

MANAGING SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS IN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Meetings are considered an important in the management of work in any organization, enterprise or administration where the exchange of ideas and coordinating between them, benefiting from the experience of others and the transfer of experiences between the participants takes place.

Likewise, meetings are an acceptable means for the academic study of topics of discussions if based upon accurate information and scientific methodology is followed to solve problems, make decisions, define the problem, identify its causes, find appropriate alternatives and in choosing the best solution.

Meetings are increasingly important in the light of recent findings from some studies that managers spend between 50% to 70% of their time in meetings (Muneef, 2004).

If the management of meetings in general holds this much importance, then the need in academic institutions, departments and administrations is much greater, its importance increases because most academic work is completed through meetings with committees, departments, colleges and deanships.

According to some researchers, such as Cabriel (2000), state that meetings are "weak and useless", while other researchers have come to other conclusions, for example, two researchers, Norton and Lester (1998), found that meetings are classified into useful and useless depending on the way it was managed, preparation involved and topics discussed.

Mesmer (2002) is of the opinion that the lack of effectiveness of meetings costs organizations a lot of time and money, and in his study of one of the organizations found that managers spend about 8 hours per week in unnecessary meetings.

1. Steps in preparing for the meeting (before the meeting):

Some state, including Keenan (1996), that 80% of the success of a meeting is determined before they are held or even take place. Perhaps what can help this, and is in accordance with what a number of researchers have found, the likes of Abu Shaikha (1991, p.198), Al Faqih (2005, p.58) and Abu Nasr (2009, p.113), are the following:

- Clearly defining the objectives of the meeting.
- Selecting the participants for the meeting.

- Specifying the date, time and duration of the meeting (when it will start and finish).
- Setting and preparing the venue for the meeting along with all the necessary supplies and equipment.
- Preparing the agenda of the meeting and arranging the topics according to importance.
- Preparing the invitation to the meeting and sending it to members in advance.

2. Chairing the Meeting (during the meeting):

In order to achieve meeting objectives, it needs to be managed well. It is not limited to the preparation phase (before the meeting), but continues to during the meeting and after its completion. Abu Shaikha (1991, p.199), Al Faqih (2005, p.63) and Abu Nasr (2009, p.138) all pointed out that chairing a meeting (during the meeting) includes the following:

2.1. Chairing the Discussion During the Meeting:

2.1.1. The Role of the Chairperson in the Meeting:

The Chairperson of the meeting has multiple roles during the meeting, these roles include:

- To encourage.
- To supervise.
- To support.
- To observe.

The main responsibilities of the chairperson in the meeting and of his assistants (rapporteur or secretary) are as follows:

- Preparing and writing the agenda.
- Setting the venue.
- Preparing all required materials.
- Starting the meeting punctually.
- Reviewing the agenda with the other members of the meeting.
- Moving from one agenda item to the next in sequence. The agenda should be arranged according to the importance of each item.
- Balancing between firmness and softness, in addition to refocusing discussion that has wandered off topic (in a suitable manner).
- Not allowing anyone to dominate the conversation.
- Listening with interest and focus to everything that is said during the meeting.
- Monitoring non-verbal messages from members and amongst themselves.
- Summarizing the main points of discussion at every stage of the meeting to keep the members focused.

- Creating an atmosphere where everyone feels they can speak their mind frankly and honestly during the meeting.
- Revising the minutes of the meeting recorded by the rapporteur or secretary.
- Recording the minutes of the meeting (it is the responsibility of the rapporteur or secretary of the meeting).

2.1.2. Role of the Member in the Meeting:

Joe Taman (2008, p.23) mentions that members participating in a meeting have the following roles:

- To strive to obtain all necessary information regarding the meeting.
- To arrive at the venue punctually.
- To abide by the topic of the meeting.
- Not to raise any problem to the Chairperson, instead to assist him in obtaining the required efficiency.
- To be open and accepting of others.
- To assist the Chairperson in his oversight of the meeting.
- To listen and pay attention.
- To speak clearly such that everyone can understand.
- To build upon the thoughts and ideas of others.
- To critique the ideas and not the person who mentioned it.
- Not to use the meeting as a means to undertake individual discussions with group members.
- To complete any tasks assigned to him.

2.2. Rules Pertaining to Chairing the Meeting:

Abu Shaikha (1991, p.195) states a number of rules pertaining to chairing a meeting, these include:

- Starting the meeting punctually.
- Upholding the rules of the meeting under all circumstances.
- To avoid preaching, teaching or disciplining by the Chairperson and not to dominate the discussion. The role of an effective Chairperson is to trust every group member and assist them to release their potential.
- To listen to every comment mentioned during the discussion.

The following can help to develop listening skills:

- To make eye-contact with the speaker whenever possible.
- To use non-verbal cues, to emphasis one's point through head gestures and eye expressions, or to ask questions that show one's deep understanding of what he is talking about.

- To give special attention to the speaker and his expressions, tone of voice, sitting posture, and body language.
- Not to interrupt or be distracted by side conversations or trying to stop the speaker before he is finished.
- Not looking at the clock or door, or starting to stand up and so on.
- To take advantage of listening to the information collected, speakers organization of ideas or preparing to speak.
- To show sympathy with the speaker by putting himself in his shoes.

2.3. Supervision During the Meeting:

Supervision ensures that the meeting is going ahead according to plan, and that it is achieving its objectives in the shortest time possible without compromising the satisfaction of the participants.

Good supervision requires a number of elements, including:

- Clear objectives for the meeting.
- Providing an opportunity for participants to exchange information and experiences and to get acquainted with one another.
- Maintaining a high degree of enthusiasm for the participants in the meeting.

2.4. Closing the Discussion and Meeting:

2.4.1. The discussion is usually concluded for one of two reasons:

2.4.1.1. Not reaching a decision, this can be for a number of reasons:

- The need for more information.
- The need for input from members who are absent.
- The need for more time to read some of the reports and studies.
- The prediction of certain events that may affect the options available.
- The objectives of the discussion can be achieved without the participants actually discussing them.

2.4.1.2. The participants are able to make a decision or take action without the need for further discussions, for one of the following reasons:

- A lack of need for basic information.
- The alternatives were discussed and their advantages and disadvantages have become apparent.
- Questions concerning the alternatives have been answered.

There are basic issues to be considered when closing, the most important of them include:

- Re-stating the objectives of the meeting.
- Summarizing what has been achieved and accomplished.
- Thanking the members for their participation and attention, if appropriate.

- Specifying the time, place and purpose of the next meeting.
- Specifying a time to send the report of the meeting to the members (if any).

3. After the Meeting:

Main tasks are summarized at this stage, as explained by the following:

- 1- Distributing the responsibility amongst the participants to follow up the implementation of the decisions made.
- 2- Determining a completion deadline for each task or decision is required to be implemented and not to exceed that date, whatever it takes (as much as possible).
- 3- Making sure everyone has understood and grasped the tasks assigned to them after the meeting.
- 4- Documenting the meeting (minutes of the meeting), which is the responsibility of the rapporteur or the secretary of the meeting under the supervision of the Chairperson.
- 5- Sending a written note to participants to remind them of the tasks expected and required of them along with the expected deadline for completion.
- 6- Preparing a dedicated register to record and save the results and decisions reached and the member who is responsible to follow-up each item (Al Faqih 2005, p.66 and Abu Nasr 2009, p.151).

Based on the above, the researcher believes that the “after the meeting” stage is critical, and one should not be content with the two preceding stages (before and during) only. This is due to its importance and role in achieving the objectives of the meeting.

4. Evaluating the Meeting:

Meetings can be evaluated for their effectiveness, as indicated by Abu Shaikha (1991, p.199) and Abdel Jawad (2008, p.67 and 2011, p. 15), through the following:

4.1. To Evaluate the Chairperson's Ability to Chair the Meeting:

Evaluation of the Chairperson's ability to chair the meeting is fulfilled by answering the following questions:

- Was the meeting punctual and on schedule both for its commencement and completion?
- Do members know the objectives of the meeting and strongly believe in them?
- Does the Chairperson address members without hesitation just as the members address each other?
- Do members express their true feelings in the meeting?
- Do members sometimes differ with the Chairperson in opinion and express it freely and openly?
- Do members listen to each other with interest and not cut one another off?
- Do members differ in opinion, but are able to understand the different viewpoints and work to address them and put them in proper context?
- Do the members receive information and directions from their colleagues without finding offence?
- Is there a feeling of hostility towards the Chairperson?

Table 1 Table of Evaluation for the Chairperson's Ability to Manage the Meeting

No	Item	Yes	Sometimes	No
1	The meeting was punctual and on schedule both for its commencement and completion.			
2	Members know the objectives of the meeting well and strongly believe in them.			
3	The Chairperson address members without hesitation just as the members address one other.			
4	Members express their true feelings in the meeting.			
5	Members sometimes differ with the Chairperson in opinion and express it freely and openly.			
6	Members listen to each other with interest and do not cut one another off.			
7	Members may differ in opinion, but are able to understand these differences.			
8	Rational opposition (based on principles rather than personal interests) is very useful for the meeting.			
9	Members receive information and directions from their colleagues without finding offence.			
10	There is no feeling of hostility towards the Chairperson.			

4.2. Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Meeting in General:

An effective meeting means the objectives of the meeting are met in the shortest possible time with the satisfaction of all participants. This can be shown by the following indicators:

- Mutual respect amongst members of the meeting.
- Members commit to the objectives of the meeting and show desire to achieve them.
- The prevalence of the spirit of cooperation between members of the meeting.
- Each member listens to the ideas and observations of the others, and focus is placed on the constructive discussions involving all or most of the members.
- Destructive criticism and conflict is avoided.
- Decision-making in the meeting is collective.

Also, the following questions can be raised and answered:

- Are the objectives of the meeting worthwhile from the viewpoint of the members, Chairperson and organization?
- Have the objectives of the meeting been achieved?
- Was the time of the members used in a beneficial way?
- Did the results of the meeting and its decisions justify the resources spent on it?

The researcher believes that the evaluation of the meeting is an important and critical stage that must be done, because -God willing-, it will help to improve the meetings and increase its effectiveness.

Table2 Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Meeting

No	Item	Yes	Sometimes	No
1	There is mutual respect amongst participants.			
2	Participants commit themselves to the objectives of the meeting and want to achieve them.			
3	A spirit of cooperation is prevalent between the participants.			
4	Each participant listened to the ideas and comments of the others.			
5	Participants avoided destructive criticism and conflict.			
6	Decisions are made collectively.			
7	The objectives of the meeting are worthwhile from the viewpoint of the members.			
8	The objectives of the meeting are worthwhile from the viewpoint of the Chairperson.			
9	The objectives of the meeting are worthwhile from the viewpoint of the organization.			
10	The objectives of the meeting are met.			
11	The time of the participants is used for a meaningful cause.			
12	The results of the meeting and its decisions justify the resources spent on it.			

5. Problems of Meetings.

There are many problems in meetings, as mentioned by a number of researchers, including Keenan (1996, p.12), Al'uthaymeen (1997, p.14), John and Shirley Payne (1998, p.11), Al Faqih (2005, p.87), Abu Nasr (2009, p.26), and Abdel Jawad (2008, p.78), these include the following:

- The subject of the meeting and its objective are not specified, nor its importance explained.
- The time of the meeting was not appropriate for some or most of the participants.
- Lack of appropriate facilities and surrounding conditions for the meeting.
- Failure to provide participants with the resources required for the meeting.
- Failure to abide by the time set for the meeting, both the commencement and completion.

- Bad selection of participants.
- The domination of one (or some) members over the meeting.
- Conflict and argument amongst the members, or between the members and the Chairperson.
- The opportunity for participants to express their views and feelings is restricted.
- Frequent interruptions and side discussions between members.
- Closure of the meeting without the participants' knowledge of the meetings achievements.
- Poor satisfaction of participants from the meeting.

The researcher believes that these problems and others can be overcome by abiding by the principles and rules of managing meetings effectively, both prior to the meeting, during or after it ends. In addition, taking into account the role of Chairperson and that of its members, abiding by the rules for chairing the individual sessions of the meeting, supervising the progress of the meeting, concluding both the discussion and meeting in an appropriate way, as well as evaluating the meeting both in terms of the Chairperson's ability to manage the meeting and the effectiveness of the meeting in general.

6. Recommendations:

- 1- The need to hold specialized training courses for heads of academic departments in universities in the field of meeting management. This includes the planning, preparation, management of discussions, decision-making, recommendations from the meeting and to follow up their implementation.
- 2- The involvement of rapporteur of the academic sections of the universities in specialized training courses in preparing the minutes, organizing them. For participating members courses on the subject of meeting management and actively participating in them.
- 3- Organizing training courses for the secretaries of meetings of the academic sections of the universities and other supporting individuals on how to prepare for meetings, organize and facilitate them in order to achieve effectiveness and achieve their goals and objectives, God willing.
- 4- To urge heads of departments in universities on the importance of being punctual with the commencement and completion of all meetings, specifying a set time for each agenda item and adhering to this strictly to prevent faculty members from complaining of the length of meetings and wasting their time with little benefit. This naturally will encourage faculty members to attend meetings and not skip them.
- 5- Universities should show an increased interest in providing meeting rooms for all the academic departments and equip them with all the necessary modern office equipment. Many departments lack suitable meeting rooms equipped for this purpose, which negatively affects the process of holding meetings.
- 6- A mechanism needs to be put in place to evaluate the meetings to find places of fault and correct problems. In addition, the active participation of members in the meeting needs to be encouraged; for

those who only attend in form but do not participate in discussions negatively affects the effectiveness of the meeting.

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