Tips for getting the most from construction meeting minutes

As an engineer, I attend more than my fair share of construction meetings, and I wanted to pass along a few tips for documenting – in writing – what goes on at these meetings.

Are you reading this thinking, “Writing minutes is a boring exercise with no real purpose, and I can do it at my convenience.”? Think again! If there ever is a dispute (it does happen), the meeting minutes are considered part of the official project record and are often requested by the attorneys involved on both sides of the dispute. So, always consider the possibility that the minutes will be used in a court of law – both when you are speaking and when preparing the meeting minutes.

What should be included?

You can use a variety of formats (I’ve provided a screen shot of a format I’ve found work well), but be sure to include:

- Name of the project
- Meeting date, time, and location
- List of attendees and the company/organization they represent
- Statement of who prepared the minutes
- Record of the meeting: scope, schedule, budget (if applicable)
- Time and date of next meeting
- Record of any project-related discussions that took place after the meeting ended and a list of those attending the discussion. These discussions should be documented at the next construction meeting.

(Special note: Any conflicts that arise after the meeting adjourned should be addressed through additional meetings, phone calls, or email as needed to resolve the conflict.)
Dos and don'ts when preparing minutes

Prepare as soon as possible – Write the minutes within a day or two of the meeting, while topics are still fresh in your memory and those of others sitting around the table at the meeting. It's much easier to resolve different recollections of what was said soon after a meeting than to wait a week or a month and then try to recall. A lawyer could call into question meeting minutes that were not completed in a timely manner.

Include enough detail – Meeting minutes should contain the substance of the meeting in sufficient detail such that a person who did not attend the meeting will know what occurred in the meeting. Be sure your minutes are factual; do not speculate. One related tip - rather than using a person's name in the narrative on a topic, consider referring to the person by their role. (“The Contractor stated,” rather than “Steve stated”).

Be careful of language used – Don’t use abbreviations or be sure to define them first – does CM mean Construction Monitor or Construction Manager? Be careful what words and titles you use. When performing construction quality assurance (CQA), field personnel are Construction Monitors or Observers, not Inspectors or Managers, which hold a specific legal connotation. If you’re near the end of a project, don’t use the term “punch list” if you mean “list of things that need to be done.” Each of these has a specific legal meaning.

Avoid so-called liability language – For example: all, all inclusive, any, best, comprehensive, determine, ensure/insure/assure, every, warrant. (I have a really long list; feel free to email me if you would like a copy).

Follow note-taking best practices – Gather all notes taken by others from your company who attended the meeting. Incorporating them into the minutes can really help flesh out the discussion and make your minutes as complete as possible. Maintain the pace of the meeting to allow for note taking; ask for time to take notes if you’re not the one running the meeting. If needed, speak up and ask for clarification or for the speakers to repeat themselves to get accurate notes.

Reviewing meeting minutes

Meeting minutes should be distributed to all meeting attendees and involved parties, but before doing so, it is really important to get a thorough in-house review of the minutes. I always send minutes first to everyone from my company who attended the meeting so they can weigh in on whether I was accurate.

Once you have the draft minutes, send them out to the entire group. Discussion of the draft minutes should be the first agenda item at the next meeting. Take the time to hash out any suggested changes and adjustments. Decide if you need to make a change or simple clarification. If you find an error or omission issue corrected minutes, or note the correction in the following meeting’s minutes.

Remember, just because someone does not agree with the meeting minutes does not mean there is an error. Sometimes, what the person actually said was not what they meant – In that case, the meeting minutes will stay the same, but you can include a clarification statement indicating that the party has changed their response.

If the commenter does not agree with the group’s recollection of the event, then a statement may be added to the meeting minutes that indicates that the commenter has objected to an item but the objection is not supported by the others in attendance. This item should then be further discussed until resolution is found; the resolution should be included in the meeting minutes.

As noted earlier, the quicker you prepare and send the minutes, the easier it will be for others to affirm the language you’ve put in the minutes.