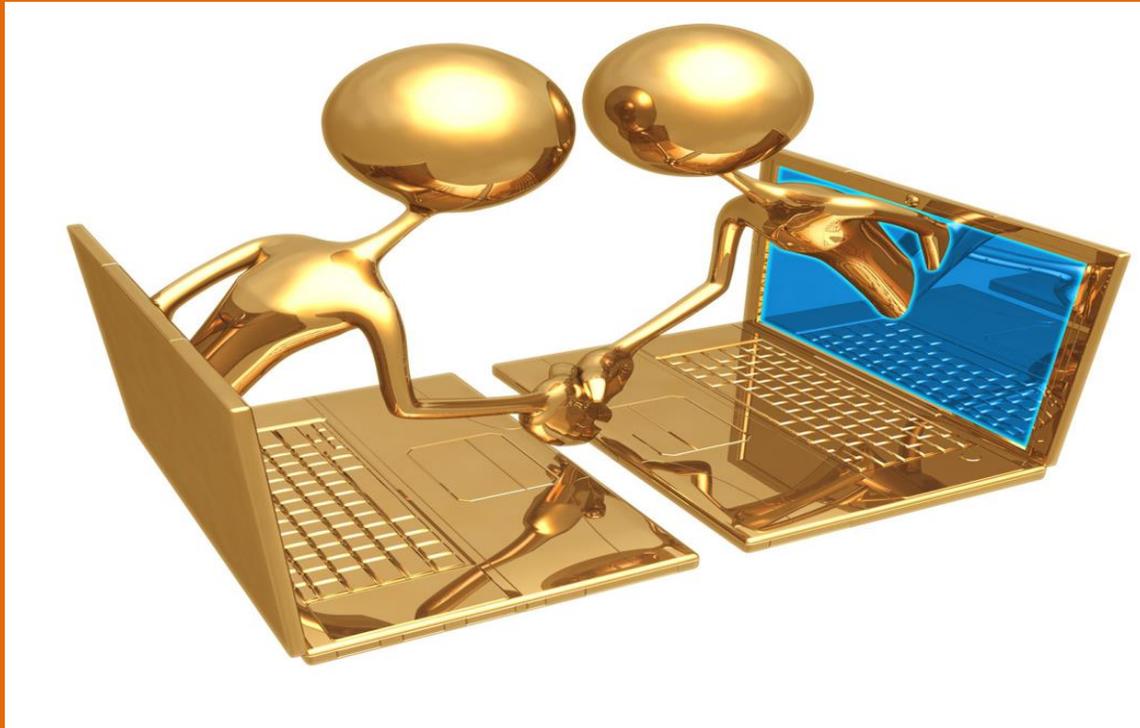


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Don't Meet by Accident:

8 practical ways to plan your meetings better



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Introduction

Really look at that ad!

If meetings are so important, shouldn't we plan them properly?

Seriously though, I have gone to some meetings where I believed I was alternately at the theatre, in a shark-infested swimming pool or at the circus, all in the space of 45 minutes.

Chances are these meetings would have been called for the same purpose as the ones in the advertisement above.

My problem with the whole question of meetings is that there are too many, too long and boring, not sufficiently productive and generally tiring, all because they are not well-planned or well conducted.

Furthermore, technology has not brought the promised relief. As a matter of fact in some cases it has reduced the effectiveness with some meetings now accommodating the "crack berries" by scheduling a "blackberry break" for them.

While at an individual level, I have just about mastered avoiding certain meetings, I have also learnt how to plan and conduct those that I control better so that they are so much more effective.

So while I won't tell you how to avoid meetings, here are some practical ways to help you plan your meetings better.

Suggestion # 1 - Establish The Real Purpose of The Meeting

How often do you attend a meeting with a clear idea of what you hope to achieve, what decision should be made or what problem will be solved?

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Having a clear stated purpose for the meeting is not the same as a general perception of what the meeting is about. A lot of meetings are called and run on the basis that everybody knows what the goal of the meeting is. Don't assume that this is the case or that all participants share a common purpose.

Without a clear consensus about the goal of a meeting, the chance of success is minimal. So especially if you are calling the meeting, write down the purpose first. Ask yourself: *What do I hope to accomplish?* Answering this essential question will help you develop and focus your agenda. **Write down something like this:**

- The purpose of this meeting is to brainstorm ideas to increase sales for the next quarter.
- The purpose of this meeting is to review the status of the Pencil Sharpening Project.
- The purpose of this meeting is to introduce our new team members and develop our common goals for the year.

When you remember that many people come to meetings with hidden agendas, you will understand even more why the purpose of a meeting is so important.

Suggestion # 2 – Decide if a Meeting Is Really Necessary

To meet or not to meet, that is the question. In far too many cases, to meet is the answer. But is every meeting necessary?

Deciding to hold a meeting should **not** be an arbitrary decision but one where the advantages and disadvantages have been carefully considered. You may decide that *individual phone calls, a conference call, e-mail, or a computer-based conference* is a better solution.

A good way to help you decide is to identify the cost of meeting. These could include:

- **Costs of overruns.** Most meetings last longer than the schedule time.
- **Preparation and follow-up.** In terms of time, this usually takes three – five times the scheduled duration of the meeting.

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- **Overhead and administration** - includes venue, equipment, stationery, copies of documents, secretary, etc.
- **Travel costs** – remember to add non-productive time as well.
- **Opportunity costs** - the cost of those tasks that are left undone while you are in the meeting.

Now ask yourself if a meeting is the best approach to accomplishing the tasks at hand?

Suggestion # 3 - Select the Right Participants

Oh! Do invite Mike to the meeting, he might have heard about the project! Hello! Please invite only those people whose presence is absolutely necessary. When it comes to productive meetings, bigger is definitely not better.

Remember too, that whatever the stated purpose some people will come with hidden agendas. Here are some of the more obvious “hidden” reasons people attend meetings:

- **To get noticed** — where else are you given the opportunity to stand up and present in front of senior staff?
- **To exhibit dominance** — it isn't anything against you personally, they just can't help demonstrating their superiority by talking everyone down.
- **To push through their own ideas** — by hijacking the meeting or using coercive techniques.
- **To demonstrate the importance of their ideas** — by pushing the ideas of others down.
- **To play games** — such as setting one party off against the other.
- **To promote their own creativity** — by describing a problem, and then magically appearing to solve the problem themselves.

So be strong about inviting only those who need to be at the meeting and if you feel that people who were not invited will feel excluded, explain your reason for not including them. Give them a copy of the minutes or a summary of the outcomes.

Suggestion # 4 - Draft Your Agenda The Right Way

I distinctly dislike attending meeting where I don't get and agenda in advance. Because of this, I'm likely to actively and forcefully present my absence to any such meeting.

If you are ever so fortunate to attend a workshop on Meeting Management conducted by **Impact Training & Development Services** you will learn that an agenda is far more than a list of things to do at a meeting. You will learn the 4 main purposes of an agenda, the 3 main types of agenda and at least 3 ways you can use the agenda to control the meeting. Go [here](#) for more information.

The reason we discuss the agenda in detail at our workshops is that we understand its importance not only to the conduct of the meeting but as part of the planning process as well. In terms of planning, the following will help you:

1. **Edit and organize your agenda.** If it is not a meeting with a fixed agenda, when you're deciding on which items to include on the agenda, write down each item and revise the list until you have only those items that support the purpose.
2. **Solicit agenda items.** Ask those who will be attending the meeting if there are any items they would like to place on the agenda. Master sales trainer *Mike Stewart* suggests, "*People tend to support that which they help create, so enable participants to help create the meeting agenda.*"
3. **Send your meeting notice and agenda early.** Whenever possible, send your meeting notice for in-house meetings at least one week beforehand. For off-site meetings, provide at least two to four weeks notice so that attendees can make necessary arrangements.
4. **Your meeting notice should include** the name of the meeting, a one-sentence purpose statement, the meeting location, date, time, any necessary directions or travel information, and the coordinator's contact information and deadline for a reply. Include a proposed agenda and any material participants need to review.

If you are asked to attend a meeting expect, or even request an agenda. Attending a meeting with an agenda you haven't seen could leave you vulnerable to an issue for which you are not prepared!

Suggestion # 5 - It's All About The Timing

I've always heard that time is money. That must be true because I don't have a lot of time and even less money. However, when you're planning meetings, whether or not you have money, you'd better understand some key factors about timing:

- ***The Right Day.*** The day of the week can be an important factor in planning your meeting. For example, Monday mornings may be a perfect time for a regularly scheduled "check in" so that everyone is clear on the week's goals, but it may be a poor time for a brainstorming session.

On the other hand, Friday afternoons may be a great time for brainstorming as the group is typically more relaxed as the weekend approaches, but it's probably a poor time to do any long-term planning, as participants may be more focused on getting home.

- ***The right timing.*** What's scheduled on the days before and after your meeting—are some people just returning from or preparing for another meeting? Is a key person just returning from vacation or leave?
- ***Consider the time of the day.*** Is your group at its best in the morning or late in the day? If you're not sure, ask. Meetings right after lunch are typically not a good idea since most people are tired directly after a meal and not operating at their peak
- ***The Right Duration. Keep it short.*** One of the main reasons people despise meetings is because they feel they just go on and on. Keep your meeting as short as possible and then adjourn.

Suggestion # 6 – Arrange For Appropriate Seating

Whoa! Of course you know this! But before you back flip through a drinking straw at my stating the obvious, I will go ahead and do so as a reminder.

Small venue seating plans. With small venues (smaller meetings), you may have more control over the seating plan than with larger venues. ***A series of narrow rows*** stretching towards the back from the head table may allow the Chair to have good eye contact but the people at the back may not see and hear properly.

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To avoid this, you may switch to **wide rows in front of you** but the eye contact with those at the end of the rows may be limited.

The optimum seating plan is **U-Shape or Semi-circular**, if you have the space. This takes care of acoustics, visibility and eye-contact.

Good. Now did you know that seating also matters for those one-on-one meetings, those cosy meetings, those just-the-two-of-you meetings? I know what you're thinking but that's not what I'm meaning. Why don't you just read below?

One-on-One seating plans. A one-on-one meeting will normally be called for one of three purposes: (a) *to support*, (b) *to collaborate* or (c) *to confront*. There is an optimum style of seating for each purpose and if the wrong arrangement is used, it might be difficult for the meeting to follow the path that you intend. Here are some tips on how to arrange seating for the various purposes.

- a) **When you wish to be supportive**, arrange the seating so that you are at right angles to the other person. This promotes good eye contact and encourages a more equal exchange.
- b) **If the purpose is to collaborate**, then sit adjacent (next to) your meeting partner. This focuses the attention on the work in front of you and promotes a positive and friendly atmosphere.
- c) **There are times when it is necessary to confront** and the optimum seating arrangement for this is on opposite sides of a table or desk. This forms a barrier between the two parties and allows disagreements to be expressed more freely.

Suggestion # 7 - Work With A Good Support Team

Ask others to help you with your meeting plans or implementation. This will allow you to focus on the business issues and increase the chances of a successful meeting as more people take ownership of the outcome.

This is where a Secretary is very important and in our [Meeting Management Workshops](#), we address the duties of the Secretary before, during and after the meeting in a very comprehensive way.

Suggestion # 8 - A Word Of Caution:

Sometimes you will get the agenda, the timing, the location and the seating right, but the target group could be all wrong or even non-existent. Doubt me? Check below!

Annual Meeting of Single, Good looking, Straight, Emotionally-Stable, Financially-Secure, Intelligent Men Looking for a Long-Term Commitment



As I leave this meeting...

I am reminded of the words of CPF and author Steve Kaye: *Bad meetings provide a sophisticated form of executive busyness. Some people find this useful because it keeps them from having to work on difficult tasks such as planning, coaching, learning, and communicating.*

Compared to these difficult tasks, sitting in a conference room is easy. In fact, it is so easy that a six-year old could do it, assuming you could convince the child to stay inside for such a pointless activity.

You are not one of these people! If you want to make your meetings more effective, do contact me at lorna@impacttrainingservices.com !

About the Author



Lorna Barrow is a Learning Solution Specialist specializing in providing training and development solutions through her business **Impact Training & Development Services (ITDS)** for organizations and individuals in the Caribbean.

Lorna is an entrepreneur and small business owner whose pension plan is to establish and manage 7 businesses and share her knowledge with other small business owners.

Her home base is the beautiful Caribbean island of Barbados from where she connects with the rest of the world. She believes that you owe it to yourself to consciously create the life you want rather than living the one you believe you inherited.

Now she has seriously put **“fingers to keyboard”** to bring you many, many wonderful resources which you can use to make life easier, happier or even wealthier.

Lorna Barrow can be found in cyberspace at <http://www.impacttrainingservices.com> or e-mail lorna@impacttrainingservices.com When you are on earthspace you may prefer to call **(246) 234-8360**

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