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Meeting Structures & Formats

Choose the right shape for the outcome you need

Read time: 8 minutes

Know the cost. Make it count.

Why Meeting Structure Matters

This guide gives you a simple menu of meeting formats you can reuse. The right shape for the right outcome.

Different outcomes need different shapes. A decision meeting looks different from a brainstorm. A status update looks different from a workshop. Choose the format that matches what you need to accomplish.

01 First: Name the Outcome

Before you pick a meeting format, you need to be clear about what you're trying to accomplish. What will success look like?

What is the specific outcome we need from this meeting?

02 The Meeting Format Map

Use this map to find the right format for what you need:

What You Need	Best Format
Make a decision	Decision Meeting
Share information broadly	Update Meeting (async-first)
Get everyone on the same page	Alignment Meeting
Generate ideas or explore options	Ideation/Creative Meeting
Solve a specific problem	Problem-Solving Meeting
Teach or build skills	Workshop
Check in as a team	Weekly Team Meeting
Learn from what happened	Retrospective/Review
Discuss something sensitive	Difficult Content Meeting



03 Core Formats

A) Decision Meeting

Best when: You need to make a choice and you need input from the team.

What you'll get: A decision that's well-informed and has buy-in because people were heard.

Typical agenda:

1. **Context:** Why are we deciding this? What happens if we don't?
2. **Options:** What are the real choices? (Usually 2-4. No more.)
3. **Pros/cons:** What are the trade-offs of each option?
4. **Input:** What does the team think? Who objects?
5. **Decision:** Based on all that, here's what we're doing.

Facilitator line: "We're here to decide on [X]. I want to hear from everyone. Let's talk through the options."

B) Update Meeting (Async-First)

Best when: You need to share information across the team but don't need real-time discussion.

Structure:

1. **Pre-meeting:** Share a written update 24 hours before you meet. (Could be a doc, email, Slack thread.)
2. **Read async:** People read it on their own time. They add questions or comments in the doc.
3. **Quick debrief:** Spend 15 minutes addressing sticky points or questions that came up.

Upgrade tip: If people are just reading back what they wrote in the meeting, you're doing it wrong. The meeting is for discussion, not presentation.

C) Alignment Meeting

Best when: Teams need to make sure they're working toward the same goals.

Typical agenda:

1. **What are we doing?** One-sentence summary of the goal or project.
2. **Why?** What problem are we solving? What do we want to happen?
3. **Who does what?** What's each person's/team's role?

4. **What's success?** How will we know we got there?
5. **Questions?** What's unclear? Where might we be misaligned?

Facilitator line: "The goal here is to make sure we're all pointing in the same direction. Let's sync up."

D) Problem-Solving Meeting

Best when: You have a specific problem and need to figure out how to fix it.

Typical agenda:

1. **What's the problem?** Define it clearly. What's happening? What should be happening?
2. **Root cause:** Why is this happening? Don't stop at the surface.
3. **Brainstorm solutions:** What could we do about it? Generate options without filtering yet.
4. **Evaluate:** Which solution(s) are realistic? What's the trade-off?
5. **Decide & act:** Pick one. Decide who owns implementing it. Set a check-in time.

Tip: The best problem-solving meetings spend less time talking and more time listening. Invite people who see the problem firsthand.

E) Ideation/Creative Meeting

Best when: You want to generate lots of ideas or explore possibilities.

Typical agenda:

1. **Frame the challenge:** "How might we...?" Make it clear but open-ended.
2. **Brainstorm without filtering:** Quantity over quality. No idea is stupid. Write it all down.
3. **Build on each other:** "Yes, and..." Think about how you might expand someone else's idea.
4. **Cluster & discuss:** Group similar ideas. See what themes emerge.
5. **Pick a few to explore:** Which ideas are worth digging into more? What's intriguing?

The golden rule: In the brainstorm phase, criticism is not allowed. Evaluation comes later.

F) Workshop

Best when: People need to learn something or practice a skill together.

Typical agenda:

1. **Why this skill matters:** Explain the relevance. Why should people care?
2. **Show how:** Demonstrate the skill or concept. Be concrete.
3. **People try:** Give them a chance to practice. Small groups if possible.
4. **Reflect:** What worked? What was hard? How will they use this?
5. **Next steps:** What should people do after this workshop?

Tip: Workshops need breaks. For every 45 minutes of content, take a 10-minute break. Especially if you're asking people to practice new skills.

G) Weekly Team Meeting

Best when: You're checking in with your core team on goals, progress, and blockers.

Typical agenda:

1. **Wins/progress:** What got done this week? What are you proud of?
2. **What's coming:** What are you working on next week?
3. **Blockers:** What's in the way? Where do you need help?
4. **Alignment:** Are we on track? Do we need to adjust priorities?
5. **Closing thought:** What's one thing everyone should know heading into next week?

The rule: Meetings are for connection and real talk, not for status reports. If you can write it down, do that. Use meeting time to talk about what matters.

H) Retrospective/Review

Best when: You're learning from a project, sprint, or period of time.

Typical agenda:

1. **What did we set out to do?** Recap the goal or plan.
2. **What happened?** What actually occurred? Where did we land?
3. **What worked well?** What are we proud of? What went right?
4. **What was hard?** Where did we struggle? What surprised us?
5. **What will we do differently?** Pick 1-3 concrete changes for next time.

Tip: The best retros focus on learning, not blame. Create psychological safety. People need to feel like it's safe to be honest about what was hard.

I) Difficult Content Meeting

Best when: You need to discuss something sensitive, controversial, or emotionally charged.

Typical agenda:

- 1. Set the container:** Explain why we're talking about this. What's the goal? How will we treat each other?
- 2. Listen first:** Someone presents the perspective or content. Others listen without interrupting.
- 3. Questions for clarity:** Ask questions to understand, not to argue. "Say more about that." "What do you mean by...?"
- 4. Share perspectives:** Others share their view. Again, listen. Don't debate in the moment.
- 5. Reflect together:** What did you hear? What did you learn? Where do we go from here?

04 The Right Meeting Length Cheat

How much time do you actually need?

- **15 minutes:** Quick sync, status update, one decision
- **25 minutes:** Brainstorm, alignment check, problem-solve a small issue
- **50 minutes:** Deep brainstorm, workshop segment, difficult conversation
- **90+ minutes:** Full workshop, strategic planning, complex problem-solving

Challenge the 60-minute default. Most meetings don't need a full hour. Be ruthless about ending on time. If you need more time, schedule a second meeting instead of going over.

05 A Simple Chooser

Use this quick framework to pick the right meeting format:

What outcome do we need?

Which format matches that?

What's our agenda?

Who needs to make this decision?

Any notes?

Quick Checklist

- The format matches what we're trying to accomplish.
- Everyone knows the agenda before we meet.
- We have the right people in the room.
- We have a clear time limit and we'll stick to it.
- We know what success looks like.

A Quick Reminder

Most bad meetings aren't bad because people don't care.

They're bad because the meeting has the wrong shape. Choose the right format.

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