

MEETING PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The Purpose of Meetings

Effective meetings should be more than information exchanges – they need to focus on creative thinking, problem solving and decision making. Meeting planning is therefore more than organizing a series of information items and managing time as participants present their reports. Good meeting planning looks at process as well as content.

Meeting Planning Principles

Most meeting agendas simply delineate topic items against a time frame. However, a good meeting session plan should also specify the process that will underpin and support the various agenda items.

It is important to review any planned meeting from the participants' perspective. What will they be doing during the session? If the main activity is sitting and listening, the meeting plan should be revised to provide more variety and opportunity for participant involvement.

A good meeting plan requires the following components:

- Clear meeting outcomes stated in concrete terms. These should specify what needs to be achieved at the end of the meeting such as increased awareness of an issue, agreement on an approach, action steps to accomplish a goal, etc.
- A strategy for climate setting to set the tone and context of the meeting. The first ten minutes of a meeting are the most important as participant attention is high. This is where the Chair should state the meeting objectives and emphasize their importance, ensure all participants have been introduced, draw backward linkages to previous meetings or relevant events, and preview the agenda.
- A facilitation plan to ensure productive dialogue around the various agenda items. Every agenda item should be matched with a facilitation strategy. Decision-making methods described later in this document may guide your facilitation strategies.
- A detailed time frame along with a realistic time management strategy. The Chair should decide in advance what items should be deferred in a time crunch. The key to effective time management is to identify blocks of disposable content that can be eliminated or deferred if time runs short and prepare supplementary discussion activities to use if there is extra time.
- A summary and closure activity. The last five minutes of a meeting are an important part of the meeting as participants prepare to move on to the next activity. This is the point where the Chair should ensure strong forward linkages by recapping decisions made and confirming action items.