

Running a Great and Focused Executive Meeting

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How many executive meetings do you attend that are crisp, clear and *brief*? Many executives attend meetings to comply with some long-established ritual of listening to people present reams of boring overheads in order to gain recognition and approval for items which should rightly be considered outside the meeting. Calculate how much it costs for your executive team to sit around for a day, including the lost opportunity of being away from customers and employees.

Do you work *hard* at executive meetings? Do your team members? It should be some of that hardest work you do. Or do you find yourself thinking: "I can't do any work today, I'm at a meeting."



How many executive meetings do you run where you struggle to find items for the agenda? Usually agenda items at these meetings are in some well established sequence, often starting with minutes and action items from the previous meeting, then the latest financial numbers, then a random walk by subject down the agenda with the last few important items compressed into the last few minutes because earlier so-called "interesting" discussions took too long. Ask yourself: do people say: "Breaks are too short" and "We're keeping visitors waiting?"

The role of chairman and the content of the agenda should be taken seriously. Executive time is the most valuable of any members of your organization. That's why executives are expected to come together to learn and to make decisions. For the most successful executive teams, meetings are high-priority leadership events which create and reinforce alignment to the organizations purpose and goals.

Try adopting some of the behaviors recommended here—they're taken from coaching world-class leaders with their teams. Start using the checklist on the last page.



Setting the Rules

First and foremost it is essential that an executive team (company-wide, division, department, cross-functional, etc.) set well defined purpose, goals and objectives, and that leadership is visibly committed to achieving the goals. No matter how the goals are set—by business circumstances, by top-down directive, or by the team—they must be clear, measurable and prioritized. Successful leaders do not waste organizational resources by focusing effort on vague, ill-defined goals.



The executive team meets to learn and discuss new things and to get important decisions made, mostly about the future. Each executive should do as much of the learning as possible *prior* to the meeting thereby leaving most time for executives to focus on the hard work of getting important decisions made in pursuit of the organization's goals and purpose. Team building, like leadership development, takes place on the job—in delivering the goals—not at fancy off-site meetings.

The role of chairman or chairwoman of the executive meeting belongs to the leader or their deputy and is to be taken seriously. The chairman must ensure that executives are properly briefed before meetings, that the agenda is appropriate, that executive's time is not wasted, and that the learning and decision making are carried out with the proper degree of clarity and closure. The chairman appoints a meeting secretary to keep minutes and, as a minimum, to record decisions and actions agreed. Minutes and action lists are produced within 48 hours of the meeting while memory of events remains fresh.

Non-executives that attend or present to the meeting should be clear as to why they are there and should start their presentations by informing the executive team what they, the executive team, are being asked to do, i.e., receive information and/or make key decisions. The chairman, as the time keeper, should insist presenters keep to time allotted and get clear what they want from the executive team. Long presentations should be avoided like the plague. It's perfectly acceptable that people should attend executive meetings in recognition of good work performed provided that, in receiving the recognition, they do not break the ground rules of successful meetings. How better to learn effective executive behavior than to present to and observe the executive team in action?

Preparation is the key to a successful meeting. Overheads should be kept to the absolute minimum. Use graphs not columns of figures. Voluminous documents should be circulated to all executives at least 48 hours prior to the meeting for reading and consideration before the meeting. The executive meeting should not be treated as a classroom or a team workshop—there are better ways to handle this, so keep them separate.

The chairman has to ensure that all executives and participants should know these simple ground rules. Remember, the behaviors of the chairman become the leadership standard.



Setting the Agenda and Preparing

Items for the agenda come from many sources and should be collected by the chairman. Deferred items from previous meetings, items from the executive team, statutory items, items from the chairman—all these should be given estimated timing by the chairman and the agenda items, including a brief sentence on what each item is expected to achieve, should be published at least one week ahead of the meeting. At this stage the sequence of agenda items is less important than notifying executives of the topics for which they should be prepared.



Written reports and presentations, implying that much detail is required for the team to make decisions, should be available for attendees no less than 48 hours before the meeting. Defer the item until the next meeting rather than break this rule. People can then prepare and read before the meeting so that executive time is not wasted on the day of the meeting. This rule also thins out the items!

48 hours before the meeting reconfirm the final list of agenda items for the meeting with participants and presenters. Where visitors must come from afar to present, give them specific times for presenting to the executive team, but not within the first hour of the meeting (the freshest hour) and where possible at a reasonable hour in their home time zone.

Plan to provide a break at least every two hours of at least 15 minutes. Executives expect to pick up and answer phone calls or connect to electronic mail during breaks, so give them sufficient time. If you expect them to turn phones off during the meeting then give them the courtesy of sufficient time to deal with things during the breaks.

Don't plan to work through lunch during at all day meetings. A proper break is important to the workings of minds and bodies. Eating together is an opportunity to discuss important issues in a different environment and, in any case, many of the executives at the meeting rarely get the chance to meet to discuss items of mutual, rather than team, importance.

Meet with the secretary just prior to the meeting and cover each agenda item. You may need to remove items for which you believe the executive committee are not well prepared. The secretary should be made aware of the most sensitive items. Be ready for any individual or team recognition awards to be given during the meeting. A good secretary should be capable of dealing with all the details of the meeting and anticipating likely outcomes at the meeting.

If refreshments are to be provided during the meeting, plan to make them healthy. Fruit not cookies.

Prepare overheads of the executive team purpose and goals (to be used at all meetings) and the items on the agenda.



Chairing and Running the Meeting

Remember that people often perform and think best when they are fresh. This provides you, the leader, with the opportunity to practice clear alignment of your followers. Having greeted and welcomed those present, rather than jumping into a long debate of action items from the previous meeting, be a great leader and take a moment to reconnect your executive team to the vision and purpose.

Place your overhead of the executive team purpose and goals on the projector and give everyone chance to read them. As you go down each item on the list of goals, reflect on what you have been doing and observing throughout the organization with regard to that goal since the last executive meeting. Use this as an opportunity to give reinforcement and praise by pinpointing the changes you have been observing since the team last met and by expressing your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with progress. If your expectations are not being met, say so and invite comment.



Invite the team members present to share with the team their own view of good (or bad) results they have been observing under each of the goals. This is not an opportunity for self promotion but the chance to reflect and celebrate together where real progress is being made towards the goals. Focus the discussion towards measurable results rather than just good feelings about things.

Place your overhead of the agenda items on the projector and align them with the goals. How much time will the executive committee be spending on items directly concerned with achieving the goals? If this is less than two thirds, be prepared to reorganize the agenda and timings while respecting the time commitments made to visitors. Check that all present have prepared themselves for discussing and decisions making as expected, and then begin the items. Deal quickly with the action items from the previous meeting on an exception basis—if actions are not getting done you may have deeper problems.

Many leaders expect their executive team members to make a progress report of achievement since the last meeting. Keeping score is important but remember that the important part will be the report of what has yet to be achieved, what risks and problems are being anticipated, what priorities have been set and how much the executive team can provide support in ensuring that performance goals are met. This is particularly true when executives are going through a difficult time. Avoid too much self-congratulation—keep the focus on future needs to achieve the goals.

Each organization, each team and each executive meeting will run differently, but as chairman you should remember some of the basics.

- Stick to the timings as closely as possible. Don't leave rescheduling items to the last minute—when you know you are delayed by an item, plan to catch up. Try to keep to planned breaks and after being seated for long periods insist on a stretch. Some teams do a little exercise together.



- When time is tight, don't rush to bad decisions. Better to defer, or ask a subgroup of the committee to finish the work and recommend a decision to the whole team.
- Ask presenters to be brief and clear on what they are asking for. Insist they leave time for discussion and for you to facilitate a good decision.
- Try not to have people leaving and joining the meeting during items, particularly the executive team. The whole team should be present to agree to decisions and if they wander in and out they are sending the wrong signals, particularly to the chairman.
- Try not to make too many interruptions personally. A good chairman is a good listener and facilitates the right decision with maximum commitment from the team.
- Stick to the ground rules. Be polite but firm in insisting that agreed disciplines are followed.
- Check to see that team members are participating and paying attention. Look at their body language; are they detached (sitting back, uninterested, passive) or are they attached (actively engaged in the work of decision making). Are you dominating discussion? Are you actively participating?
- Make sure that the secretary records all agreed action items. When the secretary has tuned out, it really is a boring meeting!
- Don't force decisions on the team. Be prepared to suspend decision making until more work can be done prior to the next meeting, but insist that the key issue within the goals is moved forward quickly to resolution.
- Well performing teams have clarity of goals, diversity of roles, wide ranging personalities and lots of ideas. Expect tensions to rise amongst talented people. Be fair, balanced and don't let bridges get burned.

As each item presentation and discussion come to an end, give pinpointed feedback to each presenter in real time. Reinforce the good qualities of the presentation—was it a well constructed argument, were the graphics clear, was the discussion valuable? Say so and publicly thank the presenter. Remember that the people that present to your executive team will talk about their experience outside the meeting. When you give reinforcement to presenters you are sending a message of successful behavior throughout the whole organization. When you do it in real time you are building consensus amongst the executive team as to the behaviors you prefer.

Many executives prefer not to make negative comments while presenters are in attendance. After visitors leave and before moving on to the next item, check to see if there are any comments or issues which your team members wish to discuss.

Closing the Meeting

Try to end the meeting ten minutes before the time planned. When all business is completed ask the secretary to quickly repeat all the agreed action items so that all participants know what they must initiate immediately. The action list will become a reminder.

Put your purpose and goals overhead back on the projector and take five minutes to reflect upon the work achieved during the meeting. This is a small moment of celebration at the end of a hard meeting. Reflect gently on what you are expecting to see happening before the next meeting, what do you anticipate will be the top priority items on the team's plate. Relax, thank individuals and the team for their contribution and be sure that the date set for the next meeting is clear to everyone.



Well done! You just chaired a well-disciplined, purpose-focused meeting—one of the key skills of a top class leader. Keep practicing and use the checklist on the next page.

Executive Meeting: Chairman's Checklist

Preparing

- Executive team goals and objectives clear and measurable?
- Agenda items with estimated timings circulated one week ahead?
- Bulky presentations circulated 48 hours ahead?
- Visitors allotted time slots, not in the first hour?
- Final agenda issued 48 hours ahead? Adequate breaks scheduled?
- Secretary briefed prior to meeting?

Running the Meeting

- Goals represented and discussed up front?
- Agenda aligned to goals as a group
- Timing of items kept to?
- Visitors on time and treated well?
- Presenters clear and good discussion time?
- Pinpointed feedback to each presenter?
- Participants body language active vs. passive?
- Action items recorded accurately?
- Chairman not dominating discussion?

Check Frequently

Closing the Meeting

- Goals presented and meeting achievement discussed?
- Moment of celebration taken—hard work, well done?
- Confirm date and venue of next meeting?