# What the Science Says about Meeting Agendas May Surprise You. Plus an Alternative Approach That Could be a game Changer

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*Pete is at his desk working on an exciting solution designed to solve a problem his customer is having. Time is flying by, he is energized, and he is in the zone. In the distance, he hears his phone "ring" with a reminder to attend his weekly department meeting. Unlike Pavlov's dogs who drool with anticipation of a treat at such a sound, Pete is filled with dread. He enters the conference room and is handed the meeting agenda. Although a few words have been changed, it is basically the same stale agenda delivered each week with only one difference: the date has been updated. His "treat" is another wasted hour from work he needed and wanted to do.*

It is hard to find a business book on meetings that does not start with the importance of a meeting agenda. However, research on agendas is far from enthusiastic. In fact, agendas in and of themselves do little to fundamentally improve meetings. Given estimates that 50% of agendas are merely recycled meeting to meeting, these null findings should come as no surprise. Pete's experience is clearly not unique. In this essay I will discuss a three step plan, leveraging meeting science, to avoid the generic-agenda-pitfall. I will conclude with a new paradigm around agenda creation that might just rock your meeting world. Here is a teaser - consider framing your agendas not as topics to be addressed, but as questions to be answered, and if you can't generate questions, that is your sign that the meeting is not needed.

**Step 1: What Should be Included in the Meeting?**

While meetings can certainly have an "update" component, which is only natural, this should be a small part of the meeting. If the topic does not require interaction (e.g., discussion, ideation, solution generation), another communication medium would likely be more efficient. In fact, if only about one-way information dissemination, the leader could consider distributing a recording of themselves sharing the messages instead. This is extremely easy to create using a smartphone, tablet, or PC. The beauty of this technological alternative is that would-be attendees can then listen to the recording at their convenience just as they would a podcast, and all can be archived.

In addition to the leader generating topics, ideas for the agenda should bubble up from the attendees themselves. After all, a meeting is a shared experience and it seems only appropriate to allow all parties to have some level of input. Andy Grove, the former CEO of Intel once said, "the most important criterion governing matters to be talked about is that they be issues that preoccupy and nag the subordinate." Research strongly supports the importance of "voice" in work-related activities. That is, when employees are encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas in a genuine manner and those ideas are truly heard, they tend to feel a greater sense of commitment to the team and the organization. This translates into the meeting in the form of an engaged attendee, one that is fully plugged into the meeting itself.

While asking for your team's input, however, it is important to keep in mind that you are ultimately in charge of the meeting. What employees propose should certainly be considered and taken seriously. However, if you deem the suggestion to <u>not</u> be a good agenda item for the upcoming meeting you should either: 1) address the issue with the employee or subset of employees outside the meeting; or (2) move it to a future meeting. The only thing you should not do when an attendee gives you feedback on agenda items is to pretend you never received the suggestion; some form of closing the loop is needed.

After identifying the *potential* topics and goals of the meeting, the meeting leader needs to carefully reflect on the importance of the goals and whether each is adding true value–value beyond opportunity costs (i.e., time would be better spent on other topics or having a shorter meeting). Drop content that does not make the cut. Also, drop content if the goal is only relevant to a small subset of attendees; in this case, it is best to pursue these specific topics in a different context (i.e. a group email, short meeting "huddle," etc.)

**Step 2: Ordering the Agenda Items**

The next step in agenda creation involves the critical task of ordering the topics. Research has found the items early in the agenda received a disproportionate amount of time and attention, regardless of their importance. Given this, first and foremost, I recommend ranking your prospective meeting goals based on strategic importance. It is key that you have a good sense of what you feel is essential to cover, versus what is just nice to cover. With that said, issues affecting the here and now should not be automatically privileged over issues that have a longer time horizon. It is critical that meetings are not just fully focused on solving immediate problems, but also contain some more proactive, longer-term items.

Now that you have this information at hand, you can start making ordering decisions leveraging the following rules of thumb. First, if all else is generally equal, I like the idea of prioritizing employee-generated agenda items. This sends a strong message around voice, inclusion and shared-ownership. Second, although meetings should start on time and all items on the agenda should be important, the first part of the meeting can contain some "warm-up" types of items, thus serving as buffer against potential individual lateness and, more importantly, serve to build momentum (e.g., sharing quick announcements and/or quick updates from the last meeting). However, no more than 5 or so minutes into the meeting time, the most important, meaty, and critical agenda items should be broached. This not only assures coverage of these topics, but also gets attendees hooked early and engaged. It is like a good book or movie: you have to grab the audience early or they will be reaching to their phones for some multitasking relief.

It is also key to note that no matter what your agenda is, it should typically end in a similar way: close with a few-minute-long wrap-up to cover meeting takeaways, clarifying assignments, and noting some items that will be put on the agenda for next time.

**Step 3: Picking the Right Way to Do the Agenda Items**

The final step in agenda creation, which is so commonly ignored, is thinking about processes to use to address the various agenda items in play. Stated differently, planning a meeting is not only knowing what you want to cover, but also *how you want to go about doing it*. Consider the people, the tasks, the history, the potential pitfalls etc., to pick the right tool for the job. There are so many tools to consider (e.g., get people in dyads, have people brainstorm in silence, voting apps, etc.), which is why I spend nearly a third of my book on this topic. I do want to share one particularly relevant example here – assigning agenda owners.

Although the meeting leader is ultimately in charge of the meeting experience, they have the ability to share leadership in a strategic manner. One way of doing that is having certain agenda items assigned to "owners." These owners should facilitate the discussion around the agenda item and in many cases, also be in charge of the post-meeting actions around it. The research literature shows that when you clearly and publicly attach a name to a task, you foster accountability. This, in turn, increases follow-through on what was decided at the meeting (an important piece of ultimate meeting success). This type of practice is embraced by a number of organizations. Most notably, it has become a fairly usual meeting practice for Apple. Apple initiated the concept of a "DRI"—a directly responsible individual. A DRI is assigned to agenda items for all to see. Employees expect to see a DRI next to an agenda item, and everyone knows the DRI will be driving follow-up actions after the meeting. In addition to this utilitarian purpose, a DRI serves a number of other purposes: (1) getting more people involved in the meeting; (2) providing a nice opportunity for skill development in leading meetings; and (3) making the meeting more stimulating for other attendees as more voices are incorporated than just the leader. Note, it may be the case that the DRI is identified not prior to the discussion of the agenda, but at the meeting itself, post-discussion of that agenda item. Regardless, the key is to assign a DRI at some point.

**A New Model – Framing Agendas as Questions to Be Answered**

Before closing, I want to share a new approach to agendas. I personally find this approach highly compelling. All of the above content is relevant to this new model, but there is one fundamental uniqueness. Instead of designing your agenda as a set of topics to be discussed, consider framing your agenda as a series of questions to be answered. In other words, the meeting is being called given a need to answer a set of important questions. For example, instead of a topic titled discuss budgetary constraints consider a question such as "how will we reduce our budget by 50K by the end of the quarter"? By framing the discussion as questions, rather than topics, it is my contention that the leader will think and act differently. First, I believe it is easier to identify who truly needs to be at the meeting – those who attend should be central players in the questions to be answered. Also, you are better able to determine when to end the meeting—the meeting should end once the questions have been answered. And, you know if the meeting was successful if the questions have been answered in a compelling way. Finally, most importantly, if you can't identify questions to be answered when planning the meeting, that tells you that a meeting is likely not needed. Consider canceling the meeting if you don't have compelling questions and give all your would-be attendees the greatest gift in the world – recovered time.

Let me conclude with what happened with Pete after his boss put many of the ideas above into action. First, he found that his phone just did not "ding" as much. That is, meetings did not just occur out of a weekly habit, in fact they were cut in half. He still did receive information in a timely way. His boss sent out a recording of key news that he was able to listen to at convenient times (not when trying to address a customer problem). Over time, the meeting reminder "ding" was not associated with the same feelings of dread: the department meeting addressed key challenges and answered pressing questions. And, given that his boss occasionally brought snacks into the meeting, the "ding" was even accompanied by a bit of salivation.

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