

Meetings: The Engagement Edge Richard H. Axelrod

Most people consider meetings time-wasting, energy-draining, and spirit-sapping. Most of us seek to reduce the pain by avoiding them or eliminating them—thus dealing with the symptoms, not the problem.

If we want meetings to be dynamic, energy-producing, exciting experiences that get things done, then instead of eliminating them we need to focus on making them positive experiences. Instead of working toward reducing the time we spend with each other we need to focus on how to make the time we spend together productive.

A New Blueprint for Meetings

Because we see meetings as engagement opportunities, we look beyond the typical notions of what makes for a good meeting. It's not that agendas and efficient meeting structures aren't important; it's just that we don't think they are enough. Meetings need to be more than something people endure, they need to create energy to get things done.

To help with this task, we have created a meeting blueprint (Figure 1). This canoe-shaped blueprint helps us create meetings with an “engagement” edge.” This canoe shape represents the opening up and closing down of a conversation. It is the boat that takes us from the beginning to the end of our time together.

Let's explore the elements of our blueprint in detail.

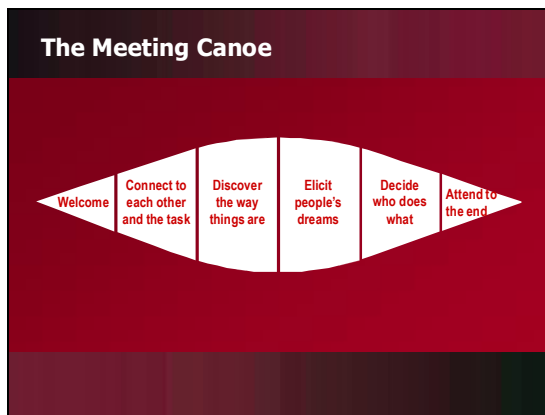


Figure 1

Start by Making People Feel Welcome. Pay attention to the room. The room sets the stage and influences what happens. Try to work in a room with natural light and plenty of wall space. Make sure everyone can see and hear what's going on without straining.

Pay attention to how people are seated. Seating participants in a circle is usually optimal. We recommend avoiding hierarchical arrangements, like lining people up in rows or seating them at long rectangular tables. Semicircles work well when the key challenge is to “face the issue.”

Pay attention to how you greet people. Your welcome can be as simple as a handshake or as elaborate as having a string quartet playing to create a mood of harmony and peace. Whatever kind of welcome you plan, it should make people feel special as soon as they arrive.

Find Ways to Create Connections Among People. Conversations help us connect. Some groups we know start their meetings by asking everyone, “What do you need to say in order to be fully present at this meeting?” A quick once around the room with everyone providing a response allows people to “clear their minds” and they are able to bring their whole selves to the gathering.

Personal questions are powerful ways to deepen our connections. They make us uncomfortable, and they make us think. We use questions such as, “Why did you come to this meeting? Why are you staying?” “What are you willing to do to contribute to the success of this meeting? What are you not willing to do?” “What acts of courage will our work require of us?” . . .

Discover the Way Things Are—Build a Shared Picture of the Current Situation. The easiest way to get started building this baseline is to ask people to explain to each other how they do their job. Individual answers will teach everyone about the challenges they meet on a daily basis. Taken together, they’ll reveal how the whole system operates. When people understand how the whole system operates, they become more willing to develop solutions that support the whole system operating effectively.

Elicit People’s Dreams—Build a Shared Picture of Where You Want to Go. We’ve found the arts to be powerful tools for creating a picture of where people want to go. Artistic talent isn’t required—just the willingness to share a personal vision of the future.

For example, you might invite the members of your team to make simple drawings that capture an aspect of the future they dream of. Even crude sketches can carry powerful messages about the future.

Writing can also be used to uncover the future. Try asking people to imagine themselves five years in the future and spend just five minutes writing about what they see in a free-flowing, open-ended style. The insights that emerge may surprise you.

Try simple conversation. Invite people to pretend it is five years from today. Ask them to discuss what they are doing, how they are working together, what their new workplace, church, school, or community looks like. The key is to conduct the conversation in the present tense, as if the future is now—discussing not how you would like it to be, but rather how it “is.”

Many varied observations will emerge from this discussion, but in time some common themes will emerge. These themes represent the shared picture of the future—the goal toward which your work will be directed.

Decide on Who Does What to Create the Future You’ve Agreed Upon. Meeting leaders and participants often are frustrated about what happens when they come together to get things done. Instead of leaving with energy and enthusiasm, clear about where they are headed, they often

leave confused about future direction. In order to prevent these negative outcomes there are three things to worry about here: the how of the decision, the what, and the who.

The group must know ahead of time how it's going to decide. There are several options. What's most important is that the method you choose is clear and understood by all.

Identifying what needs to be done can be handled by simple brainstorming. Sometimes leaders already have an idea of what needs to be done. In other cases, the group will start from scratch.

Finally, there is the who. The leader can appoint people to be responsible for each task. Volunteers may be called for, perhaps by creating a sign-up sheet. A mixed method is to assign someone to lead a task and then have people volunteer to work on the task.

Having identified the what and the who, it is critical that you review the decisions reached and make sure that everyone understands what has been decided and who is going to do what.

Attend to the End: Pay as Much Attention to Endings as You Do to Beginnings. If you don't want your meetings to end on a whimper, you need to put as much thought and attention into saying goodbye as you did to saying hello.

In our work, we like to end by taking time to review decisions and agreements so that everyone is sure what has been decided and what are the next steps. Then we reflect together on the work that has been accomplished. We ask people to identify what they appreciated about working with others. We don't rush the ending nor do we drag it out.

Meetings That Generate Engagement

Meetings are rituals that convey powerful messages. Examining our current meeting rituals gives insight into the hidden message behind our actions. Designing meetings using the meeting blueprint helps create new rituals that give your meetings the engagement edge.

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