# Excerpt taken from Introduction to Planning and Facilitating Effective Meetings, NOAA Coastal Services Center

**Planning a Productive Meeting or Workshop**

The following steps for planning a productive meeting do not necessarily have to be done in the order listed. In fact, facilitators often work through a few steps simultaneously, with one exception: defining the meeting purpose and desired objectives always comes first.

1. Define the meeting purpose and objectives
2. Create the participant list
3. Establish roles
4. Develop the agenda
5. Identify background materials
6. Plan the meeting space

**1. Define the Meeting Purpose and Objectives**
The first step should always be to ask, "Why are we having this meeting?" Typical reasons include planning or visioning, decision-making, team building, problem solving, evaluating or tracking a program or process, and information sharing.

Objectives are the expected, concrete outputs of a meeting. Objectives should be specific and measurable, such as a tangible product or a potentially measurable increase in knowledge or understanding on a specific subject. A tangible product might be a strategic plan or a funding priority list.

If the desired objective is an increase in knowledge or understanding, it is important for the desired objective to shed light on why this is needed. The desired objective should therefore include a "so that" statement. For example, "Increased understanding of customer needs is necessary so that new decision support tools can be developed to address climate change impacts."

**2. Create the Participant List**
For a meeting to be truly successful, the right people need to participate. During the planning phase, organizers should think about the people needed to finalize decisions and commitments. If the meeting requires that a decision be made, then the decision makers should be present. Meeting size is also important, since more than 20 participants can be difficult to manage if consensus is needed. If some people in the room are attending to observe, not participate, then their roles should be made clear to everyone before the meeting begins.

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**3. Establish Roles**
It is important to determine the roles people will play at the meeting. Roles can shift during a meeting, but assigning roles in advance will lead to a more organized and productive experience for all.

The following are common roles for a typical facilitated meeting.

**Facilitator**
The facilitator is the one who contributes structure and process to interactions so groups are able to function effectively. The facilitator moves the meeting along and keeps it focused. Ideally, a facilitator is neutral toward the outcome of the meeting. When complete neutrality is needed, or when dealing with contentious issues, the group will benefit by using a facilitator from outside the office or organization. Using a professional facilitator is strongly encouraged when the meeting will have 40 or more participants.

**Breakout Group Facilitator**
Breakout group facilitators guide the small discussion groups within a meeting.
For the people acting in this role, having some facilitation training or experience is helpful.

**Meeting Leader**
This is typically the person who convenes the meeting and serves as the "team captain," providing direction on the purpose and desired objectives of the meeting. Meeting leaders are often content experts for the issues being discussed.

**Facilitative Leaders**
While the use of a facilitator from outside the group is ideal for many situations, groups do not always have the resources to hire one. In these instances a group member or the meeting leader will serve as a facilitative leader. When serving in this dual role, the facilitative leader may or may not be neutral on the issue at hand but can still provide the effective facilitation practices needed.

**Meeting Planner**
A meeting planner organizes the logistics of the meeting, which involves contracting with the meeting location, arranging for catering, purchasing supplies, and so forth. While there is often overlap between this role and that of the meeting leader or facilitator, it can be extremely helpful, especially for larger meetings of 50 or more people, to designate a meeting planner.

**Recorder**
The recorder documents the process, deliberations, decisions, actions taken (or to be taken), and outcomes of a meeting, with varying degrees of detail as needed. The facilitator can also act as the recorder by writing main points of the discussion on a flip chart. For taking more detailed notes, however, it is necessary to have a separate person in the recorder role. A multi-day meeting or a meeting involving breakout groups can use many recorders.

**Participants**
The participants provide input, discussion, and feedback on the topics provided on the agenda. Participants can also provide feedback on the meeting design after the meeting has concluded.

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**4. Develop the Agenda**

The agenda provides the focusing framework for the meeting, puts tasks in a logical order and timeframe, and offers an outline for writing the summary report at the meeting's conclusion.

In the hands of a skilled facilitator, an agenda should be considered a guideline, not a law. Flexibility is essential to ensure that topics are resolved or tasks accomplished in the best manner possible. Facilitators should anticipate which items could be postponed and be prepared to table them until a more appropriate time.

There are typically two versions of an agenda. The participant agenda is the concise version participants receive before a meeting. At a minimum, the participant agenda includes the meeting title, location, start and end times, objectives, discussion topics, and information about how and when attendees will participate. The participant agenda is a clear and streamlined version of the detailed process agenda.

The process agenda has the additional information the facilitator and meeting leaders need to ensure that the meeting runs smoothly. Putting together the detailed process agenda helps the meeting leaders think through the details of the entire session. (Appendix A contains a template for a process agenda.) The letters "OPQRST" provide an easy way to remember the six components of a process agenda:

**O**rder of the facilitation processes (the agenda) and specific **O**bjective for each
**P**rocess techniques used to gather information throughout each process
(e.g., listing, brainstorming, grouping, prioritizing, sticky-dot voting, etc.)
**Q**uestion (starting question) and the explanation given to initiate each
facilitated process
**R**ecording method used to document the information as it is received during each
process (e.g., three-column matrix)
**S**upplies needed to perform each process (e.g., Post-it notes, dots)
**T**iming and estimated duration for each process

**Table 1: Questions to Consider When Designing an Agenda**

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| **Purpose and Desired Objectives** | • What is the primary purpose of this meeting? Can the meeting purpose be posed as a single phrase or sentence that will guide meeting planning?<br>• What are the desired objectives? What will the participants walk out of this meeting with (products or knowledge)?<br>• What decisions, if any, will be made at this meeting?<br>• How much can the group realistically expect to accomplish in the time allotted? |
| **Participants and Roles** | • Who are the group members (both the individuals and the organizations they represent)?<br>• What are the backgrounds of the individuals and organizations? What are the interpersonal dynamics? Do they know each other well?<br>• Who will serve as the meeting leader?<br>• Is the facilitator neutral and perceived as such? How important is neutrality? Are there any objectives or motivations that need to be addressed up front?<br>• Will there be other people helping (other leaders, facilitators, recorders, |

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| | etc.)?<br>• Will the appropriate people be present to finalize decisions or ensure that commitments can be made and the decisions carried out? |
| **Logistics** | • Where will the meeting be held?<br>• Who is the contact person for facility and logistical arrangements?<br>• Is this the most appropriate location? (Consider "territory" issues, convenience, comfort, accessibility.)<br>• What kind of space, furniture, wall space (if needed for posters or flip chart notes), lighting, and audiovisual equipment does the site have?<br>• What are the starting and ending times? Are there adequate breaks in the agenda?<br>• Have arrangements been made for food and beverages?<br>• Is any additional equipment needed (audiovisual, displays, computers, etc.)? |

**5. Identify Background Materials**
Background materials should provide participants with the information needed to meaningfully participate in the meeting. Ideally, participants should receive this information at least one week in advance.

Materials to include in a meeting background package:

- The participant agenda
- List of participants
- Any relevant information participants should read before the meeting— including topical information on issues that will be discussed

It is also a good practice to let participants know if materials will be available at the meeting or if they should bring their own copies of the digital materials that were provided before the meeting.

**6. Plan the Meeting Space**
An important part of meeting dynamics is the meeting environment. A convenient location for all participants is a plus. A neutral location should be considered for contentious discussions. If participants are traveling, send hotel information well in advance so everyone can stay in the same place.

How the room is set up should depend on how the content will be delivered and what type of interaction is expected between participants. Different setups will allow for different types of learning and participation. Common room setup options include the following.

**Conference Style**
Participants are seated on four sides of a table. This style is often used for small committee meetings or similar meetings of this type, where interaction between participants is anticipated and expected.

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**Hollow Square**
Tables are arranged in a square in which the center is open. Chairs are placed around the perimeter of the square. This setup is used for larger committee-type meetings where interaction among participants is important.

**U-Shape**
Rectangular tables are positioned to form a "U," with chairs placed around the outside. This setup is used for committee meetings as well, but is particularly helpful when using audiovisual equipment so that all participants can see a presentation when a screen is placed at the open part of the U.

**Theater Style**
Rows of chairs are placed next to each other facing the front of the room. A speaker or presenter is at the front of the room. This style maximizes the available seating and works well when the audience needs to take minimal notes and when participant interaction will be minimal.

**Classroom Style**
Rows of tables face the front of the room with two to four chairs at each. This setup is appropriate when there is a presentation at the front of the room and participants are expected to take notes. There usually will be some dialogue between the presenter and the audience. Participation between audience members will be limited.

**Round Tables**
Eight to ten chairs are arranged around small round tables. This style can be used for small breakout groups. Participants can converse with each other easily.