



By Mac McIntire

How to Hold Productive Meetings: Four Types of Agenda Items Focus Participants, Facilitate Discussion

Many meetings are ineffective because they lack a clear agenda that specifies the roles, responsibilities and behaviors to be exhibited by the participants during the meeting.

It's estimated that a typical manager spends more than 60% of his or her time in unproductive meetings.

A great deal of meeting time is wasted in unclear, unnecessary, or unfocused discussion. One reason why meetings tend to be unproductive is because people are unclear about how they should act or respond to specific agenda items during the meeting.

You probably have been in meetings where the attendees got into long, drawn-out discussions over minor issues that the presenter thought would only take a few, brief minutes. Sometimes even simple information can create tangents that take up the entire meeting. Conversely, many meeting leaders have brought up important issues expecting a rich exchange of ideas only to become frustrated by the cold silence they received when they asked for input.

There is a way to ensure you get the right response from meeting attendees. Meeting leaders and presenters can generate the appropriate response they want from meeting participants by labeling the type of agenda item being discussed. The "label" placed on the agenda item tells the participants what their role is during the presentation and helps set realistic expectations for the discussion.

There are four primary types of agenda items. Each has a separate purpose and prescribed set of behaviors.

Informational

The first type of agenda items is **Informational**. Informational agenda items usually entail a one-way presentation of information for FYI purposes only. It is used when a decision has either already been made or when the decision lies within the authority of one individual or a single functional area.

During informational agenda items the role of the participants is to listen, understand, and comply with the decision. Any questions asked by attendees should be for clarification purposes *only*. No discussion should take place except to clarify what is being said.

During informational presentations it does not matter whether the participants agree or disagree with the decision or information being presented. Participant input or analysis is not being solicited. On informational items, the decision either has been or will be made as stated, regardless of the views of the meeting participants. The only role of the meeting attendees is to understand and comply with the information.

Informational agenda items usually are brief. They should take no more than a few minutes, depending on the complexity of the information being given. Complex information should be delivered in a written format, rather than in a meeting. In fact, most informational agenda items can best be delivered in writing *outside* of a meeting.

As with all requests for a slot on the meeting agenda, the meeting leader should ask the presenter which type of agenda item the topic represents. The leader should also ask how much time is required to cover the topic. Any presenter who requests a huge block of time for an informational agenda item should be instructed to reduce the amount of information he will present. If he cannot reduce the amount of information, he should put the information in writing so participants can review the information outside of the meeting. Then the item can be placed on a future meeting agenda to briefly clarify any questions people may have about the information they read.

Advisory

A second possible category for a meeting agenda is **Advisory**. An Advisory format is used when a decision has *not* been made and the presenter wishes to seek advice, feedback, or input from the participants before proceeding.

Advisory agenda items usually start with background information being presented to the group. This information should be delivered in an "informational" agenda item format and should be brief. Once the participants are brought up to speed on the background information, the meeting then shifts to a discussion of the item on which the presenter wishes input.

The role of the participants during an advisory discussion is to share their opinions. It is not necessary for people to agree or come to the same conclusions. Conflicting points of view can be raised without the need to resolve differences. Individuals do not need to sway the group or the presenter. The purpose of the agenda item merely is to get the advice of the participants, not to come to consensus or make a decision. The decision lies solely with the presenter.

Normally the decision around an advisory agenda item is *not* made in the meeting. Usually the presenter receives input from the group and then makes the decision at his or her convenience after the meeting. The presenter does not have to accept the advice of the group, since the group's input was "advisory" only. Once a decision is made, the decision is announced as an *Informational* agenda item. No further discussion of the topic should occur when the decision is presented.

Frequently participants want to reopen the discussion about a topic when the decision is contrary to the advice they gave. Meeting leaders should remind members that the initial agenda item was "advisory" only. They were not asked to solve the problem. Their advice was consultative in nature, and the solicitor of the advice had the option of either accepting or rejecting their advice. The participants had the opportunity to offer advice in the previous meeting, so no further advice is necessary. The meeting leader should not allow the item to be reopened for discussion unless there is some new information, changes to the situation or "fatal flaw" regarding the decision made.

Problem Solving

[Problem Solving](#) agenda items, not surprisingly, are reserved for those issues that require the problem solving expertise and skills of the group. Normally it is used for cross-functional issues where the members of the group should all be involved in the decision or solution. Some problems are so complex coming to the right solution requires the collective intelligence of a group.

The purpose of a problem solving agenda item is to come to an acceptable resolution or decision regarding the topic. Usually the decision is made *during* the meeting by the entire group. However, if the issue is complex, it may take several meetings to resolve the problem.

During problem solving agenda items the role of the participants is to fully discuss the issue until they have a clear enough understanding to make an informed decision. If there is conflict or disagreement among the members, this must be worked out *during* the meeting. Everyone's concerns must be addressed.

Once the participants have a clear understanding of the issue, they should determine the best possible course of action to take to resolve the problem. All decisions should be made in the meeting using whatever decision-making procedure the group has established (e.g.: consensus, majority vote, etc.).

Problem solving agenda items usually are the most complex and controversial. Sometimes discussion of problem solving topics can become heated. Meeting leaders should plan enough time for problem solving agenda items so the topic can be addressed without rushing the participants to closure. At the conclusion of problem solving discussions all members of the group must be comfortable and fully satisfied with the decision.

Request for Help

The final category of meeting topics is where a person in the group asks others in the group for help on some issue or project.

Sometimes meeting topics go on longer than they should because an individual in the group is too timid to ask for what they really want. They hem haw around. They complain about the topic being discussed. They hesitate to respond to the group's input or to commit to the group's decision. They exhibit blocking behaviors when, in reality, their only concern is the impact the group's decision will have on their workload.

Groups can also get off track when one member in the group asks for help on a task or project and the group immediately goes into problem solving mode to address the issue. Often the person didn't need or want the help right then; they merely were stating their need so people would understand their concerns.

In cases like these it is always best if an individual knows they can ask the group for assistance via a [Request for Help](#) agenda item.

A request for help agenda topic is placed on the agenda when a participant wishes to request specific professional or personal help from other participants in the meeting. This item is placed on the meeting agenda by individuals who sincerely need help from their teammates in order to accomplish the objectives of the group.

The role of meeting participants during this agenda topic is to listen so they understand the request for help. If a participant is willing, able, available, and committed to help the requestor, the individual should offer their help and meet with the requestor *outside of the meeting* to identify when and how they best can be of service to the person needing help.

A request for help agenda item is merely that. Very little discussion should take place other than a

brief, one-paragraph statement about what help is needed. No discussion should occur in the meeting room other than an identification of who can help.

Conclusion

Meeting leaders and group participants will work together more effectively when agenda items are identified according to these four categories. When participants know the type of agenda item being addressed they know their role and how they should behave during the meeting. This keeps everyone focused and on track, helping the meeting to proceed at an accelerated pace. §

Innovative Management Group offers two-, four- and eight-hour training sessions that teach meeting leaders and meeting participants how to hold productive meetings. We show you how to streamline your meetings so you can spend more time focusing on the things that matter most. Call us for more information about the meeting management training programs we offer.

- - - - -

Mac McIntire is the president of Innovative Management Group, a Las Vegas-based training and consulting firm specializing in strategic visioning and alignment, organizational effectiveness, quality improvement, and teamwork. He can be reached at 702-258-8334 or e-mail mac@imglv.com. His website is www.imglv.com