

7 tips to communicating more effectively in meetings

Even with increased use of technological communication methods, such as emails, phone calls, and video conferencing, workplace meetings are still one of the best places to get live feedback, exchange information, collaborate, plan projects and make decisions that will impact the organisation's bottom line.



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“Over the past decade, meetings have gotten a bad rap primarily because they are not managed effectively, or they are not used for the right reasons,” explains Lyndy van den Barselaar.

To ensure that workplace meetings are effective, there are certain protocols to follow. ManpowerGroup South Africa provides seven tips on how to communicate most effectively in meetings.

1. **Be clear, concise and direct:** People frequently criticise the effectiveness of meetings because they often run too long. Therefore, it is important to prepare well before meetings, to ensure that when you are communicating, you can clearly articulate your point in a concise and direct manner.
2. **Practice active listening:** Whenever someone is speaking, he or she should be the most important person in the room at that moment in time. Listen carefully to what is being said, and pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal

cues. Do not interrupt the speaker, allow them to complete their thoughts. “If you are unclear about something that was said, respectfully ask for clarification,” says van den Barselaar. “To make sure that you understand what is being communicated, paraphrase what you have heard.”

3. **Use a talking stick:** In the indigenous community, they have what is called a ‘talking stick’ or ‘speaker’s staff’ – meaning the person with the stick is the only person who is allowed to speak. “This is a good practice to adopt because it eliminates several conversations from going on at the same time, and it also gives introverts the opportunity to share their ideas,” she explains.

When the speaker has completed their thoughts, they pass the stick to another person.

4. **Support your arguments:** If you are in a meeting with ‘difficult’ people, always make sure that you have statistics, facts and other documents to support your claims and statements. If someone questions what you are presenting, respond with grace and professionalism, showing him or her your supporting documents.
5. **Respect others’ point of view:** Even if you do not agree with what the speaker is saying, always treat them with respect. That contrarian or off-the-wall idea may very well be what is needed.

“If based on your experience, you know that an idea will not work, instead of tearing it down, tactfully say why you think it will not work, then offer an alternative,” suggests van den Barselaar.

6. **Pay attention to the speaker and not the PowerPoint slides:** Often people are so caught up in reading what’s on the presentation that they unknowingly tune out the speaker.

If you are the speaker, your slides should be cues for you, and not your presentation. Expand on the points listed on your slides, and be engaging. “When others in the meeting realise that what you are saying is more important than your slides, they will pay attention to you and not your slides,” says van den Barselaar.

7. **Have sponsors for tasks:** Never close a meeting without securing sponsors for tasks that have to be completed. Reconfirm who is doing what, so that everyone is clear on expectations per task or project.

If you are the chair or meeting facilitator, always send out an agenda before the meeting, giving participants enough time to prepare. Allot time for each item on the agenda, placing the most important items at the top. At the start of the meeting, establish the ground rules for communicating, and any other expectations. Honour your word by starting and ending the meeting on time. At the scheduled end time, if you have not addressed all the items on the agenda, that either means that the agenda was too full, or you did not manage the meeting effectively. Get permission from participants to extend the meeting, or end the meeting and set another date. If the more important agenda items are dealt with first, and you run out of time, you may be able to deal with the other items using other communication methods.

Finally, van den Barselaar suggests that you send meeting minutes to those who participated or will be affected by what was discussed. “By following these strategies, you will be able to communicate more effectively in workplace meetings and use these to the advantage of yourself and your team,” she concludes.