Setting up for a Strategy Development Meeting

It constantly surprises me how badly hotels and other venues design and prepare meeting rooms. Don't rely on their judgment to set things up for you. After fighting against too many bad meeting rooms, I finally recognized how much I could improve the meeting by being more specific and demanding about the room and the way it was set-up.

It's generally recommended that the facilitator go and see the room that's going to be used ahead of time. In practice however, this is not always possible. In my own case, I'm often working overseas or a long way from home base, so I don't see the room until the night before the meeting at the earliest. As a result, I developed a set of guidelines to send to clients ahead of time, (and that clients could send to the venue), in order to improve the chances of getting a well-prepared room. Here they are - I hope they help.

Room Space

The main meeting room should be large enough to accommodate comfortably whatever number of people you expect to attend the meeting along with all their stuff (projectors, briefcases, luggage etc.) I have had only one occasion where the room was too large (the ballroom for a meeting of about a dozen people). It is much more likely that the room will be too small. If you need a rough calculation for the required size, you should aim for a minimum of 30 sq.ft. and preferably closer to 50 sq. ft per person. In other words, for 10 people you need somewhere between 300 and 500 square feet or a room measuring from 15' by 20' to 25' by 20' (4.5m x 6.0m to 7.6m x 6.0m).

Seating Arrangement

You need so much space per person because the best seating arrangement for a planning type meeting is a horseshoe, something like the drawing below. This is not the most efficient use of the space, but it's the best way to promote good discussion among the group.

Projector
Table

Screen
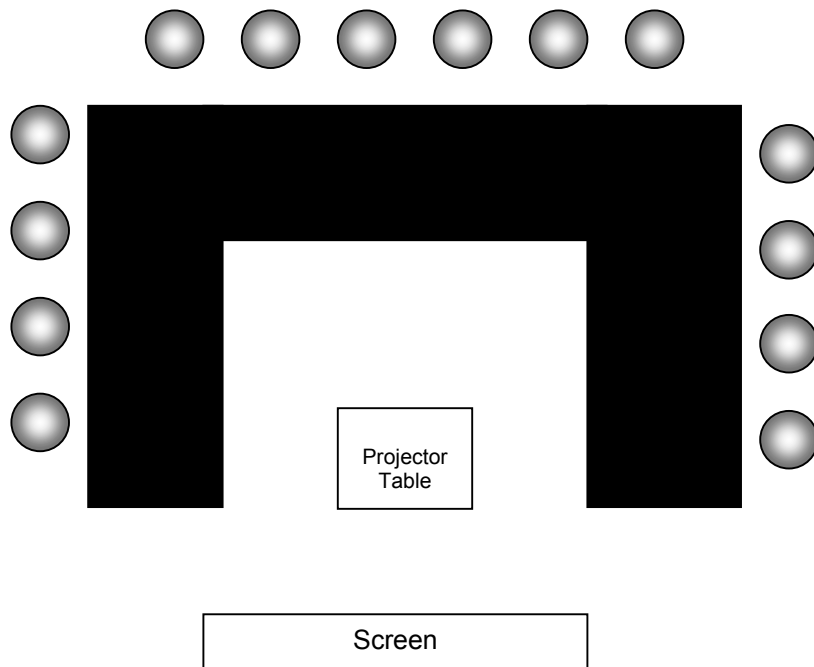
In most meetings, there are tables (about 0.5-1metre wide is best) and comfortable office chairs. However, I have worked successfully using about a dozen two-seater sofas, (without tables), organized in a horseshoe.

The choice of having tables or not depends on what the meeting is for. If the tables aren't going to be used for writing or other materials, then you can dispense with them. Many people get very uncomfortable as soon as the tables have gone and this can lead to a very different kind of discussion. So you need to weigh the effect of removing them. (As a side note, if you do decide to remove the tables, have the group members do it themselves. Groups seem to become more flexible and imaginative about seating arrangements if they're in charge of the moving.)

In any event, in the arrangement of chairs and tables, don't be afraid to improvise. Your guide should be how different arrangements make the room feel. You will know immediately if something is wrong.

Light & Climate

The two most important attributes of the room, apart from its size, are its light and climate controls. The room should preferably have natural light. If the meeting is to last 2-4 days, any lack of natural light takes its toll on the group's energy. If there is no natural light, try to incorporate getting out of the room into the meeting design. If there is natural light, try to make sure there is no part of the day when sunlight makes part of the room unusable, or if it does, that the curtains work!

Artificial lighting (if possible not fluorescent) should be easily adjustable. This is so that overheads and slides will be visible, and that discussion can start quickly in full light once the presentation is over.

Climate controls should be easily adjustable by the meeting members themselves (not a technician called by the front desk). Fans should be as quiet as possible. An otherwise great room can be rendered useless by a climate system that makes the room either too hot or too cold, or by a noisy fan that prevents one end of the room hearing the other.

On the subject of the electrical system, there should be adequate power outlets for projectors, laptops etc.

Walls & Flipcharts

Hotels in particular go to great lengths to decorate their walls with nice wallpaper and attractive artwork. This is a pain. I expect to cover all the wall surfaces with flipcharts over the course of a meeting. It is important that these are visible to the entire group not only when they are first created, but a day or so later, so that each individual can jog their own memory of the work that has been done.

Make sure you have a viable way to fix flipcharts to the walls (tape, pins, adhesive putty like BluTack) without damaging them. And, if it's possible, take the prints and paintings down to create more space.

Security

Since I prefer to leave flipcharts up for the whole meeting no matter when they were written, it is important that the room be secure for the duration of the meeting. Make sure you can lock the room and that the cleaning staff is instructed to leave everything the way it is. I have had to fish coffee-stained flipcharts out of trash bags because an overzealous cleaning crew went through the room and, strangely, didn't see the value of the charts.

A secure room also means that laptops and briefcases can be left without worry during breakout sessions.

Break out rooms

In addition to the main room, there should be either a nearby second room or space, like a lobby or a hall, where smaller groups (of 3 or 4 people) could have a 'break-out' meeting.

How much extra space depends on how many people there are going to be; how big the main room is (ie. Is it big enough to hold two or more groups working separately?); and what else is going on around the group, (e.g. Is the meeting in the middle of a hotel and the group can't really use the lobby? Or is it in a private conference center?)

The break out rooms don't have to be as flexible as the main room if they are only going to be used for brief sessions. And don't forget to use good space outside - like a terrace or sitting area.

Equipment & Supplies

- I generally need at least:
    - 2 flipchart stands with flipchart pads (& spare flipchart pads)
    - About 6-12 Magic Marker pens of various colours
    - Masking tape or Scotch tape for sticking flipcharts on the walls of the room
    - Notepads
    - Pencils/pens
- An overhead projector for overhead transparencies/slides
- An electronic projector for connection to a laptop
- Projection screen or good substitute like a plain white wall
- Ample supply of cold drinks, coffee, tea etc. replenished at regular intervals

These are only a few of the issues that a meeting organizer needs to think about. Also, there is a very different set of problems when the meeting is much larger than the relatively small executive planning sessions that I work in. But I hope these very basic requirements help you with your planning.

If you have any comments or questions, or if you need to discuss a particular set-up or location, please feel free to call or contact me.

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