

## Mindful meetings

A guide for Action for Children



### Introduction

A lot of time can be spent in meetings. These can be between professionals in-house or with other organisations, and with the children and families that we work with.

We've probably all experienced meetings where we feel that not much was achieved, or where there was tension or even conflict.

The purpose of this guidance is to create the basis for better meetings, ones that are effective and positive. This guidance combines general good working practices with an approach informed by mindfulness.

These notes expand the information in the main video.

Supporting information includes:

- Core meeting protocols - which could be included with any meeting agenda
- Guidance and an exercise on listening skills
- Notes about kindness at work
- A video and notes on a quick de-stress technique
- Notes on quick ways to centre and stay grounded.

### Planning

Whilst many of us may be good at planning and running meetings, others may be newer to it, so it's best to cover all the fundamentals here.

- A. Be clear about purpose and participants:
  - a. What needs to be discussed and what decisions need to be made at this meeting, and why?
  - b. How important is it to meet at all? Is there another way to communicate or interact effectively?
  - c. Does the meeting need to be face-to-face, or would a conference or video call suffice?
  - d. Who really needs to be there? Is it okay to send someone else or for one person's views to be represented by another person?
  - e. Note that meetings with more than about 7 people can be much less effective.
  - f. Is it clear who leads or chairs the meeting, and who will take minutes?

# Mindful Work

- B. Setting the agenda:
  - a. The Chair should to set the agenda a few days in advance (not longer), with location, time to start and finish. Check if other participants have other suggestions.
  - b. The agenda should define the purpose and key subjects that need to be discussed.
  - c. It could include the mindful meetings protocols.
- C. Do we have what we need?
  - a. What materials need to be brought to the meeting, eg reports, data, as a key reference?
  - b. If a report for example is lengthy, the person bringing it should summarise it, for other people's benefit, and ideally circulate in advance.
- D. Other positives to cultivate – meetings can, and should:
  - a. Strengthen team bonds and purpose, and help everyone move forward as a group.
  - b. Feel inclusive and welcoming of new members and new views.
  - c. Bring different views together – so challenge is useful.
  - d. Re-motivate individuals.
  - e. Identify where help is needed.
- E. Be creative – consider:
  - a. Holding the meeting outside (a great conflict breaker).
  - b. Holding the meeting while walking, or standing up (small meetings).
  - c. Starting with a fun event, ice breaker, or stimulating talk or video.
  - d. Allow person-to-person, human interactions first.
- F. Consider a structure such as:
  - 1) where are we now?
  - 2) where do we want to be?
  - 3) how do we get there?

## Principles and values

- A. Keep uppermost in mind, AFC organisational purpose and values:

### **Our ambition**

Any child who needs help gets help.

### **How we deliver**

Do what's right for children. Do what's needed. Do what works.

### **Our values**

We're straightforward, honest and analytical.

We partner, we collaborate and we share.

We value evidence and expertise.

We find strengths, we build on positives.

We don't judge, we don't belittle, we get on with it.

We think hard, then do, what's right for children.

*(from AFC's statement on Ambition and Values)*

# Mindful Work

- B. Also be clear about your personal values:
  - a. What matters most to you?
  - b. Why did you take on this role, and what difference do you hope to make?
  - c. Are you acting out your values – and if not, how are you addressing any barriers?
  - d. Have you done a values exercise? (see notes)

## Emotional preparation

- A. It's not personal:
  - a. Sometimes being in a meeting can be daunting, especially if you're not very confident or don't have all the answers. But put that aside, the meeting is not about you, it's about the outcome – your contribution is what matters.
  - b. Your views and your ideas matter, or you would not have been invited.
  - c. If other people behave badly, decide that you will not engage with it, and that you will just get on with the task in hand.
- B. Calm yourself:
  - a. Spend a short while, say one minute or even 10 seconds, to calm yourself and feel more grounded before you enter the room (see related guidance).
- C. Be prepared:
  - a. Prepare any important materials well in advance.
  - b. Make bullet point notes of the things you need to get across.
  - c. Let other people know you will not be available – and leave email and phone messages if necessary.

## Managing the meeting

- A. Start the meeting by asking everyone to respect the **mindful meeting protocols or code**, for example:
  - a. 'We will **focus** on the task in hand.'
  - b. 'We will keep organisational and personal **values** in mind.'
  - c. 'We will **listen** fully to each other and not interrupt.'
  - d. 'We will **respect** each other's views and contribution.'
  - e. 'We will interact with each other with **kindness**.'

These protocols could be included with every agenda.

- B. Where it feels appropriate, start with a pre-meeting:
  - a. When everyone has settled, invite everyone to review these protocols and to agree to them.
  - b. Consider starting the meeting with 30 seconds silence, inviting everyone to take some deep breaths and to feel grounded.

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- c. Check in with people on a personal level (acknowledge that some people may be stressed, tired or worried).
- C. Look for the positives:
  - a. Smile.
  - b. If the meeting is not enjoyable, it may allow tension and conflict to arise.
  - c. Start with something positive or some good news – and keep looking for positive news.
  - d. Stay grounded by tuning-in to your breathing or body, and letting tension go with each out-breath
- D. Dealing with conflict:
  - a. The Chair should make sure that all voices are heard equally. He/she should request contributions, but politely curtail them if necessary.
  - b. Challenge negativity by asking for the protagonist to suggest a solution.
  - c. Where conflict arises, see it as an expression of strong views, not as a personal attack.
  - d. Ask the protagonists to repeat the other person's views, so that they show they have clearly understood each other.
  - e. Be open and let others know the effect it has on you. Your gut feeling is valid.
  - f. Be empathetic – if someone is behaving badly they may have other reasons for this.
- E. Chairing the meeting.
  - a. The Chair should talk less and listen more intently than anyone else. The key is to ask the right questions.
  - b. The Chair should interpret and clarify; move the discussion forward; and bring it to a resolution that everyone understands and accepts.
  - c. The Chair is the servant of the meeting, as well as the master.
  - d. Encourage suggestions and ideas even if they appear unworkable at first, rather than opinions or judgements.
- F. Clarifying actions
  - a. Meetings are for decisions, not for general chat.
  - b. Try to find consensus; and where it cannot be found make a plan to resolve the issues arising.
  - c. Always put a clear action against a decision – who will do what, when?
  - d. Is it reasonable and achievable? Are other actions required first?
  - e. Who will follow up on the actions?
- G. Concluding the meeting
  - a. The Chair should thank everyone for their contribution.
  - b. The Chair should review and summarise all decisions and actions.
  - c. Clarify if and when a follow-up meeting is needed.

# Mindful Work

## Post-meeting actions

- A. Review actions
  - a. Review what you offered to do, and how you will fit it in.
  - b. If you cannot complete the task, or do it on time, let the Chair know why, or what help you need.
- B. Catching up and settling down
  - a. Meetings take time out of the normal working day, so there can be a backlog when you return to the desk. Take the time to list and prioritise all the tasks, make a plan, and let others know if something cannot be done.
  - b. Take a break before moving on to normal tasks, maybe just for 10 seconds, to pause and breathe, get perspective, and re-charge.

## Meetings with children and families

Many of the principles and procedures described above, also apply to meetings with service users. However, there are some other significant considerations to keep in mind, as outlined below.

### **Acknowledge that you are likely to meet with stress, be prepared emotionally, and protect yourself**

Find ways to come in to the meeting feeling grounded and protected. You can help a lot in stressful situations by being like the still point in the middle of the storm.

### **You're there to help, as best you can, but you cannot solve everything**

Just being there in support, and listening with selfless attention, is a great gift to people in difficulty. Not having all the answers or solutions is okay.

### **You are neutral**

Try to be non-judgemental even if you see behaviours alien to your own values.

### **Be compassionate rather than empathetic**

Too much empathy can lead to burn out, whereas compassion is a more sustainable approach, as it means taking appropriate action – and seeing that you've made some difference, however small the action. So any action you promise must be realistic and achievable.

### **Taking caring of yourself is the best way to serve others**

When you're with people, keep checking-in to your own emotional state. Allow yourself to pause, take some deep breaths, and feel your feet on the ground. Spending time to resource yourself is not just good for you, it also means that you can serve others better.