

Meeting Agendas

Four Key Questions for More Effective Meetings



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own company, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for the city and county of San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

The three core competencies that I believe any manager should have are the ability to speak persuasively, the ability to write clearly, and the ability to facilitate a productive meeting.

Of the three, the skill that is most frequently neglected is meeting facilitation. Yet one could argue that it is the most important of these three core competencies. This is because our success depends on bringing together people with competing priorities and convincing them to agree on an issue and, more importantly, to turn that agreement into action.

The reason many managers are ineffective facilitators is that they focus on the meeting itself and do not realize that the meeting is part of a process. Today I'd like to focus on the first part of the facilitation process: the agenda.

Why Agendas Matter

As managers, our time is valuable. Yet we squander our time in countless non-productive meetings that fail to resolve issues, make decisions or take

decisive action. We need to be more selective.

This is where the agenda comes in. A well-prepared agenda should answer the question of whether the meeting will be a productive use of our time. Is the subject of interest? Are you the right person to attend or should you send someone else? What results are expected? If the agenda can't answer these questions, it's probably not going to be an effective meeting.

The agenda is also a tool that you will use to manage your meeting. It will keep you on track and keep your audience from digressing. It brings focus to your meeting and keeps you mindful of your expected outcome. It also forms part of the meeting record.

Developing the Agenda

In developing an agenda, I ask myself four basic questions:

1. *Why are we meeting?* We tend to think that meetings are the only option. You can sometimes achieve the same results in less time through a conference call or a one-on-one phone conversation.

2. *What are we trying to accomplish?* A meeting should have a single, clearly defined purpose. If you can't identify this purpose, cancel the meeting. Also, once you know what you're trying to do, revisit question 1.
3. *What will we talk about?* If you know your purpose, this should be pretty straight forward. The problem begins when you start adding items that might be "of interest" to attendees. Even if the item is important, resist the urge to tack it on to the agenda – keep your focus on your expected outcome.
4. *Who needs to attend?* Cartoonist Scott Adams suggest that you can define the intelligence quotient of a meeting by starting at 100 and deducting 5 points for each participant. It's hard to get things done in large meetings, so give some thought to who really needs to be there.

Agenda Components

Once I have answered my basic questions, I prepare the agenda using the following format:

1. *Meeting information:* Believe it or not, I have received many agendas that did not include basic information such as the time, date and location of the meeting. Even if this information provided somewhere, having it on the agenda puts all the information pertaining to the meeting in one place.
2. *Sponsor:* In many cases, the person sponsoring the meeting has a direct impact on attendance. If a senior person calls the meeting, his or her peers and direct reports are more inclined to attend. If someone in a more subordinate position sponsors the

meeting, senior people are more inclined to send a representative.

3. *Meeting outcomes:* if your meeting is to be effective, you need to know what you want to achieve. This should be clearly articulated to your attendees. Remember that there are different types of meetings – there is a big difference between an information-sharing meeting and one at which you intend to make decisions. Your expected outcomes will also influence attendance.
4. *Agenda items:* Identifying agenda items allows attendees to prepare for the meeting by reviewing documents or brining appropriate information. It will also help the reader determine whether the meeting is pertinent to them.
5. *Process for each agenda item:* In deciding whether or not to attend a meeting, it is useful to know not just the agenda items but what you intend to do about them. For example, will the agenda item be an information briefing, a group discussion on the issue, or a decision making session?
6. *Time limits for agenda items:* Assigning time limits to agenda items helps to keep meetings on track by clarifying expectations up front. There are ways to deal with items that need more time than allotted which I'll cover in a future paper but they should be used rarely.

The agenda is much more than just a list of topics. It provides you with a clear definition of the expected outcome for your meeting and a timeline and process for achieving those results. It is the essential first step in effective meeting facilitation. 