

# Effective Planning & Review Meetings

Gospel ministry often involves lots of meetings! In fact, it can seem like meetings take up a disproportionate amount of time for church staff and leaders, and others involved in gospel work. Though know planning and canvassing ideas is an important part of being good stewards of the resources at our disposal - we don't want to be wasteful because we haven't thought enough about likely outcomes. It's also part of being good shepherds of those in our care – it's unkind not to consider the challenges and responses likely to be faced by those we lead and involve in ministry.

Similarly, reviewing our ministry tasks - reflecting on how we've used our time and money and how we've asked people to labour alongside us - is part of seeking to be fruitful and effective for the gospel.

If you lead a team, whether that be of staff or volunteers, for a range of ministries or for one specific task or project, here are some suggestions for your team meetings to help them increase your effectiveness and fruitfulness, and hopefully reduce frustration! The focus here is on planning meetings, ie before an event or as a project is progressing, and review meetings, after the event. You may have these meetings weekly; in the case of a Sunday gatherings planning meeting, or as a one-off; for example, reviewing a Christmas evangelistic event. Much of the advice is common to both kinds of meetings and indeed other types of meetings, also, though there are some comments for specific types of meetings.

## 1. Every meeting needs to honour Christ

No matter what meeting you're in, if you're a follower of Jesus, your meeting must serve honour him! We're reminded in Colossians 3:17 *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Pray at the start and the end of each meeting, asking God to be at work in you and through you, and giving thanks for the good works he has prepared in advance for you to do.

If you're the one leading the meeting, then doing so "in the name of the Lord Jesus" as Paul says in Colossians means overseeing it in such a way that the meeting reflects Christ's character and love for people. The leader is responsible for ensuring the meeting culture is edifying and Christ-honouring. Lead by example in loving others by making sure they have an opportunity to speak, that they feel heard, don't get cut-off, or talked down to by others present. It may be appropriate to ask particular members of the team who haven't spoken up if they have anything they'd like to add – perhaps they hadn't felt able to make their contribution in the cut and thrust of the meeting.

There may be occasions when it's appropriate to give people an opportunity to provide their thoughts outside the meeting, when it seems to you that because of the personalities of some present it's hard for others to share honestly.

## 2. Start and finish on time

Show people that you value their time and the effort they've made to be in the meeting by starting on time and sticking to the expected duration. Those around your table may have needed to say no to other things in order to be present, or at the very least will be mindful of other things they could be doing.

## 3. Write, distribute, and follow an agenda

Even if your meeting is to review a regular event like a Sunday gathering and therefore follows the same pattern every time, stick to your agenda so you cover what needs to be covered and avoid getting tangled in matters better dealt with outside the meeting.

I used to run a 30 minute meeting both planning and reviewing Sunday gatherings from an operational perspective (ie we weren't debriefing the preaching, etc). The agenda allocated 10 minutes to reviewing the past Sunday's gatherings, 20 minutes to planning for the coming Sunday and 10 minutes for planning gatherings for the Sunday after that. We followed the same agenda each week, with sections for talking about rotas, technology, logistics, etc, so everyone in the meeting knew exactly what we were trying to accomplish. This meant the meeting, though the shortest regular meeting in my diary all week, was highly effective.

## 4. Continually restate your vision in meetings

Don't be afraid to continually restate your vision in your planning and review meetings. When you're making decisions about what to do, or reviewing what worked or didn't, always tie it to your vision and make your evaluations in that light.

An event or Sunday service element that was brilliant but at odds with, or unrelated to vision is not a success! You can't do everything, so "vision alignment" is how you decide what gets done and what doesn't. And there's no substitute for constantly being reminded and reminding your team why you do the things you do.

## 5. Stay up high!

Don't get bogged down in detail that doesn't require the time and attention of everyone present. This is another way to value and respect the time and contribution of those in your meeting.

This means it's a good idea to do your analysis before the meeting, not in it. The meeting then becomes your opportunity to share the plans you've come up with that flow from your observations, or to invite others to contribute plans in the light of the observations you've established. There may be occasions when you need others' input to interpret data (giving patterns, attendance, demographics, uptake of training, etc) so if this is the case, do this in a separate meeting or 1:1 so that the planning meeting has an agreed foundation on which to move forward.

## **6. Limit attendance and invite everyone who should be present**

These two goals sound contradictory, but they're not! You should only have people in a meeting if they need to be there, otherwise it's yet another way to waste their time and reduce their effectiveness in ministry. Every additional person round the table means each person has less opportunity to speak, but doesn't necessarily increase the breadth of perspectives in the meeting.

Equally, think carefully about who will benefit from being present even if they haven't historically been in these types of meetings in your organisation. In particular, people in ministry support roles often find it very helpful to have been exposed to the planning discussions so they hear the thinking behind the plans and not just the final decision. If they need to make their own decisions as they execute the plans that come out of the meeting, they often feel they're able to make better missionally-oriented decisions if they've heard the rationale, witnessed what's been dismissed and have felt the tone of the meeting – all things not usually well captured in a meeting's minutes!

## **7. Record action items for clarity and accountability**

We've all been in meetings where ideas have been shared, a path forward agreed, and then a few weeks later, no one is quite sure who's responsible for making it all happen! Without action items, nothing gets done.

In every meeting which generates tasks needing completion, record action items with names and due dates. This means there'll be clarity among the team about who is responsible. Since everyone receives a copy of the minutes or notes, which will also be reviewed in any subsequent meetings, recording actions and due dates is key to accountability among your team.

Action items should be specific and if you're running the meeting, confirm that the person concerned knows what's being asked of them and in doing so, you let everyone else around the table know what their colleague is being asked to do. In some meetings you may like to re-state all action items and the team member responsible as you wrap up the meeting, but always include them in the minutes or notes from the meeting circulated afterwards.

It may be appropriate to ask this person to nominate the due date, rather than assigning one.

## 8. Learn how people on your team think

Remember that some people want to talk through an idea to help form it in their head. Others are internal thinkers who will only speak when they're comfortable with their finished thought. The people in the first category tend to be quite happy to have their idea changed and modified, or even discarded. They're not emotionally invested in the idea they're presenting, as they're not even sure what *they* think of it until the group's helped them consider it from all angles. People in the second category though, who present ideas that they've wrestled with and considered at length, may be much more invested in what they propose. To criticise or change these ideas can feel like a criticism of the person themselves!

This, of course doesn't mean you don't challenge or build on ideas from team members who think internally and present ideas that they considered to be the finished product, but in order to love that member of your team well, do it gently, ask questions, and affirm the aspects of the proposal that you believe will work.

Similarly, remember that for the external processing members of your team, when they say "Let me tell you a great idea I think we ought to put into practice!" this isn't them committing to a particular course of action! They may just be sharing an idea which they would no longer support after 15 minutes of group discussion!

## 9. Assess on data, not anecdotes. But share stories for encouragement

When you're reviewing your ministry, whether that be a Sunday gathering, a mission event, or allocation of money and other resources, base your assessments on data, not anecdotes.

This of course means collecting meaningful data! And there is lots of data that we can, and should record, beyond the typical headcount and collection count on a Sunday. Some metrics are rather blunt and not very specific – money given and numbers of evangelistic resources distributed, for example. Other measures will be more precise – How many people made professions of faith in this event? How many new groups or ministries started? Metrics can also be divided into "leading indicators" which predict a change before it occurs; "How many groups have an assistant leader who can lead the group?" is a leading indicator that tells us about our church planting readiness. There are also "lagging indicators" which tell you what's already happened, eg "How many people attended a mission event?"

But some data is better than no data, so whatever data you can collect, measure, and keep – use it! “We explained the gospel of Jesus to 200 people this year, compared to 5000 last year” is useful data. “Mrs Jones said this was the best evangelistic mission we’ve ever run” is an anecdote that must never obscure the fact that evangelistic conversations were down 96% on last year.

Review and plan your ministries based on the best data you can get. This might mean asking those involved in ministry to record more metrics than you have in the past; small group leaders noting attendance, asking door-knockers to count conversations, establishing processes to follow-up newcomers so you know if they stick with your church. Some people might feel this is a bit too “process-driven” but we want to love people well, and be good stewards of our resources. Good data helps us not be wasteful!

But Mrs Jones’ comment is wonderfully encouraging! While you must review your ministry and plan for the future according to your data, share the stories to encourage people! The most recent mission may have been less-well supported by the church family than in previous years, but hearing Mrs Jones’ story could encourage lots of people to join in next time. The church family, patrons, and prayer supporters love to hear the stories!

## **10. Help people feel valued – provide snacks!**

This of course is not really a “must do” for meetings, but it’s good to think about how to help people feel that their time and contribution to the meeting is valued. To whatever extent you’re able, ensure the heating or cooling is set before the meeting begins, that people have easy access to parking if necessary, and that the room is set up to help rather than hinder discussion.

If it’s possible, you might provide tea, coffee, and water, and even snacks like fruit and sweets. It’s amazing the difference that introducing snacks in multiple small balls into a meeting has on people’s punctuality, attitude to the meeting, and willingness to take part. It’s always a simple way to be generous to those on your team.