Make Your Minutes Count

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Distribute minutes for project team meetings to ensure the scope is recorded and communicated. Use the format outlined here to get all the benefits of minutes without the drawbacks.

Our ideal selves keep our desks organized, meet or exceed deadlines, and answer every email. In the real world, however, few of us consistently and simultaneously achieve these goals. Taking and distributing meeting minutes is one such goal that often falls by the wayside. Perhaps it is unrealistic to compile minutes for every meeting on your calendar, but you should consider taking and distributing minutes for any project team meeting. This article provides a format for meeting minutes that eliminates the shortcomings and increases the benefits of minutes.

Why use minutes?

Minutes are important to project team meetings because the project scope is often generated during these discussions, and the best way to document it is through minutes. Projects of all sizes can benefit from minutes, but they are especially important for large projects — some large-project team meetings generate eight or nine pages of minutes. When a scope is that complicated, documentation is imperative.

The project manager needs to make sure the scope is complete, documented, and communicated, which may involve meeting with appropriate experts. The scope informs your overall responsibility, which is to ensure that the project achieves the intended goal and that it is completed correctly, on time, and under budget. Accurate minutes can help you accomplish these goals.

I was the project manager responsible for a large project involving the design and construction of a new process building that included new controls, raw material handling equipment, two large roll dryers, packaging equipment, and support equipment. Although this was a high-profile assignment, I received it verbally from my manager. He said that he wanted to add a second roll dryer and build a new facility to take advantage of lessons learned about the process.

I formalized the verbal directive by forming a project team and scheduling meetings to develop the scope. Over the course of the many project team meetings, the scope changed dramatically. Originally, the new building was to be placed on the east side of the existing packaging warehouse and an existing railroad spur. That would have required the finished product to be conveyed about 150 ft to the packaging warehouse, where it would be packed by new equipment, and the new process building would have needed a new control room. The final scope located the new process building just a few feet west of the packaging warehouse, which eliminated the long transfer line and allowed the packaging warehouse's control room to control the new process building.

Clearly documenting these changes and the rest of the scope was imperative. The scope lays the foundation of a project, and it is vital that it be documented and communicated. Inherent in the scope of a project is its limits. For example, in this project, we had to decide whether we wanted to leave room for another roll dryer in a future expansion and determine minimum and maximum processing rates. Minutes must detail these limits, which, when combined with the rest of the scope, should be incorporated into drawings and other project documents.

Meeting minutes, however, do have shortcomings. You might take minutes and distribute them, only to have them go unread. In addition, projects typically require many project team meetings, and it may be difficult to understand the entire scope when it is distributed across various documents. Minutes may also have inconsistencies because project teams frequently change their minds. What was agreed to in one meeting may differ from what was agreed to in another.

Although minutes have problems, they also offer many benefits. In addition to documenting the project scope, minutes can be used to ensure that assignments are completed. Even assignments of people not on the project team or not attending the meetings can be tracked. For example, a high-ranking manager not on the team who committed to an assignment verbally can be held accountable through minutes.

Project managers must often influence colleagues they do not manage; without minutes, it can be difficult to ensure assignments are completed on time. Minutes can be used as a tool to influence without authority. They can even be used to build relationships. Used correctly, minutes can increase a project's chances of success.

Minutes Template

To: Venture Manager, Pertinent Dept. Heads, Project Team Members, Other Stakeholders

From: Project Manager

Date: Nov. 22, 2017

Subject: Powder Processing Team Meeting Minutes

Attendance

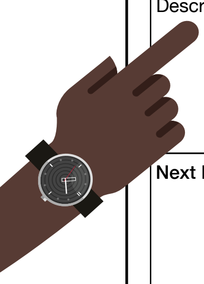
Minutes

- All agreed the last minutes were correct.
- The new process building will be located west of the packaging warehouse.
- Roll dryers must be removable for maintenance.
- Sanitary fittings must be used.

Minutes from Past Meetings

- The new process building will be located east of the packaging warehouse.
- The existing roll dryer will be transferred to the new process.
- The existing process building will be demolished.

Action Items / Assignments
Description, Responsible Party, Due Date, Status



Next Meeting's Agenda   Date:__________ Time:______
Location:__________________

Notes

Note 1: A highlighted item in the Minutes section signifies a change from something agreed to in the past. (See also highlights in Minutes from Past Meetings.)

Note 2: No response to the minutes by the next project team meeting is considered agreement with the minutes.

Ensure minutes are read

Minutes are useless if no one reads them. You can increase the likelihood that the minutes you distribute are read by calling or visiting meeting attendees. Ask if they have any questions about the minutes or highlight important points. When you start doing this, people will be more likely to read the minutes in anticipation of your call or visit. I have found that once people start to read minutes, they see their value and look forward to discussing them. Most engineers enjoy following a project unfold and finding ways to contribute.

Although you should plan to check in, always state that no response to meeting minutes indicates agreement, such as Note 2 in the Minutes Template on the left. This type of note helps to discourage last-minute changes, as well as impart a sense of discipline to stakeholders. Your in-person check-in will help to gather any late comments, especially those from high-ranking managers.

In one project that I managed, for instance, I held ten project team meetings before moving on to detailed design, and distributed minutes after every meeting. After the design contract was issued and the design started, I received a call from the head of process engineering. Although he was apologetic for being too busy to read the minutes in time, he had some serious issues with the design. His comments included big changes to the scope, which delayed the project and cost money.

Personal checks to gather meeting minute comments are also your opportunity to use minutes to build relationships and your network. After discussing the minutes, take some time to get to know your fellow project team members. Do not let the relationship stop after the project is complete. Look for opportunities to connect and chat about the installation, any current projects, or even a favorite sports team. With each project, your network will grow.

Close action items

Minutes can ensure that assignments get done. In your minutes, list the action item, as well as its due date, status (*i.e.,* incomplete or complete), and owner. The owners or responsible parties must commit to the action item and its details. You will have no doubt that the owners are aware of their responsibilities by communicating it through minutes.

By distributing minutes, responsibilities will be communicated to some of the most important people in an organization. This helps to get the proper resources allocated to close items, as well as hold owners accountable.

Owners of action items not on the project team or not attending project meetings can also be held responsible through minutes. During a project meeting, mention the commitment, even if it was made in passing, and incorporate it into the meeting minutes. When distributing the minutes, be sure to copy any individuals mentioned.

Track changes

Keeping track of multiple, sometimes contradictory, minutes can be a problem. Use the format illustrated by the Minutes Template to compile a single, evolving set of minutes that captures all project team meeting events. Meeting attendees and other stakeholders only need the latest version to be up-to-date. Any inconsistencies between versions are highlighted to reduce confusion.

This summary format allows individuals to read the latest minutes and see everything that has been accomplished and agreed to by the project team at all the meetings. Having all of the information in one document keeps everyone up-to-date without needing to examine multiple files.

This format also eliminates contradictions between minutes of different meetings, creating a single coherent picture of the project and status. When an item changes from one meeting to the next, highlight the item in the Minutes from Past Meetings section and also in the Minutes section. In the next version, remove the highlighting and move the information from the previous Minutes section to the Minutes from Past Meetings section. At this point, take out any incorrect statements and eliminate any duplicates.

This method keeps minutes as concise as possible and clearly indicates any contradictions. Maintaining a log of changes for as long as it is useful lets everyone know of the changes and that they have been agreed to. After the final

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project team meeting minutes are distributed and all parties have verified the information, send a final set of minutes that summarizes everything that has been agreed to and delete the Minutes from Past Meetings section.

Head off complaints

Send the final minutes to everyone on your project team, project stakeholders, other interested parties, and anyone who is notorious for making changes. Communicating the project scope through minutes as it is being developed can head off complaints before they grow to be real problems that affect timelines or deliverables. It is much easier to incorporate a change during the preliminary design stages than out in the field. Capturing changes at this stage can help keep the project on budget and schedule.

Use the attendance lists on the minutes when you need to argue against unreasonable change requests or criticisms by project team members who do not attend meetings. It is easy to point to lack of attendance as a reason for not incorporating a change. The attendance list is also a useful tool for persuading members to show up to the meetings.

As the first order of business at each project team meeting, verify that the latest minutes are correct. If not, redline the minutes and ask everyone to sign the document. It is extremely important that the information captured in minutes is considered reliable. Then, simply list the items that the team has agreed to.

Looking ahead

What is not in the minutes is just as important as what is. Include all major points in minutes, but do not list the back and forth that took place to come to a conclusion. Take notes during the meeting to create a draft. At the end of the meeting, summarize any major points aloud to the team. Ask the team to verify that you have captured all the major points and list those you may have missed. CEP

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