early. Find a seat where you feel comfortable. Relax your body by taking deep breaths. Read any papers etc. beforehand so that you feel prepared. Try to contribute as best you can by indicating agreement/ disagreement with what is being said. Remember everyone feels nervous. We all have different anxieties.

'I am worried in case I have to write something down or read something': In every workplace there are people who have difficulty with their reading and writing. If your supervisor is sympathetic, explain the difficulties you have so that you can be reassured and will not be embarrassed at the meeting. Remember meetings are for talking – not for reading and writing. Ask for any papers to be circulated in advance so you can ask a friend or relative to help you with them before the meeting.

See also
the booklets in the
Coping with the paperwork
section in this series.

Key Learning Points

- To make a more effective contribution, make sure you are clear what the meeting is about and what you say is relevant, think about how you sound to other people, actively listen to what other people are saying rather than focusing on what you want to say, support what other people are saying.
- To overcome worries about meetings, talk to your supervisor or some other approachable person about what happens and the sorts of issues which come up, if you find it difficult to get a word in edgeways indicate to the leader that you want to say something, try to get used to talking at the meeting by saying something brief and factual to start with, try to relax your body and find a seat where you feel more comfortable.

Section 3

Making the meeting worthwhile

LEADING A SMALL MEETING

A small meeting is likely to be informal. Nevertheless, this still means that you must take certain steps to ensure that the meeting is worthwhile.

There are a number of things which anyone leading a meeting has to do. These include:

- telling everyone who is attending, either verbally or through a written agenda, what the purpose of the meeting is, what items will be covered, how long it will last and the date, time and venue.
- providing a brief, written agenda, otherwise people might forget
- making sure that people keep to the point and avoid doing all the talking yourself
- avoiding conflict
- encouraging the group to listen to each other by only allowing one person to talk at a time
- keeping to time and making sure that points that are important to the group are covered
- keeping a record of what was agreed.

Activity 6

How not to hold a meeting

Pam was asked by her supervisor to lead a team meeting for the six administration assistants within her section.

She felt nervous about doing this and was not sure why she had been asked. She decided that she would fix a date and time and ask everyone what they wanted to talk about at the meeting. Pam's agenda ended up having thirteen items on it. She did not bother to circulate it, as she felt silly being so formal with people she worked with.

At the start of the meeting Pam found that two people were missing. They were sent for, and when they arrived they said that they did not know the meeting was still on. The group went through each item on the agenda. They seemed very bored and listless and kept complaining about all the other work they had to do. The meeting ran over time.

Next day Pam's supervisor asked her what came out of the meeting and if she could have a copy of the

Section 4 WRITING NOTES DURING AND AFTER THE MEETING

Some of the most common problems people have when making notes at meetings are:

- They are not a regular attendee at the meeting and are called in to take minutes.
- They do not know the names of the people there.
- They are not familiar with the jargon or the specialist subject.
- They are trying to take down everything which is said word for word and can't keep up.
- Their notes are disorganised and jumbled and they cannot make sense of them once the meetings is over.
- They do not know which are the main points they need to take down.

*See also
booklet 2, 'Sending memos
and messages' and
booklet 9, 'Brushing up on
writing for work'.*

Activity 7 Do you find it difficult to take notes a meetings?

Look at the list above and note down which ones you have problems with. Is there anything else you find difficult?

FEEDBACK: You may like to talk to your supervisor about these problems. Activity 8 is designed to help you with some of them.

Activity 8 Some techniques which might help you:

Look at the list below of helpful tips and techniques and put a tick next to those which might help you.

- If you do not know who people are, ask beforehand if the person leading the meeting can go round the group and introduce them to you. Draw a map of who's sitting where.

- If you do not understand the jargon or terminology being used at the meeting, do not be afraid to ask the leader to explain these to you.
- Do not be afraid to clarify a point with the group as you are going along, eg. “Can I check I’ve understood that ...?”
- If there is a lot of disagreement, do not try to write all the comments down.
- Take note of the main points the group as a whole seems to agree on. The leader of the meeting should be summing up at the end of each item and you will need to take these points down.
- Ask the person who is chairing the meeting what sort of notes are needed. Do they need a lot of detail or do they want brief action points? Notes will vary depending on the type of meeting – informal meetings need only produce an action list of things to be done. Formal meetings sometimes require more detailed notes, often called ‘minutes.’

An easy technique for taking notes

It helps if you use a page format, which will help you to organise your notes.

- Use three columns: item/speaker, action/main points, by whom/by when.
- Leave gaps to return to items if necessary or write up more fully afterwards.
- At more informal meetings it is not necessary to take note of the speaker’s name – only do this if you are asked to – it usually means that you will have to write very detailed notes on the discussion.
- Only put down the main points and decisions unless you are asked to do otherwise.

This is a simple format which will help in any sort of meeting. Here is an example:

Team Meeting 25/4/20XX

Present: Jenny, Yusef, Karen, Linda, George, Kevin

Item/speaker	Action/main point	By who/when
4. Jenny	The computer system has crashed 3 times in the last week. We need to contact the suppliers.	Kevin 30/4

Writing up notes after the meeting

There are a number of things that you can do to improve the quality of the notes or minutes you circulate after the meeting.

- Write them up while they are still fresh in your mind.
- Only put down the main points/decisions/actions unless you are told otherwise.
- Use the same order as the agenda. If items were covered in a different order, keep the same agenda number for that item when you write up your notes or minutes.
- Circulate the notes quickly after the meeting to everyone who attended or should have been there, having first checked them with the leader.

Very often the minutes or action points can be circulated in more or less the same format as they were taken down using the three column system. You may be told to use a different format.

Key Learning Points

It can be difficult to take notes because you cannot keep up. You do not know which are the main points and are trying to take down everything.

You can improve your note-taking by clarifying points with the group as you go along, asking someone before the meeting to explain certain terms, asking the leader what sort of notes are wanted e.g. detailed or brief action points, talking to the leader after the meeting if there are any points that you are not clear about.

Organise your notes by dividing up your page into three columns: item/speaker, action/main points, by whom/by when.

Leave gaps for you to come back to the item later if necessary.

To write up notes after the meeting, you need to write them up while they are still fresh in your mind, only put down main points and actions, who by/when unless you are told otherwise.

Afterwards, circulate the notes quickly to everyone who was at the meeting or should have been there.

*See also
booklet 2, 'Sending memos
and messages' and
booklet 9, 'Brushing up on
writing for work'.*

Action Plan

Write down two points you will put into action the next time that you take part in a meeting. Make a note here, after the meeting, about how you were helped by applying these action points.

Feedback to Activities

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 1

1. This sort of behaviour is helpful. If you don't feel comfortable talking, you are at least demonstrating your support.
2. This is not always helpful. What you want to say may not be relevant and may hold up the meeting.
3. This is helpful. You can make a better contribution if you come to the meeting well prepared.
4. This is unhelpful. To go to a meeting and not to take part is a waste of your time. It would be more helpful to suggest some items which everyone would find useful. If you think that more important issues need to be discussed then raise these points at or before the meeting.
5. It is helpful if you want to ask an occasional question such as 'which item on the agenda are we looking at?' However, if you constantly ask questions and make comments it would be more helpful if you shared them with the rest of the group.
6. Raising sensitive issues – you will have to decide whether or not the issue is more appropriately dealt with by talking to someone outside a meeting, or if it is a group issue. Always respect people's confidentiality.

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 2

1. Formal. A council meeting is likely to be run in a very formal manner with a detailed agenda, minutes and detailed rules on procedure.
2. Informal. You may not have a written agenda but you must have someone to ensure that the meeting is achieving its purpose and keeping to time, otherwise it is a waste of time.

3. Informal. Unless the meeting is, for example, a disciplinary interview in which case it would be formal.
4. Formal. It is essential that this is formal, particularly as there are regulatory and legislative requirements to meet.
5. Formal. As with meetings of voluntary groups, clubs and charities, it is very likely that these meetings will be formal. The group has to demonstrate that business is being conducted in the right way and one of the means of doing this is through agenda, minutes and meetings being run according to procedure.

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 3

Compare your agenda with the example provided below. Have you included all the details of the date, time (start and finish) and venue? Would the participants have a good idea of what the meeting is about?

Example: an informal agenda

AGENDA

Meeting 28 October, 20XX, 2–4p.m.
Venue: Room 236

1. Follow-up from last meeting
2. Purchase of new office furniture
3. Customer complaints for the month
4. Monthly budget targets
5. Holiday cover for the office
6. Sales targets for next month
7. Any other business

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 4

1. Unhelpful. Barry is only giving his opinion and offering no facts to back it up. Participants will not know whether or not this is right. They will also be put off by the negative tone.
2. Unhelpful. Barry is trying to move away from the purpose of the meeting. This will only waste people's time.
3. Helpful. Barry has information that other people should know about before a decision is made. He is also expressing it in a way which will not irritate other people.
4. Unhelpful. Barry is being dismissive about the other participants and the contribution they can make to the decision. This sort of comment creates bad feeling and holds up the progress of the meeting.

FeedBack toActivities

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 5

Suggest to Mr Shah that he should talk to an approachable person who regularly attends the meeting and ask them what form it takes, what sort of reports are given and check that what he is doing is following the usual routine.

Mr Shah feels nervous about giving his report, so he should make sure that he is on time for the meeting and if possible choose somewhere to sit where he feels comfortable. He should try to relax by taking in deep breaths and slowly breathing out. Also Mr Shah shouldn't sit hunched up or leaning forward. He should try to relax his muscles by contracting them and then letting go.

Mr Shah shouldn't feel annoyed with himself if he doesn't say much, apart from giving his report. He is new so people will realise that he needs to listen and find out information at this stage. It would be far worse to come across too loud and bossy!

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 6

There are a number of things Pam can do:

1. Clarify what her supervisor wants her to achieve from the meeting. She can then plan her agenda around this.
2. Circulate a brief agenda outlining the purpose, items and date, time, length, venue of the meeting. This way everyone will know it has been confirmed. It would also help if she circulated any short reports or papers beforehand so that people do not have to read them at the meeting.
3. Explain why she is holding the meeting. If it has been called for a special purpose or if it is a regular team meeting. Make sure that everyone has the agenda and knows what time it will finish.
4. If the group seems bored ask them how relevant the topics are and what they would find more helpful. This can be fed back to the supervisor.
5. Keep to time, making sure the most important issues are covered first. Try to keep everything as brief as possible e.g. individual progress reports, items, discussions. Otherwise people are likely to fall asleep.
6. Make a note of the main points and actions as she goes along.
7. Write up notes and action points after the meeting and circulate these to everyone including the supervisor.

Do you find writing notes during a meeting difficult?

Do you dread attending meetings?

Do you panic when you have to say something at a meeting?

Are the meetings you attend a waste of time?

Would you feel anxious if you were asked to lead a small team meeting?

If you answer 'yes' to one or more of these questions, you will find that the activities in this booklet will help you to develop your meetings skills and also gain more understanding about what needs to be done to make your meetings more worthwhile.

Workbase Training is a national specialist organisation for workforce learning and development. These booklets are based on work with over 20,000 employees within 120 organisations since 1980. Workbase is a not-for-profit charitable company, limited by guarantee, and is supported by the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress and other unions.

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Orders to:

SOUTHGATE PUBLISHERS LTD

The Square, Sandford, Crediton, Devon EX17 4LW

Tel: 01363 776888 Fax: 01363776889

e-mail: info@southgatepublishers.co.uk



WORKBASE TRAINING

Finchley House Business Centre
707 High Road
Finchley
London N12 0BT

e-mail: info@workbase.org.uk

CAMPAIGN FOR LEARNING

24 Greencoat Place
707 High Road
Westminster
London
SW1P 1RD

Tel: 020 7798 6067

e-mail: info@cfllearning.org.uk

