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# Let's Stop Meeting Like This

Tools to Save Time and Get More Done

Dick Axelrod and Emily Axelrod • Berrett-Koehler © 2014 • 192 pages

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Leadership / Leading Teams / Holding Meetings

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## Take-Aways

- Many meetings are a waste of time.
- However, a well-planned, well-executed meeting can be effective and useful.
- If employees need to share information in person and that requires dialogue, then you need to schedule a meeting.
- Invite people with specific knowledge, a role in the issue or decision-making authority.
- Before each meeting, know why you're holding it, how it will be different, who needs to come and how to inspire attendees to take ownership of its goals.
- Use the six elements of the "meeting canoe: welcome, connect, discover, elicit, decide and attend."
- This helps people feel engaged, challenged, informed and able to set a course of action.
- Good meetings give people "autonomy, meaning, challenge, learning" and "feedback."
- If a session goes awry, "say the unspoken" and name the problem. Ask if everyone perceives the same dilemma, and find out what they "want to do about it."
- Good meetings provide value. They can energize employees to do meaningful work, enable timely decisions, build teams and address pressing issues.

## Recommendation

People usually dislike meetings. Often, meetings only waste time and build frustration. Yet organizations need their people to confer or need to hold meetings to unite a team or fulfill a specific goal. Employee-involvement specialists Dick and Emily Axelrod offer worthwhile strategies and methods to make your meetings more effective. Most of their ideas are pretty sensible; for example, involving all the participants in the advance design of a meeting. A few seem silly, if well-intentioned, like having competing groups build towers with raw spaghetti, marshmallows and duct tape. Overall, the Axelrods provide pithy quotations and useful, hands-on information – warmly infused with a sense that they actually care how your meetings work out. They cover planning, designing, facilitating and leading group sessions. The book’s art direction helps with a clean layout and lively, silhouette illustrations. *getAbstract* recommends the Axelrod approach to managers, executives, start-ups and anyone responsible for organizing meetings.

## Summary

### Not Another Meeting!

Many meetings fail their organizations and their attendees. Multiply the number of your company’s meetings times the number of participants times their pro rata hourly pay to discover the hidden financial cost of ineffective work sessions.

Consider the hidden costs, as well. Employees can spend 20% to 70% of the workday in meetings. If those gatherings don’t accomplish anything, that’s a tremendous loss of productivity. Still, organizations need to have their employees convene. Before you hold a meeting, use two criteria to determine if it is necessary. Do people need to share important information? Does sharing this information require dialogue? If the answer is yes on both counts, you need a meeting.

*“We meet because the knowledge and experience needed in a specific situation are not available in one head.”*

To determine who must attend, list those who have important knowledge to communicate, the authority to make decisions or a prominent role in the issue at hand. Handled correctly, meetings can offer tremendous value. They energize employees by helping them do meaningful work, make timely decisions and learn about vital company issues. Conferencing can help employees develop professionally.

*“Changing meetings from time wasting to time valued, from energy sapping to energy producing, requires a different approach to designing, leading and contributing.”*

Quality meetings involve the following five elements:

1. **“Autonomy”** – The participants control the group discussion.
2. **“Meaning”** – All discussions concern important topics.
3. **“Challenge”** – The meeting agenda and topics discussed provoke participants to be at their best.
4. **“Learning”** – Attendees acquire new knowledge through discussion.

5. **“Feedback”** – Intelligent, dedicated people who want to do their best appreciate positive guidance and constructive criticism.

*“Meetings can be places where you can do productive work [that] requires moving beyond meeting mechanics.”*

The success of a meeting depends on full engagement. To ensure that people participate actively, make attendance voluntary. However, even so, “people will still make choices about how much of themselves they bring to a meeting and how much of themselves they leave behind.” So, this tactic works only when employees deem the session worthwhile. Otherwise, no one will come.

### “Five Steps to Meeting Success”

To help your confabs go well, attend to the basics – the important considerations and decisions you make before assembling your participants. Answer the following five questions:

1. **“Why are we meeting?”** – No matter what the format – a staff brainstorming, work session, town hall, “major change initiative” or informal chat – align with your organizational needs. Meetings should always involve “work worth doing.”
2. **“What do we want to be different because this group of people meets?”** – A conference must have a specific purpose, for example, training the participants, communicating essential company information, planning strategy, and so on. Purpose is the North Star of your meeting. Align the length of your gathering with its purpose.
3. **“Who needs to be in our crew?”** – For successful sessions, bring in the right assortment of people with a productive mix of assets and capabilities, including “information, authority, responsibility” and “different thinking styles.” To avoid groupthink, include at least one contrarian.
4. **“How do we get people to take ownership of the meeting?”** – Have attendees participate in the design of your meetings. Ensure that the agenda fits “the culture and the participants’ needs.”
5. **“Where and how long will we meet?”** – A gathering’s environment affects its success. Whenever possible, try to arrange “round tables, plenty of wall space, whiteboards and natural light.”

### Three Primary Meeting Roles

Each person present plays a role in making the session work. Treat your participants as volunteers. Those who put meetings together play “three basic roles”:

1. **“Leaders”** – These managers direct the proceedings and keep everyone on point. Their agendas have a clear purpose, and only those who are truly involved need to attend. Leaders must be smart in how they exercise power. Be open to criticism – talking to only yes-men or yes-women is worthless. Ensure that everyone understands the session’s rules and agrees on the way that the participants will reach decisions.
2. **“Contributors”** – These experts bring specialized knowledge and ideas to the discussion. Contributors assume partial ownership for a meeting’s outcome. They speak accurately about facts pertinent to the agenda, including interpreting what they believe the facts mean. Contributors must explain their hopes for the organization, maintain open minds and empathize with other participants regarding the issues.

3. **“Facilitators”** – These meeting guides enable attendees to achieve their group purpose. Facilitators utilize what Tim Brown, founder of the renowned design studio IDEO, describes as “design thinking”: Consider what type of meeting works best for all participants; iterate the session’s design; include “potential users” – that is, participants – in the design process; be objective about the design; and ensure that everyone involved can voice opinions that count. Facilitators are in charge of timekeeping. They post data coming from the discussion on “smart boards” or the like, if needed.

*“As connection increases, you begin to learn about others’ capabilities and character and how comfortable you are sharing information with them.”*

None of these roles is limited by hard and fast rules. Any attendee “can lead the discussion, contribute or facilitate.” No matter who’s in charge, the mark of an effective, successful meeting is that all attendees do productive work afterward and hold themselves responsible for the follow through and the results.

## Common Errors

Leaders, contributors and facilitators make some common mistakes and may find that their personal shortcomings and beliefs contribute to meeting failure:

- **Leaders** – Managers go wrong when they develop an agenda without input from other attendees, are too unsure of themselves to open their planning to others’ opinions and manipulate their meetings “through false participation” – that is, valuing self-interest over the session’s actual purpose.
- **Contributors** – Experts fail when they don’t assume ownership of their gatherings, expect the leaders to fix any problems that develop during the sessions, place self-interest above the group’s concerns, or aren’t properly prepared and therefore can’t make a positive contribution.
- **Facilitators** – Just because you’re running the meeting, don’t make the mistake of taking over and performing work that the group should handle. Never assume your special management “magic” can fix any problem.

## “The Meeting Canoe”

The meeting canoe is a useful metaphor for the various activities that combine to create quality meetings. The idea is that all attendees pull together in rhythm – as paddlers do in a canoe – to advance the session’s goals productively.

*“Good order is the foundation of all things.” (Edmund Burke)*

The meeting canoe works for every type of meeting. The canoe offers a fully operative and easily adaptable system in which all components influence the others. No one element functions without the rest working cooperatively. When you structure meetings this way, you can accomplish your objectives.

*“How you end your meeting determines whether you leave energized by knowing you completed your task or frustrated because the work is unfinished.”*

The six sections of the meeting canoe are:

1. **“Welcome”** – Develop a friendly and affirming atmosphere so everyone involved feels welcome. They must also feel safe – that is, all attendees must feel comfortable enough to share their views about the issues without putting themselves in jeopardy. Warmly greet everyone at the beginning of each meeting. Join in small talk to break the ice and get everyone into the right frame of mind. Make sure the meeting room’s ambience sets the right tone.
2. **“Connect”** – This segment has two parts: Participants should connect easily through meaningful conversations and everyone should care about the issues at hand. These positive links are energizing and make the discussion go more smoothly and efficiently. When people feel as if they are functioning as a purposeful unit, they can pull together like rowers to accomplish a shared goal. The functional rapport that attendees need to establish takes only a few minutes to form. Avoid “token connections; they are worse than a lack of connection.”
3. **“Discover”** – This meeting component represents a learning process in which all participants discover the ramifications of the present situation – that is, why they are together and what they need to accomplish. This process has three aspects. First, develop a shared viewpoint among all participants regarding the current reality. Second, objectively comprehend this reality and its ramifications. And third, once the situation and challenges are clear, don’t shrink from the reality or try to solve related problems prematurely.
4. **“Elicit”** – In this phase, attendees speculate about a positive future in which the current problem no longer burdens them. You can evoke their “dreams” four ways: 1) “Find out what people care about” by delving for more information; 2) “talk about the future as if it were the present” by discussing things in the “future present,” for example, visualizing “what you are doing and how you are working together” in the future; 3) “engage the creative...side” by devising stories and pictures; and 4) “take a break” to let creative ideas surface while people are in a more relaxed state of mind.
5. **“Decide”** – Now, participants must begin to make choices about their future course of actions. For this to work, everyone must be clear about who makes the decisions, how the decisions get made and what gets decided. Once a decision is reached, clearly specify “who is going to do what.” Detail all the steps required for specific actions. Sometimes, it won’t be practical to make one large, sweeping decision. If this is the case, make some small decisions now and plan to make additional decisions later.
6. **“Attend to the end”** – Close by reviewing all decisions, discussing upcoming activities and reflecting on what took place. Pay close attention to this important phase. The way you end a meeting directly affects how people will handle the work to come, which will go much better if you create a road map for future action.

## When Good Meetings Go Bad

Despite your best efforts, your meetings may not always go the way you want. Take three steps to “prevent your canoe from sinking”:

1. **“Say the unspoken”** – Don’t hesitate to point out whatever the problem might be. For example, if people are unwilling to take action after deciding what needs to be done, say something.
2. **“Ask, ‘Do you see what I see?’”** – Do the other people present perceive the same problem that you see?

3. “Ask, ‘What do you want to do about it?’” – Get the group to focus and decide what to do to repair the situation.

*“Sometimes an issue is too complex or too big for a group to gain agreement. In this case, you can decide what you can and cannot agree to right now.”*

Sometimes the problem will be that the wrong people attend the meeting, and try to sabotage what your team hopes to accomplish. When you discover bad apples, get rid of them as soon as you can. Sometimes, because of external events like a merger, you may need to reassess the original rationale for getting all these people together in the first place. In this case, ask if it is necessary and if its “purpose is still relevant.”

*“The most difficult thing is the decision to act. The rest is merely tenacity.” (Amelia Earhart)*

If you recognize that your original plan no longer works, don’t hesitate to make changes in the locale, the agenda, the duration of the sessions, the number of people in attendance, and so on. One of the more intractable problems is realizing or discovering that the leader of your meeting is the problem. Diplomatically point out to the leader that he or she is making things difficult, and request a change in behavior. Get someone the leader respects to deliver this message.

## About the Authors

**Dick Axelrod** and **Emily Axelrod** are co-founders of the Axelrod Group, a consulting firm specializing in employee involvement.



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