

get2thepoint

52 Tips*

**to bring magic
to your meetings**

* that's one a week for a year

52 Tips to help you bring a bit of magic to your meetings (that's one a week for a year)

Will the venue accommodate a room layout that nourishes?

Some things in a room can't be changed, but a lot of things can be. Walls, pillars and tiered seating bolted to the floor can't be moved. But chairs can be. Treat them as the playthings of your imagination. Hold the meeting in mind, its purpose, how you want to feel at the end and then imagine you are walking into the space. How can the physical environment enrich the emotional environment of the meeting.

This meeting matters. Does it?

There are ways of letting it be known how much the meeting matters to you, if it does. For example call key participants (or if they have them, their PAs) to confirm the date is in the diary, explain its significance and offer to resend any materials. It will matter more to them, if they know it matters to you.

People will support what they create.

You don't need to plan alone! Create a planning group and share responsibility for the meeting between the chair, organiser, host and representatives of different teams, groups and offices. Encourage them to bring in ideas, consult their own groups, lead sessions and train as facilitators with you. Create together.

Make decisions about decision making.

Consider the nature of the group and think ahead about how decisions are to be made. It may be that there needs to be voting, which requires a simple majority or full consensus, it could be the group will continue to discuss until it is clear that everyone is in accord with a decision or maybe until everyone can at least live with the decision. For some meetings it is important to agree the decision making model before people arrive in the room, for other meetings it is mission critical.

Do you know how much your meeting really costs?

Go on frighten yourself. Create an imaginary template (or a real one) to estimate all the costs of the meeting you have just been in. Include the average salary of each participant plus their expenses, cost of the venue, refreshments and equipment, as well as hidden costs such as stationery and insurance. Is the meeting worth it?

Let's get personal... what shall I wear?

Clothing provides comfort, protection and is your outward manifestation of what is inside. Your choice can also demonstrate your appreciation of the group you are with. If you are comfortable with yourself and at home with what you are wearing, you will be able to contribute with greater ease. Including comfy shoes you can stand up in all day if and when necessary!



Plan to finish well.

In planning the agenda allow space for an ending that is in proportion to the length of the meeting. An hour's meeting might require space for some closing comments from around the table. A three-day conference might require a closing ceremony or participant evaluation to mark and celebrate the work together. People will remember the closing moments.

Take five - and make it short and snappy.

There is often a need to update people with quick bits of un-contentious information. The x event has been moved from this date to that ... a new team member will start on ... scaffolding will be going up around the building next Monday. Put them into a rapid fire 'Short and snappy information' agenda item. Agenda it for a fixed time - not many minutes, for example take five.

The end is a good place to start.

If you are planning a series of meetings, try preparing an agenda in which the agenda is turned upside down, by starting with getting some suggestions for the date for the next meeting and have dates in mind during the meeting. It may be that you need have some discussions before you can decide how far ahead the next meeting may need to be; but decide as soon as you can during the meeting so that everyone knows now when the next step in the journey will be.

Don't just worry about it, do something.

You feel a nasty niggle in your insides when you look at the programme you've constructed. You've packed in a lot of sessions. You've given each of six speakers five minutes each in the morning and you worry they'll all go over time, then lunch will be late, then the afternoon will start late... Oh dear. So listen to your guts, be brave, act now and make changes while you're preparing.

Are you sitting comfortably?

'How was the conference?' I asked. With some reservation, she said it had been OK. The reservation she later told me was that the chairs were hard and she'd been uncomfortable all day. So allow time in the agenda to stand, to move, to stretch. So however much padding there is participants can more easily focus attention on the subject not on their physical discomfort.

Don't say 'Yes John'

You are chairing a plenary discussion. Comments are invited. You know some people in the room. John, for example. But if you invite him by name and then not the next person whom you don't know, you are excluding part of the room from an invisible in-club. Feeling excluded inhibits, which does not encourage participation.

Meeting purpose: know the difference between the destination and the journey.

It's powerful to state the purpose of the meeting in the form of the point everyone will have got to by its end. Distinguish this from what is needed to help get you there. For example by the end of the meeting you want all involved in the project to know what action they must take to get a project started; to do that all participants need to know what has happened so far.



End on time; or not.

The meeting is scheduled to finish at 4pm. At 3.45 it's clear to everyone that the work of the meeting is not done. Don't just allow the meeting to wander past 4pm. Do have the courage to agree a new end time. Shall we continue to 4.15? Can everyone stay until then? A new boundary is set; boundaries help create safety.

Prepare not to get lost.

If just one person gets lost on the way to the meeting, there will be one person arriving fed up and that's one person who will participate less. It's easy enough to put up a few signs here or there and maybe tell those nice people at the porters lodge/reception desk what's happening where and when. Take care of people before they arrive and they will care about the purpose of the meeting.

A hand-written conference bag is a personal touch, literally.

When participants arrive they are given the bits and pieces they need for the meeting, not in an expensive and probably ecologically unsound plastic bag, nor a nice linen bag, but a lovely carrier bag on which someone has drawn some simple images and written some simple welcoming messages. The bag carries stuff and also tells participants they matter and that someone has taken care.

A one breath trailer.

There will be workshops later in the day. Presenters are asked to give a brief trailer to encourage people to attend. They've been asked to be brief. Then someone suggests they each make their pitch - in just one breath. Now that concentrates the mind. Try it... take a deep breath and say what you need to say.

Order! Order!!

The room is full of noise and you are the lucky person whose job it is to call people to order. My ears are still ringing from an experience some years ago when someone shocked us in to silence by blowing a football whistle. Ouch. Better to invite the group' attention firmly and subtly by a nice chime - find one on your phone, tap a wine glass with a soft pen or invest in a Tibetan bell.

Do you know your T&P from your Q&A?

Assume nothing. If there's even one person in the meeting who is using up attention on trying to work out what the acronym means you've lost half their attention and they are less likely to speak as they don't want to show themselves up. So establish a habit of always explaining an acronym when first used. Even better write it on a flipchart for the person who wasn't listening (there's always one).

Make space with the words you choose.

There is three minutes for people to think creatively about something. You want new ideas. So choose spacious words like, 'we have three full minutes for this', 'let's see what great ideas we can come up with in three minutes'. (Rather than 'Sorry we're really short of time, so we've only got three minutes'). Try it and see what works for you.



Find the smile - they will if you will.

Neurologists can tell us why it works. We can experience it for ourselves. What I see is mirrored in my brain. So if I frown, a frown is sparked in you. If I smile, a smile is sparked in you. And here's the important bit. It's got to be real as it will sure be noticed if it isn't. So when you're in a group, find the smile in you, even if it's only a little one tucked away in a corner. Then invite it to come out to play.

¿Habla español?

Well maybe you do, and maybe you don't. But know that if English is your mother tongue there may well be people at your meeting table for whom English is not their mother tongue. They are proficient and very able; and also they may be using up a bit more energy than you so there's just that little bit less available for participation. So articulate clearly, use idioms sparingly and speak a bit more slowly.

Greeting well invites meeting well.

'Here's your badge and we've saved some lunch for you.' I had just arrived, as anticipated, half-way through a planning day. I was greeted by a room full of people engrossed in conversation and, importantly, by these few words of greeting from the CEO. This practical gesture helped me arrive in the room and invited me to play my part in the afternoon's proceedings - just because one person had remembered me. Try it. It calls for care and attention but only little effort.

One chair per person what a good idea - except that sometime you don't know how many people will be coming to your meeting: 10, 14, 18, 25? You don't know. So put out the number of chairs for your best guess and have more stacked neatly close by. Add chairs and reorder the room if and when more people arrive: every one has a place. Much more elegant than having too many and having empty chairs in the meeting: 'who didn't turn up'?

To coffee or not to coffee - it's good to know.

You're planning to launch a report at 10.30 with around 50 people. You notice during the discussion time that comments are slow and it all feels a bit sticky. You notice a couple of people looking at their watches. Then you remember that you didn't provide any coffee or indeed water as your guests arrived. And you hadn't told them. Energy was low. Hmmm do it different next time - provide refreshments or tell people there will be none so they can take care of their needs before they arrive.

Anticipate energy levels.

One purpose of this meeting is to inform participants and there will be 6 short presentations. This is too much all in one go. So when you're planning the meeting, decide that you will tell people at the beginning that there will be six short presentations and that then there will a pause before the next three. In the pause invite participants to speak with one or two people sitting close to them. They can stand and move around if they like. Create a buzz. Give time to digest and regroup and get energy refreshed.



Especially if you are chairing or facilitating a meeting, creating rapport is one of the key ingredients of making a meeting productive and 'magic'. In any meeting you can make a start by greeting people as they arrive in the room. This works whether you know people well at a regular meeting or are greeting new comers to a new meeting. Make sure you're ready for the meeting in time to do this. Greet each new arrival, show them where the refreshments are, invite them to take a seat, introduce them to someone. Look after them. And they will look after you and make a richer contribution to meeting.

How do you get talkative people to be quiet?

The three suggestions below based on Sean Blair's excellent ProMeet blog were made at an International Association of Facilitators meeting in London. They're simple and they work. Try them. (Thanks Sean)

- 1.** You are facilitating a workshop and one person is giving feedback and is going on... and on... and on. Consider moving closer and closer to the person, slowly coming more into their field of vision, bringing their attention to you and your body language and your gestures to close or conclude.
- 2.** In a speaker presenting scenario, before the session starts agree with speakers how long they will speak for and agree when you will give them a time check. A 10-minute talk may have a 5-minute time check. When introducing them, announce that you have agreed with the speaker that you'll indicate at 8 minutes. When 8 minutes comes show 8 fingers and keep your hands aloft until the speaker has seen you.
- 3.** Interrupt the speaker and use the moment to create conscious awareness to the circumstance of someone speaking for too long. When you have the groups attention invite the whole group to become more aware of what's happening. You might say: 'May I ask you to stop for a moment? Thank you for your contribution. I'd like to bring your attention and the group's attention to what's happening at the moment'... and ask if there are others who would like to speak.

A cheap kitchen timer is worth its weight in gold.

When you start discussing an item in your next team meeting agree how long you think it may need. Start the kitchen timer and make it the responsibility of someone in the room to give time checks say every five (or for longer items, ten or fifteen) minutes. So their intervention is not disruptive to the flow of conversation, have them hold up their open hand every five (or ten, or fifteen) minutes. This will help everyone notice the passing of time and, when the time is right, to draw to a close - and strike gold.

It's a buzz - quick, easy, effective and free.

You're half way through and your three hour board meeting is becoming a bored meeting. Do not tolerate this. Inject a change of pace and stay on track. Choose an agenda topic which invites some expansive thinking and invite people to pair up into buzz pairs. Invite everyone to scribble as many suggestions as they can in say five minutes. Tell them its OK to walk about and to make a noise. Open the window. (Even better, plan your agenda so there is always a suitable item half way though the meeting) Phew it's a buzz.



Think snail, think safety.

What does a snail do when something touches it? You've seen it - it immediately shrinks into its shell. Just like we do in a meeting if we fear attack. Although we're (most of us, most the time) smarter than snails, we remember the last time we felt unsafe so many of us sit in meetings waiting for it to hit us again. So do everything to reassure participants that this time, they will be emotionally safe, knowing that this will help them come out of their shell and contribute.

Equal value as thinkers.

In the meeting act as if you really knew that every single person in the room is equally valued as a thinker. This means that everyone gets a turn to think out loud - and also a turn to listen powerfully. Equal listening and contributing are powerful partners in a meeting. Talkative people hold back to listen, quieter ones grow more courageous.

Clear your desktop.

A tidy desk helps you have a tidy mind. That's a good thing and will help you be at ease and productive. Before a virtual meeting, close anything on your computer which you will not need at the meeting. No mail, no facebook. Have open only the agenda and the papers you will need for your discussion. Sound obvious? It is. So do it.

Arriving 15 minutes early is being on time.

For a face to face meeting being early is good; for a virtual meeting it's essential. For a meeting starting at 2pm, get online as soon after 1.45 as you can. Find your headphones, make a cup of tea, dial in, sort out sound, social check in with others. It's 2pm. Are we all comfortably? (for those who don't remember - this is a reference to a 1960 children's radio programme). Now we'll begin.

Have a 'technical lifeguard' for each virtual meeting.

We've all been there: 'Where's the mute button?' 'The chat box has disappeared!' 'I can't hear anything' Help!! So try appointing a technical lifeguard for each meeting whose task in the meeting is to help people with their inevitable technical struggles so they can fully participate. The life guard does not need to be a world expert; they just need to know more than others.

Put AOB on death row.

Having Any Other Business at the end of a meeting is like having an unexploded bomb waiting round the corner. It might go off. It might not. But if it does, it can make a mess, produce a ragged ending to the meeting and/or make it overrun. Not good. So at the beginning check if there are additional items and add even small items into the agenda. So everyone knows what to expect.

It's easy and everyone's voice is heard at the beginning of the meeting (best for groups of 10-60). Think of a word (which has resonance with the group) eg 'climate' and pass it to someone. They have to think of a word which begins with the last letter. So they might say 'egg' and pass it on to the next person who says golf. And so on. Go fast. Before you start, ask people to guess how long it will take to get round the whole group.



Hardest first.

If you have more than a handful of agenda items, try diving into the hardest item first (not the standard minutes of the last meeting). People are paying attention. You can give it the time it needs. When the tough item is dealt with, energy is released as people feel relief. Hardest first is a good idea. Try it a couple of times and see...

C.O.R.D.

Along with email, phone, post, a meeting is one of the sources from which your 'next actions' will come. During or right after a meeting, C for Capture ie. write it down on paper or electronically whatever has come your way. Then O for Organise (when, how you'll do it), then Review and Do. CORD. Want to know more... get the book How to be a Productivity Ninja by Graham Allcott.

Be there... or don't be there

If you need to be part of the conversation, then be at the meeting. If you have no contribution to make, plan to spend your time some better way. As an organiser, decide who needs to be invited/consulted in advance/informed afterwards? Involve them. And only them.

Minimum intervention meetings

Is the massive cost of a face to face meeting really justified? (Maybe have a virtual meeting?) Do you really need 3 hours? (Maybe 30 minutes will suffice) Do you need 20 people there or are some potential invitees just 'meeting padding'. Plan it to be as easy and as short as possible, with as few participants as possible to get the job done. Or... maybe have no meeting at all. Even better.

How long do you need... to say what you have to say?

Part of your preparation as a chair is to ask a speaker this question. Encourage them to be precise. Then say that you will indicate say at 8 minutes for a 10 minute presentation. As you introduce them, say that you will indicate by raising your hand at 8 minutes. Then do exactly that.

No one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once.

To be engaged in a dialogue we need to arrive. We arrive when our presence is felt. Our presence is felt when we speak and are heard. For smaller meetings start by inviting every person to speak. The time taken will be more than repaid by everyone's fuller engagement and contribution.

VIPs are your Virtually Integrated Participants.

In a mixed meeting (some in the room and others virtual) give twice as much attention to your VIPs as others. They need it. Put each virtual participants' name on a sheet and place in the physical room... frequently refer to them by name eg. inviting their comment... ask if they need a break (it's even harder being virtual than actual).

Build on the best, reverse the worst.

At the end of every meeting, invest three minutes in thinking about the process you've just been through. If something helped you achieve your purpose, make a note and remember to do it again. If something got in the way, take a deep breath and promise yourself to do the opposite next time.



A name to entice.

Choose an appealing name that embodies what your meeting's about. For instance, 'Quiet Enjoyment' was the name of a meeting for a London local authority. It was named after their anti-harassment policy, which the meeting aimed to improve. A UN agency chose the name 'Re-Treat for Real Work' for an awayday. The team had worked hard and deserved a day out (a treat) which helped them be productive (real work).

Know what happens next.

Plan the three stages (before during after) of your meeting thoroughly, and be flexible enough to adapt as things unfold. For example, before the meeting you planned follow-through (after). Now, in the meeting check that what you planned still makes sense. Then do it.

Make a meeting space that says 'you matter'.

Nancy Kline's advice in Time to Think is wise. It does not mean you have to have a perfect space. It does mean it's good to make the best of what you have. Clean away the debris from the previous meeting, open the door to air the room, maybe put some flowers on the table. All of this shows people someone cares about the meeting - so they are more likely to. I've done all of these and more. It works. Try it.

Transform tardiness: greet late comers in a way which does not disrupt the flow of the meeting and which invites participation. As a chair you might smile at the late comer and say 'hello, welcome, please come in' and then continue the meeting. After some while, summarise proceedings so far which will serve both as a catch up for the late comer and also as a summary for those who arrived on time.

No purpose = no business = no meeting.

Only proceed with a meeting or an agenda item in a meeting if you can simply state what the purpose is. Resolve not to waste any more of your life in purposeless meetings and politely leave any in which the purpose is not clear.



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