

**Powerfully Simple Meetings (PSM) System**  
**White Paper**



## **Introduction**

Great meetings rarely just happen by chance. They are designed and managed by following a specific protocol that produces consistently great results. With our Powerfully Simple Meeting System (PSM), we have distilled the essentials of the meeting process into a streamlined system that empowers our clients to take control of their meeting performance. PSM consists of three phases and each phase has multiple steps. Each step in the process can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few days depending on the circumstances of the meeting, and the bottom line is that each step must be completed in order to *consistently* manage outstanding business meetings.

### **Phase 1 - Planning**

*Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.*

—Winston Churchill

Great business meetings start with thoughtful planning. We are always dumbfounded when we see business executives “winging” important meetings. Either too busy, too confident or too careless to properly plan, they leave their colleagues’ time and productivity to chance. Can you imagine a professional football quarterback beginning a drive without a thoughtful plan? We all know that he would have little chance for success. The old axiom holds true in football as well as in business meetings; “if you’re failing to plan, then you’re planning to fail.” Yet for some strange reason many organizations tolerate this lackluster behavior.

On the other hand, there are conscientious managers who are adamant about the need to have an agenda for their meetings. These managers at least invest the time to think through the meeting topics, sequence and the allotted time to cover them. While this agenda-only approach is more effective than “winging it,” there are big holes that need to be filled in to ensure optimal performance that drives the results we desire. To that end, PSM divides planning into three components: meeting approach, stakeholders, and logistics.

#### **Step 1 - Meeting Approach**

Meeting approach begins with thinking through and documenting the meeting objectives. A common problem we see in meeting planning is the tendency to start planning with the creation of an agenda without first considering the objectives. That’s like getting in your car and beginning to drive without first determining where you really want to go.

Setting objectives is accomplished by considering two basic questions: What specifically am I seeking to accomplish during my meeting? What do I want others to focus on during

the meeting? Meeting objectives are comprised of statements that complete the following sentence: The objective of this meeting is to \_\_\_\_\_. Examples of these objectives include:

- Obtain final approval to proceed with the next design phase of the ABC project.
- Determine client needs for information technology (IT) services and establish criteria for us to demonstrate our capability to meet those needs.
- Communicate the current state of the XYZ implementation and obtain insight from attendees on resolving our two resource issues.
- Decide on a specific course of action for remediating our two key audit findings.

The importance of establishing meeting objectives cannot be understated. In order to be certain that everyone in the meeting is pointed toward the same target, you must define the target. The interesting thing about documenting meeting objectives is that the more difficult they are for you to define, the more important it is that you lay them out clearly. Keep in mind that one of our guiding principles is to bring clarity to an intrinsically ambiguous process. If the meeting manager is not clear on the objectives, then how can you expect anyone else to stay on target? Setting and communicating clear objectives is a critical first step toward that end.

Once you are crystal clear on the objectives for your meeting you are in a position to map out the best course for accomplishing those objectives (that is, your agenda). Your agenda represents the components and sequence of the meeting needed to achieve your stated objectives.

Each meeting must have a minimum of one agenda item that supports one or more meeting objectives. If an agenda item doesn't support an objective, then you have either an unnecessary agenda item or inadequate meeting objectives.

Each agenda item should consist of:

- Agenda Item Overview—a short description that makes it crystal clear what will be covered during this part of the meeting.
- Leaders—individual(s) responsible for leading the topic and guiding its results.
- Time—an estimated amount of time allocated to cover the agenda item.

The order of your agenda is an important component of the planning process. There are many factors that contribute to deciding the optimal order of an agenda (for example, priority of the topic relative to meeting objectives, decisions required as input to other agenda items, attendee meeting schedules). There are few absolute rules when it comes to

deciding the order of an agenda. The only absolute is that the meeting manager applies the necessary forethought to manage an efficient, productive meeting.

A key point is that the meeting agenda should be prepared and distributed to meeting attendees prior to the beginning of the meeting. Although lead-time on distribution of meeting agendas will vary among meetings and companies, twenty-four hours is a good rule of thumb.

The final component in developing the meeting approach relates to meeting materials. The key questions to be addressed include:

- What materials are required to support my meeting objectives and agenda?
- When do I need to distribute these materials to attendees?

Determining what materials are required to support your agenda and how they will be utilized is ultimately determined by the meeting manager and the agenda topic leaders.

We believe that familiarizing attendees with the meeting content as early as possible is generally in the best interest of driving results. However we recognize this is a decision best left to the realities of the organization and discretion of the meeting manager. Therefore we will refrain from over-prescribing a standard approach to content distribution.

## **Step 2 - Meeting Stakeholders**

Once your meeting content is planned, you are in a position to determine who to involve in your meeting. Failure to appropriately complete this step can result in a significant waste of time and resources. As mentioned in the previous chapter on guiding principles, the PSM system distinguishes between two types of stakeholders when organizing and executing your meetings:

*Attendees.* These are individuals whose contribution is essential for obtaining your meeting objectives.

*Subscribers.* These are individuals who have a vested interest in the content and results of the meeting, but whose attendance is not required to meet the objectives. Essentially subscribers function as consumers of meeting information and our focus is on keeping them informed. We see many instances in client organizations where nearly half of the individuals attending the meeting are really subscribers who don't actually need to be present. Subscriber time can be much better utilized by providing these individuals the information they need after the meeting.

As we progress through this book, you will soon see how the PSM system ensures that subscribers receive all the relevant information they need through a clear, concise

approach.

In many organizations we see the meeting invitation net cast so wide as to become overly inclusive. While inclusiveness in the right context is a great principle, when it comes to meetings it proves to be a colossal waste of time. For those people not contributing to meeting objectives, it amounts to time better spent elsewhere. For those who are contributing, it often bogs down the meeting process

On occasion, there are exceptions to the proper parameters of determining who should be invited to attend your meetings. It can be a matter of providing individuals with face-time, exposure or professional development by allowing them to listen to the discussion. Other times the decision to invite an otherwise unnecessary attendee is a matter of internal politics. While these isolated instances exist, the meeting manager should strive for a clean delineation between attendees and subscribers wherever possible.

There is one final category of meeting stakeholders that bears mentioning—a category we call “taggers.” Taggers are third-party individuals whose attendance is not required to meet the objectives of the meeting (that is, they are not attendees) and are not known to be consumers of the meeting information (that is, they are not known subscribers). However, during the course of a meeting, taggers are identified as potential stakeholders who might need to be informed of certain meeting content. An example of a tagger would be:

Attendee: *We can't move forward until the compliance report is reviewed by Legal.*

Meeting Leader: *Who's on point for getting that report to Legal for review?*

Attendee: *Oh, Janet Miller in Finance is supposed to be preparing and submitting that report*

Meeting Leader: *Does Janet know she's on point?*

Attendee: *I think so?*

Meeting Leader: *I'll make certain she knows.*

We will discuss how to manage taggers in chapter five. For now we need to at least be aware of this category of stakeholder who might need to know about a specific piece of information that surfaced in your meeting. These people might not need all of the output from the meeting, but they should at least be informed that there is an expectation that they are aware of, or they need to do something.

In the example above, the meeting leader simply needs to notify Janet Miller about the expectations that she is going to send the compliance report to Legal. If Janet is aware of this expectation, great. If she's not aware, then it's a good thing she was notified.

### Step 3 - Meeting Logistics

The final step in the planning process is completing the meeting logistics. Logistics work covers the basics of finalizing the meeting date, time, location and duration based on the previous planning work mentioned above. It might include secondary steps to outline expectations for attendance, delegates (that is, delegates are welcomed or they aren't), pre-work or pre-read expectations, material distribution, catering, equipment, post-meeting documentation and reporting.

PSM does not prescribe any hard rules about managing meeting logistics, other than that they need to be done, and done well! Even a well-planned meeting can be overshadowed if a conference room is too small, too hot, or doesn't contain the equipment (for example, a projector) needed to execute the meeting. Meeting leaders are responsible for ensuring every detail of the meeting is considered and covered.

### Phase 2 - Execution

*Out of intense complexities, intense simplicities emerge.*

—Winston Churchill

The meeting execution phase takes place from the time a meeting begins until the time a meeting is adjourned. Simply put, the execution phase is about implementing the planned meeting approach, leading and aligning stakeholders and capturing the value generated along the way. Effective execution relies on a focused leader who drives results throughout the entire meeting process.

We recently participated in a two-hour meeting with ten attendees assembled to address an emerging regulatory challenge. In this case the meeting leader did a good job planning this important meeting. He thoughtfully established the objectives for the meeting and creating an agenda to support those objectives. He also effectively managed all the meeting logistics and had the right attendees present and equipped to execute a productive meeting.

However problems began to emerge quickly as the team initiated its first agenda item. What soon became obvious was that the meeting leader believed his job was essentially done once he completed the planning process and got everyone in the room. It was as if he viewed his role more as a valet attendant than an actual chauffeur. He was too eager to give up the keys and allow the stakeholders to take the driver's seat.

Throughout the course of this meeting, the meeting leader retracted into a bystander role versus an actual leader. What he did not recognize was that he was responsible to *drive results throughout the entire meeting process*. This is a vital responsibility that does not

end after a meeting is planned and continues after the meeting has been completed and attendees have left the room.

In fairness to this meeting leader, he simply did not know his responsibilities. It's not as if he had ever been trained, or his boss clearly instructed him on the expectations of his meeting role. Unfortunately though, his lack of understanding led to several common mistakes that waste valuable time. A couple of key mistakes we witnessed include:

- Failure to redirect the discussion as the dialogue drifted off course to sidebar conversations and to bring everyone back to the agenda and objectives.
- Failure to ensure attendee alignment by actively clarifying discussion that was unclear or unsettled (particularly as it related to decisions and action commitments).
- Failure to effectively manage the agenda by alerting presenters who were going way over time (without a compelling need to do so). As a result there was not enough time to address other important agenda items.
- Failure to manage the important information that surfaced throughout the meeting. As important ideas were raised, decisions made and assignments surfaced, he neglected to capture this activity. In essence he left all these important points to reside in the short-term memories and notepads of the meeting attendees.
- Failure to clarify the key outcomes from the meeting and align the next steps going forward.

Not surprisingly this same team found itself in another meeting two weeks later rehashing much of the same information. The attendees wasted valuable time as they tried to recall what they discussed and decided on two weeks earlier. Each attendee maintained a slightly different recollection of “where we ended up.”

Does this scenario sound at all familiar? Unfortunately for most organizations this is a daily experience. However, utilizing PSM you can put an end to this madness.

The meeting execution phase is where the PSM system diverges significantly from the status quo of meeting management. From the time a meeting begins until the time it is adjourned, and everything in between—our focus is on driving our attendees through a process to efficiently attain our meeting objectives while capturing the essential value generated along the way. The execution phase of PSM has three components: initiation, body, and conclusion. Collectively these practices represent the structure for executing great meetings.

## Step 1 - Meeting Initiation

Meeting initiation is about providing the context for the meeting so that everyone is aligned and ready to drive toward the meeting objectives. In a standard one-hour meeting, at least the first three to five minutes should be allocated to defining the context of the meeting.

*Example: As you might know we had a security breach in our website over the weekend. So the focus of our time here today will be to brief you on the details of the breach and obtain your input on a plan to remedy the situation going forward. To that end, our agenda is to . . .*

Even if the agenda and objectives are properly distributed prior to the meeting, you should avoid the assumption that everyone in the room has the same understanding of purpose and approach. The aim here is straightforward: to align attendees on the goals and task at hand.

Meeting initiation is the time for you to set expectations about the protocols, guidelines or special requests of your meeting (for example, hold your questions until the end, avoid checking email if possible, please help us stay on time). It's also a great time to ask if attendees have any other expectations, objectives or special circumstances (for example, need to step out of the meeting or leave early). Examples of meeting initiation questions/comments include:

- Is there anything else that you think we need to cover during our time today?
- Do you have any questions about our objectives?
- Is everyone onboard with what we're looking to accomplish?
- Does anyone need to leave early?
- Our agenda is tight today so please allow me to keep everyone on task with our agenda and objectives.
- Please refrain from checking your email or text messages because we really need your total focus to accomplish our objectives and avoid scheduling another meeting.

The final component of initiation is to take attendance. This step is as simple as it gets, but it needs to be done and it's good that attendees know you're doing it. Remember we're working to develop an environment of accountability in our meeting space and knowing who's attending and who isn't is an important component of this work. Tracking attendance is a small but important link in the chain of accountability.



## Step 2 - Meeting Body

The body is the bulk of the meeting time and it is where the majority of the meeting value is created. As mentioned earlier, meeting leaders are responsible for leading the attendees through the agenda, toward the attainment of the meeting objectives and capturing all of the valuable insight that surfaces along the way. The body of the meeting involves two main functions for the meeting manager to lead: flow and capture.

### *Flow*

The meeting manager is responsible to ensure that the meeting flows from initiation and drives toward the meeting objectives. Along the way attendees might veer off course. Flow consists of pacing the meeting appropriately to ensure that the meeting objectives are honored. It does not mean that every agenda item ends exactly as scheduled, but it does mean that presenters are kept on topic so the meeting value is not hijacked. Essentially, flow involves keeping your meeting focused on the objectives and agenda and on time.

### *Managing Agenda Topics*

A key aspect of managing the meeting flow is effectively transitioning from one agenda item to the next and maintaining momentum in the process. Once you've initiated your meeting, the first place to start, obviously, is with your first agenda item. A general framework for transitioning to an agenda item and maintaining flow is to:

- (a) call out the agenda item
- (b) introduce the agenda leader
- (c) remind the topic leader (and other attendees) how much time is allocated to their topics

*Example: All right, so I'm going to pass it over to Bryan to kick us off. Bryan is going to provide us with an overview of the databases the hacker was able to access and how we believe he/she was successful. Bryan, we have you on the agenda for twenty minutes.*

Informing a stakeholder how much time he has is no guarantee that he will stay within budget, but it most certainly helps. It also sets an expectation that time matters, and that you will cut in if he consumes too much of it. In instances where you're working with an agenda leader who is a notorious time offender, consider a tactic of providing time warnings throughout their presentation.

*Example: I'm going to pass it over to Bryan to kick us off. Bryan is going to provide us with an overview of the databases the hacker was able to access and how we*

*believe he/she was successful. Bryan, we have you on the agenda for twenty minutes. I'll give you a five-minute warning to make sure we have time for questions.*

While this might seem like a subtle difference, it's proven to be effective in managing flow.

### *Managing Attendee Focus*

Another key aspect of meeting flow is to keep attendees engaged and focused on the meeting objectives. It is inevitable that someone in your meeting will introduce a discussion that has little or nothing to do with the objectives of the meeting.

Managing flow does not mean that you cut these people (and their comments) off. We all know that sometimes it's the boss who is a key offender for staying on track. What it does mean is that the meeting leader needs to be sensitive to dialogue that is off topic and professionally align everyone back to the task at hand.

We'll discuss how to do this in chapter six, "Meeting Skills and Tools," but for now it's important to understand that the meeting leader is responsible for flow and for continually directing attendees back to the scope of the meeting (i.e. the objectives and agenda).

### *Capture*

Beyond the meeting flow, the most important responsibility of the meeting manager is to make sure that the important information that surfaced in the meeting is captured. With PSM we refer to this information as "meeting assets"

The importance of capturing meeting assets is so critical that we've dedicated an entire chapter (five) to the rationale and mechanics for collecting this information. For now it's important to note it is the meeting manager's responsibility (or in some instances a designee) to capture this intellectual property that is generated throughout each agenda item discussion. Meeting assets represent the essential distinctions raised during the course of your meetings. These include items such as decisions, action item assignments, issues identified and other key ideas or concepts.

The PSM system relies on the capturing and communication of meeting assets as a cornerstone strategy for mitigating each of the five meeting killers raised in chapter two.

Keep in mind that the meeting manager does not own all the meeting assets raised during the course of a meeting, but he or she does maintain the responsibility to ensure they are captured so that they can be clarified and shared with key stakeholders and leveraged in the future.

### **Step 3 - Meeting Conclusion**

The final step in the body of the meeting execution phase is to bring the meeting to conclusion. A common tendency of meeting managers is to allow meetings to run until the end of the allocated time without leaving time for necessary summary and closure. As a result, meetings frequently run over or end abruptly as attendees hustle off to other obligations.

For a standard one-hour meeting a meeting manager should begin concluding with approximately five to ten minutes left in the meeting. This is important for several reasons:

1. It provides time to communicate and clarify meeting assets (when needed) and discuss next steps.
2. It minimizes the need for follow-up meetings if you leave enough time to complete necessary discussion or decision.
3. It guards against “backloading” where attendees introduce a last-minute curveball topic at the end of a meeting with no time to discuss.

Concluding the meeting is as simple as reviewing the key assets captured throughout the meeting and confirming next steps and expectations.

Remember that a key focus of PSM is to reinforce clarity and accountability of meeting content. You cannot assume that all meeting attendees heard the same things and came to the same conclusions. It is better to assume that everyone in the meeting did not hear the same things and allow time for a brief review and any necessary clarifications.

It is also important to keep in mind that it is common to uncover disagreement when recapping meeting assets and concluding a meeting. This might require you to reopen some of the discussion to ensure attendees are aligned. This is actually a good thing! It’s better to surface the disagreement while everyone is still assembled, than having to deal with it later. The point of concluding the meeting appropriately is to ensure that attendees are aligned as they exit the meeting. However even the most skilled meeting manager cannot guarantee that everyone gets completely aligned, and remains aligned. Which brings us to the next phase of meeting execution—reporting.

### Phase 3 - Reporting

*A crank is someone with a new idea—until it catches on.*

—Mark Twain

We recently participated in a half-day collaborative meeting with the CEO and her senior team at a multibillion-dollar, international corporation. The objective of the session was to obtain senior executive alignment and vital input into the company's highest priority business initiative.

Throughout the four-hour meeting many valuable distinctions were made. Decisions on how to move the business forward, commitments to take action by members of the senior team, worthy ideas about the evolution of the business and significant issues with the current operating structure that were inhibiting progress.

Throughout the discussion, meeting assets were identified and captured. At times we would interject to clarify comments or decisions and other times the outcome was self-evident. Shortly after the meeting adjourned, we distributed a meeting summary report (that is, a synopsis of the key decisions, ideas, action commitments and identified issues to the members of the team.) We then asked the executive team to review and comment to be sure that we had a common understanding of the important meeting points.

Soon after the meeting we received a thank-you email from the chief operating officer (COO) of this organization noting:

*Thank you for the clear and concise follow up. I've been around for a while and this is the first time we've circulated our decisions and commitments. Much needed and appreciated.*

We simply captured the essential elements (that is, key points, decisions, commitments) of their meeting discussion and sent it back to them in a timely manner. However the impact to the clarity of their outcomes and the associated accountability was significant and unprecedented.

The reporting phase of PSM is straightforward, yet critical to ensuring clarity, accountability and follow-through. In our experience we've observed meeting output taking one of two main forms: meeting minutes or nothing, with the vast majority of meeting output being nothing. It's hard to fathom how so many organizations spend so much time in critical collaborative meetings without documented meeting output.

While producing meeting minutes is typically better than doing nothing, minutes tend to be too bulky and fail to distinguish important information from superfluous content. Readers are left to fend for themselves to sift the meeting wheat from the chaff. This

approach does little to improve the clarity and accountability we desperately need in the meeting process. To make matters worse, meeting minutes take a lot of time to prepare and are rarely ever read.

The PSM results phase culminates with the distribution of a meeting summary report that captures the most important meeting assets and a few pieces of other important information.

Key principles for the meeting results phase include preparing and distributing a meeting summary report that includes the following components.

- Meeting Assets—Document all the meeting assets captured and the relevant details (description, dates, owner, et cetera).
- Meeting Objective Review —Confirm whether the meeting objective was accomplished.
- Agenda Items Covered—Identify the agenda items that were completed and those that were not completed, noting the leader of each agenda item.
- Meeting Attendees—Document who attended and who didn't.
- Meeting Logistics—Date, time, duration, (for reference purposes).
- Other Messages—Any additional messages that should be shared with the team related to the meeting (for example, next meeting date, thank you, et cetera).

We recommend that the meeting leader distribute the meeting summary report within forty-eight hours after the meeting occurred (within twenty-four hours is ideal). Quick turnaround is necessary to reinforce accountability and obtain feedback while the content is fresh in attendees' minds. This also demonstrates the importance of the meeting and attendee time by distributing the summary in a timely manner. Ultimately, prompt distribution ensures that everyone is on the same page and significantly reduces the possibility of misalignment.

Stakeholders should be asked to review the meeting summary report and comment/edit as needed. This provides attendees an opportunity to comment and adds to their ownership of the meeting outcomes. It also gives attendees an opportunity to reconfirm the key points of the meeting before it is memorialized.

Once any feedback is received, the last step is to distribute the final version of the meeting summary report to the stakeholders and subscribers. This ensures that subscribers have the information they need to perform their role and provides a clean starting point for your next meeting.

Throughout the reporting process and the entire PSM system, the cornerstone of effectiveness rests with the identification, capture and communication of meeting assets—a topic we'll tackle next.