



## **The Agenda...Your Guide to Organize, Engage, Discover, and Actively Listen**

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In the early part of my career, I served as an account executive with Johnson & Higgins. Founded in 1845, it was the largest and most admired privately held insurance broker in the world before being acquired by Marsh USA in 1997. While the J&H model boasted an array of systems, processes, and resources within its customer-centric platform, the agenda was front and center.

It was expected that one came prepared with a formal agenda to each and every meeting – internal and external. Why? Because this powerful tool would determine the form, structure, and desired outcome of interactions with clients, prospects, staff, carriers, and centers of influence.

In simple terms, the agenda represents a schedule or list of items to be attended to in a meeting. The agenda communicates to the attendees that you are professional and have an orderly plan to accomplish an objective. The agenda offers precision and flow...a guide for meetings, rather than tangled viewpoints, misunderstood norms, and a finish line that is nowhere to be seen. It is a statement that you are organized and serious about your game. And it creates a lasting positive impression.

## The Case Study of Robert and Ralph

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a gifted industry professional who is specializing in food processing. Robert, a 39-year-old producer, joined a reputable agency just two years ago after serving as the safety director for a national food distributor. He is credible, bright, energetic, diagnostic, and process-oriented. Below is his email:

*Scott,*

*I desperately need your help! Since joining my agency two years ago, I have been cultivating a relationship with the leadership team of the largest food processor in my region. After numerous emails and phone calls, the organization invited me in to present for 30 minutes with an additional 30 minutes for Q&A.*

*Because of my background as a safety director for a large food distributor, I felt capable and confident to meet with the firm's CEO, CFO, QA director, and HR manager. That being said, Ralph (my agency principal with 30-plus years' experience) insisted that he accompany me in the meeting. He stated that the agency needed another voice, and his role as the founder of the firm would make a statement. I agreed.*

*Prior to the meeting, I was able to determine that the prospect had some real issues. Its workers' compensation experience modification factor had risen by 20%, and it had two recent OSHA violations. I was also able to learn that the firm had downsized a division due to a product recall. As I had previous experience with all these issues, I was the perfect man for the job.*

*On the way to the meeting, Ralph suggested that he open the dialogue with a brief history of the firm as well as a few comments about the agency's unique capabilities. I reluctantly agreed. After introductions in the CEO's beautiful executive conference area, we were asked to use the allocated 30 minutes to convey our distinguished value proposition. Ralph immediately took charge. And it was obvious that it was "his" meeting, not mine. Well past the 30 minutes, he was still going with his extended capabilities' pitch – showing no knowledge of, or concern for, the issues facing the prospect. While I attempted to jump in to get the session on track, it was to no avail. Although well-intentioned, Ralph just showed up and threw up. I watched the body language of the CEO, CFO, QA director, and HR manager. They were disengaged and uncomfortable. Eventually, after an hour of monologue, they pretty much just asked us to leave.*

*Later that day, I emailed the prospect's leadership team to thank them for their time. It has now been a full week, and there has been no response. Please offer a strategy to reposition myself. Thanks!*

Upon receiving the email from Robert, my heart went out to him as this good opportunity was crushed because Ralph broke the cardinal rule of an effective meeting – he had no agenda.

## Six Reasons to Create Formal Meeting Agendas

Many well-intentioned industry professionals fundamentally misunderstand what makes a good meeting and how to run one. They get the nuts and bolts right, but do not comprehend how best to lead, engage, discover, and actively listen. A structured meeting with preset discussion topics is likely to have more direction and be more productive. On the other hand, meetings without direction often stray off-topic, create disengagement, and lead to few tangible results.

In this article, we will focus on six reasons to create formal agendas for first prospect meetings:

### 1. Preparation

A first meeting prospect agenda requires thought and preparation as your goal is to impress and engage the prospect. In the initial meeting, you must build rapport, fact-find, and explore pain points so you may craft solutions. An agenda requires you to put your strategy map on paper prior to the meeting.

### 2. Positive First Impression

A first impression is a strong effect product on one's intellect, feelings or conscience. It is the mark you make the first moment of interacting with someone. And this impression never completely fades. That being said, the agenda serves as a signal to the prospect that you are organized, systematic, thoughtful, and have a keen interest in listening about them.

Consider sharing the agenda in advance of the meeting. This action demonstrates your professionalism, make the other person know that you respect their time, and communicate what is expected of them in the session. It is also helpful as the prospect may need to research an issue and/or gather information prior to the meeting.

### 3. Self-Confidence

To be successful in the business of insurance and risk management, you must be confident. Confident in your approach. Confident in your services and solutions. Confident in your communication skills. Confident in articulating your value proposition. And confident in the face of rejection. Highly confident people feel in control. They have the ability to shut out distractions, establish priorities, make sound judgements, create strategies, and carry them out effectively.

Without an agenda, it is easy to lose confidence in your ability to control the outcome of your actions.

#### 4. Ensure Key Topics will be Covered

Have you been in a meeting where one or more of the participants strayed off-track? I am sure you have. For that reason, your agenda should list in order of priority the issues to be discussed. By doing so, you are focused on capturing what really matters. In a picture-perfect first prospect meeting, it should be your goal to fill three buckets. Actively listen to understand the:

- Strengths of the Organization,
- Opportunities for Organizational Growth and Prosperity,
- and Risk Issues that Keep the Prospect up at Night

Although you want your value proposition to be front and center, it will be your discovery tactics that will enhance your consultative, solutions-based approach.

#### 5. Encourage Participation

With a clear outline of what is going to be discussed, attendees will recognize the value of their participation. Your constructed agenda will leave ample time for active listening. Active listening represents a way of reflecting back what the other person has expressed to let him or her know that you are attentive and confirm your understanding of the issue(s) at hand. In simplistic terms, it is a restatement of the other person's communication. Active listening establishes a meaningful connection between you and the prospect. And it deepens relationships.

Your true value to the prospect is a solutions-based approach to risk and risk management. Active listening positions you to clearly understand these problems. And it is a wonderful strategy to engage so you may drive emotion.

#### 6. Summary and Action Plan

The final piece of your agenda should be a call to action, so you may demonstrate your unique value in the marketplace. The agenda will position you to spell out the objective(s) and steps to position you for client acquisition.

### Components of an Effective First Prospect Meeting Agenda

Please consider the following components to an effective agenda. They include:

- I. Introduction and rapport-building
- II. Review of agenda to confirm that it is on target (even if it was sent out in advance)
- III. Ask prospect to fill three buckets:
  - Bucket one – Strengths of the business
  - Bucket two – Opportunities for growth and prosperity
  - Bucket three – Risk issues. What keeps the prospect awake at night?

- IV. Your value proposition and unique capabilities. Where possible, connect risk issues (bucket three) to your value proposition.
- V. Gain buy-in. Ask, how would the prospect “feel” if the risk issue(s) was solved?
- VI. Next step. Action plan.

The agenda...a statement that demonstrates your ability to organize, engage, discover, and actively listen.

#### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* “Entrepreneur of the Year” award as well as one of the “25 Most Innovative Agents in America.” Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.