Making a start

> **Level:** Intermediate upwards
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> **Timing:** 90 minutes + extension activities
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> **Material needed:** one copy of the worksheets and Vocabulary record per student
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> **Group size:** any

Overview

This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is adapted from an article first published in Business Spotlight Issue 3/2009.

The article deals with the stages of kick-off meetings and how important they are to the success of new projects. A kick-off meeting is defined as the first official meeting of a group of people who will be working together on a project. The agenda will usually include introductions, statement(s) of mission, and organization of teams or working-groups. The implication is that there will be more meetings to follow.

The tasks in the student's notes will encourage the students to not only learn and use new business vocabulary and functional language related to the topic of meetings, but also to bring their own professional experiences into the classroom.

The teacher's notes aim to provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys, and follow-on extension tasks and lesson plans.

Introduction

Notes: First, it is essential to establish that everyone knows what a kick-off meeting is. Many students will already know the term *kick-off* in a sports context and it may be useful to use this as a memory aid. After the students have decided what the correct answer is, ask them what kind of projects they think would require (or benefit from) a kick-off meeting. Use the opportunity to find out whether anyone in the class is working, or has recently worked, on a project. Did their project start with a kick-off meeting?
Key: b) The first official meeting of a group of people who will be working together on a project.

Brainstorming

Notes: Read through the warmer questions ensuring that everyone understands the task. Then ask the students to discuss the questions in small groups. If you have a large class, designate one person in each group to be the secretary and to make notes. These can be referred to during a short follow-on feedback session and again in task 5.

Set a Time limit of 10 minutes on this task, but be prepared to cut the task short if you notice that the students are running out of things to say.

Skimming for information

Notes: the students should skim-read to decide what the main content of each paragraph is in order to decide which subtitle is most suitable for each section. Again, setting a time limit will encourage students to speed up and not read in detail. Remind them that they will be able to read the article in detail after they have completed this task.

Check the answers in class before allowing time to read the whole article either silently to themselves or aloud in class.

Key:
1. *Choose the right people*
2. *Use an external facilitator*
3. *Spend time together*
4. *Make people feel important*
5. *Specify different types of goals*
6. *Clarify expectations*
7. *Manage your sponsor*
8. *Train people to communicate*
9. *Allow time at the end*
10. *Pick up the phone*

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Teaching and learning strategy: skim-reading

Skimming is a reading strategy used to quickly identify the main ideas of a text. It is usually done at a speed three to four times faster than normal reading. It is frequently used in language learning when a task requires students to quickly read an article to discover its main content rather than get distracted by new words. There are many strategies that can be used when skimming. Some people read the first and last paragraphs or sentences of paragraphs; others run their finger over the paragraph diagonally from one corner to the opposite corner. These techniques are useful when you're seeking specific information rather than reading for comprehension. Skimming works well to find dates, names and places, or to find out the gist of an article or section. Set time limits to encourage students to skim-read rather than read every single word. As business people and students of business English are often required to read large amounts of material, it's worth practising the art of skim-reading.

The building blocks of a kick-off meeting

Notes: This task aims to check the students' general comprehension of the article. Allow the students to work alone or in pairs. When checking the answers you could ask the students to point out where in the article they can find the information relating to each building block.

Key:
The building blocks of a kick-off meeting:
1. Getting to know everyone: who are we and how can we create a great team?
2. Clarifying the vision: what is the big picture, and what are we trying to do?
3. Communicating the goals and benefits: what, specifically, do we need to achieve?
4. Organizing the team and its tasks: how is the project structured, and who does what?
5. Confirming the budgets and resources: how much can we spend, and how many people do we have?
6. Beginning a communication plan: what do we need to say, to whom, by when and how?
7. Specifying the next steps: what should we do in the coming weeks to move the project forward?

Language

Notes: 16 business-related verbs and nouns from the article have been chosen for the students to record and learn. If the students would like to add additional words, photocopy the page before they start writing.

Encourage them to write in not only the words given, but also the related words whenever possible (it will not be possible to fill in each column for every word as some simply do not have related adjectives, adverbs or opposites) and to mark the stress pattern for each word.

Teaching and learning strategy: recording new language

The more related words the students record, the sooner they will be able to use the new vocabulary. Students can find the related words by using a paper-format or free online dictionary, e.g. http://www.macmillandictionary. com.Try to get your students used to marking the stress pattern on all new words. All good dictionaries will show where the main stress of a word lies and online dictionaries will often give the option of hearing the word spoken too. Most students will not be able to use the new vocabulary confidently until they have first used it in a controlled practice. One effective way of doing this is to ask the students to write an example sentence for each of the words that they consider worth learning. The more personalized (or quirky) the example sentences are, the more likely the students will be able to remember the new words. To ensure that the students learn how to use the new words correctly, it is important that you check that the example sentences do not contain any errors.

Setting an agenda and writing an email

Notes: Using the information and language from the article and the previous tasks, the students should now set an agenda for a kick-off meeting and send this agenda, preferably in an email, to all the participants.

To start them off on this business writing task, ask them to refer back to the answers they gave in task 1 and to think about their own personal (positive or negative) experiences of meetings and incorporate this knowledge into their discussion and writing.

If possible, the students should work in pairs or small groups as this will make the task collaborative as well as add a spoken element to the task

Extension tasks

1. Word groups / lexical fields
The article contains many job descriptions and titles. The students could collect these in a table such as the one here, or on a mind map.

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job title	description	translation
facilitator	someone who helps a person or organization to find a solution to a problem	(*facilitator* in student's own language)

2. More about meetings

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics go to the following lesson plans in the Business Skills Bank on www.onestopenglish.com:

Lesson plans:
http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?sectionType=listsummary&catid=59834&docid=156660

And read through and discuss the following functional language for business meetings:
http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?catid=58028&docid=154818

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Introduction

What is a kick-off meeting?

a.   A meeting to discuss who should leave a company.

b.   The first official meeting of a group of people who will be working together on a project.

c.   The last meeting at the end of a long-term project.

1 Brainstorming

Before you read the ten tips for effective kick-off meetings, take a few minutes to think about and discuss the following questions. Later, you can compare your answers with those offered in the article.

- How can you help to choose the right people for a project?
- How useful is an external facilitator?
- How can you build relationships within the team?
- How can you clarify expectations within the team?
- How should you follow up a kick-off meeting?

2 Skimming for information

Skim-read the article and write the following subtitles above each section.

Use an external facilitator	Clarify expectations
Allow time at the end	Make people feel important
Pick up the phone	Specify different types of goals
Manage your sponsor	Spend time together
Choose the right people	Train people to communicate

Making a start

by Bob Dignen

Most people are involved in some kind of project at work – for example, for product development, organizational change or marketing strategies. Successful projects can be a vital mechanism for reaching corporate goals. In this article, we examine one important aspect of projects –the organization and running of a (two-day) kick-off meeting.

We will consider the case of an international project team made up of a project leader, sub-project leaders, and project team members who come from different national business units. We assume senior management has already agreed to the project and that a high-level sponsor has been specified.

1 Project success depends on having the right people, with the necessary experience, expertise and personalities. To get the right people, project leaders need to speak with the individuals nominated and the nominating managers, together and separately. These discussions should clarify expectations about goals, roles, expertise, levels of participation and lines of reporting.

This is an opportunity to check the mindset and level of engagement of the person nominated. It is also a chance to get commitment to the project from the business-unit manager, and to confirm that the team members who have been nominated have the competence for the job and will be given the necessary time away from their normal responsibilities.

2 One key decision is whether to involve an external facilitator, both in the planning of the agenda and at the kick-off meeting itself. Effective international facilitators or project coaches can easily pay for themselves by focusing team efforts and reducing inefficiency.

Using an external facilitator can have the following advantages: It frees up the project leader to take part more easily in the meeting. It brings external expertise into the project at an early stage – for example, intercultural team-building skills or project-management expertise. It can increase the energy and output of the meeting.

3 Building relationships and developing trust is a long process. But the kick-off meeting is a good place to start the process. It may be a short person-by-person introduction of job functions and project expectations. Alternatively, much more time can be spent discovering each person's experience and expertise, mindset and working style, and learning about the daily life and culture in their business unit. Too often, this process

is given insufficient time. As a result, there is no common understanding. A good way to start the process of building relationships is to organize a get-together and dinner on the evening before the first day of the kick-off. You should encourage conversation by asking people to mix and find out about each other's job, hobbies and business culture. At the end of the first day, include a fun input from an expert on international teamworking, with tips on how to collaborate effectively. And then, in the evening, you could organize an event that is fun and involves collaboration.

4 After the fun "get-to-knows", the next stage is usually the more serious business of explaining what the project is all about. What is the "high-level vision"? This often takes the form of a presentation from the sponsor, who then leaves the project head to work on the details of project structure and milestones. Sponsors need to inspire team members to become project ambassadors who will communicate the project vision in their organization. Project teams could work in smaller groups to draft mission statements and slogans for the project. This allows for time to discuss the vision, and can also create a greater sense of ownership of the process, and thus increase commitment.

5 After the sponsor has left, the project leader will often make a presentation to clarify specific goals. It is important to focus the team early in the project on delivering financial targets. Secondly, it is vital to integrate the perspectives of the customers and other stakeholders into the project's targets. Thirdly, project leaders must discuss the possibility that the project's goals may change during its lifetime as new information arises. Teams have to balance the controlling and delivering of defined targets with an ability to think flexibly and to create new targets – within budget, of course.

6 After looking at the vision and goals, it is necessary to go into more detail by looking at the project structure, the organization into sub-projects (or "workstreams") and the main tasks of each sub-project. This gives team members a holistic view of the project and enables them to think about deadlines, dependencies and risks.

Team members need to know exactly who will do what and who expects what from whom. So spend time defining roles explicitly. Otherwise, people may fail to take responsibility or they may blame others, which leads to conflict and inefficiency.

7 International projects often face both cost constraints (budget estimates are too low) and human-resource problems (there

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Making a start — by Bob Dignen

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are not enough people). At the kick-off meeting, it is important to discuss openly the resources that are needed and available. In projects with too few resources, team members will often have huge and very frustrating workloads. This may lead to them wanting to leave the project, which creates the problem of finding replacements and bringing them up to speed. Intelligent project leaders form very close relationships with the senior sponsors, who are the keys to unlocking budgets and providing more staff.

Towards the end of the kick-off, the meeting should take a look at communication. Communication planning is an important part of project management, and there are two dimensions to a kick-off: internal team communication and marketing to externals.

If you ask a project manager where things went wrong on a project, the question of communication is likely to be mentioned: "We used email too much"; "Meetings were not focused enough"; "The business didn't understand the project".

Take time to do training on how to speak, listen and write effectively across different cultures, whether national, corporate or departmental. This training can act as a platform for the project team to create communication rules for their work.

9

It is essential that people know what they have to do and by when. They also have to be motivated to do so. If not, the meeting has failed. Plan at least 90 minutes at the end of the kick-off to work through all the agreed actions, to specify what has to be done by when, and to deal with any open questions.

10

Don't overestimate the success of a kick-off. The real work starts when the kick-off ends. Project leaders and members should look for every opportunity to communicate by phone (if not personally) in the following weeks. This may be to update each other on the project's progress or just to pass on the details of a recipe discussed over dinner at the kick-off. Establish the habit of communicating often, about work and non-work matters – and not just by e-mail.

Project kick-off meetings need to balance the technical and human aspects of project management. Most projects underestimate the human element. Camillo Mazolla, an Italian businessman, has worked as an international project manager for many years. He says: "Social relationships are vital for reaching a result. So if you have everything but not the relationships, you will not obtain results. You are not in the army, where you have to do things, full stop. Bad relationships can compromise a good technical job. So, during the kickoff phase there's always a kind of socializing part, a dinner, an event. The more developed it is, the better it is."

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3 The building blocks of a kick-off meeting

Match the building blocks with the accompanying questions to give a short summary of the main points of any kick-off meeting.

1. Getting to know everyone:

2. Clarifying the vision:

3. Communicating the goals and benefits:

4. Organizing the team and its tasks:

5. Confirming budgets and resources:

6. Beginning a communication plan:

7. Specifying the next steps:

a. What do we need to say, to whom, by when and how?

b. What is the big picture, and what are we trying to do?

c. Who are we and how can we create a great team?

d. How is the project structured, and who does what?

e. What should we do in the coming weeks to move the project forward?

f. What, specifically, do we need to achieve?

g. How much can we spend, and how many people do we have?

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4 Language

a. Check the meanings of the following business words from the article and record them on the vocabulary record. Remember to write in any related words as well as the pronunciation pattern of each word.

verbs:	assume	nominate	collaborate	focus	specify	
nouns:	sponsor	mindset	facilitator	inefficiency	milestone	target
	perspective	stake-holder	budget	conflict	resources	

b. Choose at least six words that you consider to be useful for your work and write an example sentence for each.

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5 Setting an agenda and writing an email

You have been asked to plan a kick-off meeting for a new project. The meeting, which will take place in a conference hotel, is scheduled to start on Friday evening and end by early Sunday afternoon.

Plan an agenda for the meeting and send the agenda, as part of an email, to all the participants.

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verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
collaborate	collaboration	collaborative	collaboratively