

MEETINGS

The Right Way to Start a Meeting

by Liane Davey

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We all know there's a price to pay for making a bad first impression: A limp handshake conveys low confidence; a wrinkled suit makes you seem lazy; oversharing comes across as emotional instability. But do you ever think about the first impression your meetings make? Frequently restarting meetings for stragglers sends the message that participants have more control than you do. Issues opened for discussion with no clear purpose get

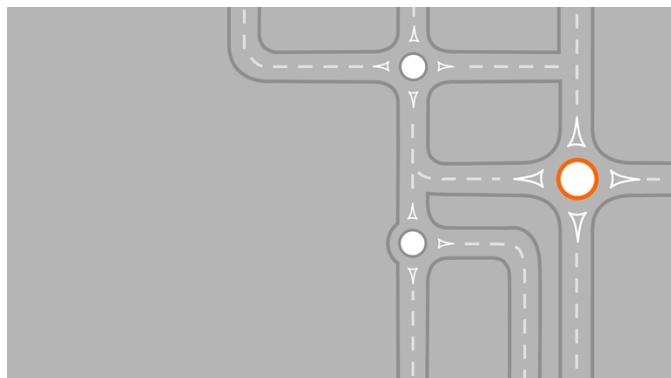
hijacked by participants with a clearer agenda than yours. Monologues validate everyone's fears that your meeting is going to be about as valuable (and as scintillating) as watching an hour of C-SPAN.

If you want to have a more productive meeting, focus on a strong opening. A good start to a meeting is like an overture: It sets the tone, introduces the major themes, and provides a preview of what you can expect. Here are some best practices for starting your next meeting:

Make the purpose of the meeting clear. It's amazing how much time gets invested in meetings where no one really knows *why* the meeting is happening. Remember to state the purpose of the meeting in the agenda and then reiterate it at the start of the meeting. Differentiate between idea generation sessions and decision-making forums; separate meetings driving long-term strategic thinking from those driving short-term action and accountability. (For more on how to create fit-for-purpose meetings, see "A Step-by-Step Guide to Structuring Better Meetings.") **While you're at it, talk about what the meeting is not about.** "This is our monthly capacity-building session. We're working *on* the business today, not working *in* it. Any tactical issues need to be tabled until Wednesday's ops review."

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Be specific about the purpose of each agenda item. Although the types of agenda items in any one meeting should be similar, they might be at different stages and therefore require a very different conversation. **Before each agenda item, take a moment to clarify the goal. If your goal is idea generation, say so, and facilitate the discussion appropriately.** Don't allow action-oriented team members to converge

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too quickly if you're trying to foster original thinking. In contrast, if an item requires a decision, be clear on the decision criteria and the process. Specify whether everyone gets to vote or whether one person owns the decision and is looking for recommendations. "Barb owns this

decision, so I'm going to ask Barb to halt the discussion when she has what she needs to make the call."

Ask people to filter their contributions. Another way to set the tone at the start of a meeting is to tell people what level of engagement you expect from each of them. You can cite the MIT research that found that a team's collective intelligence is predicted by how equally team members participate. Ask participants to modulate their contributions (either up or down) so that they take up about as much airtime as everyone else. Ask that participants refrain from simply agreeing with one another. You can say: "I'm looking for different perspectives and new ways of thinking. I'm going to move on if we're all in agreement."

Reiterate any important ground rules. If your team has spent time developing ground rules (which I highly recommend that you do), use the time at the beginning of the meeting to remind everyone about any that are still aspirational. Too many teams go to the effort of defining ground rules and then never speak of them again. Don't overdo it, but pick one ground rule that you think will be particularly salient for your discussion. For example, say, "I know we're talking about some sensitive issues today. Just a reminder that we've all committed to starting with a positive assumption."

Head off passive-aggressive behavior. One reason that meetings are so abhorred is that they tend to go on and on, but don't expose the real problems that need to be solved. Many teams use the meeting-before-the-meeting and the meeting-after-the-meeting to

surface the prickly or unpopular issues. That makes the meeting itself a complete waste of time. **Address the risk of passive-aggressive behavior explicitly by asking that issues be addressed in the meeting, not after it.** It's not a fail-safe approach, but calling out difficult or contentious discussions at the start of a meeting, and asking for people to share their points of view candidly, will increase the likelihood that you get the issues on the table rather than leaving them for hallway gossip later.

Decide whether to roundtable. I would be remiss if I did not weigh in on the controversial topic of roundtables. **By roundtable, I mean the portion of the meeting where each participant shares a status update.** Roundtables are notoriously bad for sucking up time, adding little value, and providing a platform for nervous team members to justify their paycheck. If that's what's happening at your roundtable, get rid of it. If, in contrast, you're willing to **redirect your roundtable to selectively address issues related to the agenda topic, then have at it. Just be strict on the time limits and stop anyone who goes off topic:** "It's our quarterly strategic meeting, so the topic of the roundtable today is the one trend that is either exciting or frightening you."

It's likely true that you attend too many meetings. It's even more likely that you attend too many *bad* meetings. You can usually tell within the first two minutes whether the meeting is going to be a good use of your time. If you're running the show, make sure your meeting makes a great first impression by focusing everyone on the unique value they're supposed to be adding, emphasizing diversity of thought, and filtering out time-sucks. Do that and you'll find that your meetings earn a sterling reputation and actually help get work done.

Liane Davey is the cofounder of 3COze Inc. She is the author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done* and a coauthor of *Leadership Solutions: The Pathway to Bridge the Leadership Gap*. Follow her on Twitter at @LianeDavey.

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