

How to Make Your Meetings More Productive



By gathering the right people, using your time wisely and focusing on action, you'll conduct meetings everyone will want to attend.

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Meetings are a reality for all physicians, but running a productive meeting is a skill that takes some cultivating. Whether your group is as small as three or as large as 23, you must do three things to make your meetings successful:

1. Gather the necessary participants.
2. Make the meeting effective and efficient.
3. Follow through on the decisions made and communicate them to the appropriate people.

Here's how you can accomplish each of these steps.

Rounding up your group

How do you get doctors to attend your meeting? First, pick a favorable time. You

KEY POINTS

- Conducting a successful meeting, like any skill, requires practice.
- To maximize attendance at your meeting, select the date and time carefully, send plenty of reminders and consider offering incentives to those who attend.
- As the meeting's organizer, you must assemble an agenda that addresses important issues and make sure the attendees stick to these topics. Afterward, compose your minutes concisely so that assignments and deadlines are clear.

cannot afford to conduct meetings at a time when patients are normally scheduled. My group has found early morning or noon works best – but not on Monday or Friday. (I always chuckle when I see a hospital meeting set for 10 a.m. This shows they really don't want primary care doctors in attendance, since mid-morning is when we're typically busy seeing patients.) When picking the date, try to avoid long days. For example, don't plan an early morning meeting when there is an evening obligation for several of your members. My group minimizes evening meetings at all costs to preserve family life.

Another important tactic for maximizing meeting attendance is a constant stream of reminders. We send an early notification (at the previous meeting, if possible), mention it in all internal communications and send out a cover letter with the agenda and all relevant information three days ahead. Our final reminder is a voicemail or an intra-office message the day before the meeting. It may seem cumbersome, but it works. Our schedules are so full of clinical appointments and disruptions that administrative obligations can easily get overlooked in the heat of a busy day.

Incentives can also be useful for luring physicians to meetings. Always provide food

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Meetings scheduled during early morning or at noon will ensure a larger turnout in most physician groups.

Send several reminders to physicians prior to a meeting as their schedules are very busy and meetings tend to get overlooked.

As the meeting's leader, you should create an agenda with important topics and be prepared to moderate the discussions.

The meeting's minutes should be succinct yet informative, including what was decided at the meeting, who is responsible for the tasks and when they must be completed.

and drinks. Some doctors will want to get their breakfast at the early morning meetings, and lunch must be served at a noon meeting. On rare occasions, we pay our doctors to attend. This is done primarily when we are meeting to benefit a third party (such as a utilization review entity), and we ask the third party to foot the bill. Sometimes they agree. A payment of \$100 to \$150 per doctor seems to entice more attendees.

Keeping it short and sweet

Once you have the physicians assembled, you need to run a great meeting so they will come back next time. The first step is to be prepared; if you go in cold, those around the table will sense it – and they deserve better than that. Assemble an agenda of relevant topics, and send the necessary background information with the agenda no more than three days in advance so that no one will lose or forget it. If your agenda seems anemic, call off the meeting. It's better to cancel a few meetings than to waste everyone's time.

When running the meeting, you must behave as a tactful, benevolent dictator. This will help ensure that all opinions get aired and a decision gets made. Doctors appreciate making an informed decision at the initial meeting in which a topic is introduced (versus the traditional format of distributing information during a meeting and either rushing to an uninformed decision or repeating the subject at a subsequent meeting). As the meeting leader, you must keep the group on topic and focused. You destroy your meeting if you let individuals ramble incessantly. Don't forget every group has a "dominator" – the gruff physician whose opinions silence everyone else in the room. Make sure to ask for other opinions and, when necessary, a motion and a vote. The silent, considerate majority – common in family practices – needs to be heard, and it's your job to ensure it is.

Remember that timing is the key to a good meeting. When you gather a group of physicians around a table, revenue production goes to zero, so you do not want to waste time. Have a schedule, stick to it and finish promptly. Doctors will inevitably drift in late, so I suggest starting the meeting with light topics, such as minutes approval. To ensure you have ample time to discuss the

most important or controversial issues, always place them in the middle of your agenda; never leave these issues to the end.

When your meeting involves special presenters, do not let them dwell on unimportant details. They should hit the high points and ask for questions. If necessary, spend time with them before the meeting, telling them how much time they have and reviewing what they intend to present. When they have used up their time, cut them off gently but firmly.

Taking action

Don't wait until the end of the meeting to establish a plan for executing your decisions, because many of the doctors will have already left the room. As you address each item on your agenda, determine who is responsible for implementing the decisions, and set an appropriate deadline for completion. This

information should also be highlighted in the meeting's minutes.

Minutes are critical to a successful meeting – so critical, in fact, that I often record them

myself. When someone unattached to the meeting records the minutes, they often focus on small details that simply clutter the page. This results in ineffective minutes that no one reads. I will frequently jot down notes on my agenda and then dictate succinct minutes. Be sure the minutes go to everyone who attended the meeting and anyone else who needs to know what was discussed. If you have meaningful content and your minutes are succinct, physicians are much more likely to read them.

After the minutes have been distributed, call and remind those with assignments to be prepared to report on them before the next meeting. Be sure to plan the next meeting far enough in advance so everyone has time to complete the tasks.

Success!

A well-run meeting is a thing of beauty and a highly effective management tool. If you are consistently efficient and effective, your physicians and staff will be more involved and informed – and more willing to attend future meetings. Try implementing some of these suggestions, and your entire practice will benefit. **FPM**

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Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.