



## MEETINGS MATTER. MAKE THEM BETTER.

👤 Lisa Banks and Betsy Miller 🕒 March 2, 2021 📁 Looking Ahead

Meetings should be engaging, focused and efficient. Talented leaders run them with clarity and purpose. Given the time lawyers spend in meetings, leading them skillfully should be a professional requirement. And yet, most of us have received no basic advice on how to do this. According to research cited in the *Harvard Business Review*, nine out of ten people daydream in meetings, 25% of meetings are spent discussing irrelevant issues, 50% of people find meetings to be unproductive, and 73% of employees do other work while in meetings. The answer is *not* to eliminate meetings, but to design them more thoughtfully and for greater impact.

Humans have been meeting since civilization began. Greeks designed the famed Agora of Athens as the city's central gathering space, to encourage the assembly of people and a robust exchange of ideas on topics ranging from business to law and culture. Historians hail the ancient Agora as a birthplace of democracy, a word that quite literally means deriving strength ("kratos") from the common people ("demos"). How is it that our most primal instinct, to find strength in the communal gathering of people, has devolved into a construct so universally despised?

The meeting concept isn't lousy; the way most people lead them is. What goes wrong? Most meetings are:

- Too long
- Boring
- Not a good use of time
- Lacking clear purpose
- Indifferent to the diversity of learning styles in the room

Think about the last meeting you enjoyed. What stands out about it? Would you know how to replicate that experience? We've applied principles of neuroscience and social psychology to pinpoint four key practices for elevating your meeting leadership:

1. Reveal the Purpose
2. Make it “Sticky”
3. Reach the Room
4. Practice your ABCs

## Reveal the Purpose

Well-run meetings have a clear purpose. Purpose drives the structure, defines the desired outcome, and creates an objective measure of success so that participants know what they have achieved. Identifying the purpose also clarifies who should, and who should not, be in the room.

A meeting without a defined purpose is like embarking on a road trip without a map or destination. You might stumble across some great sites, but eventually you'll run out of gas and be lost. While it's surprising so many meetings proceed without an identified purpose, this is easy to remedy because there are just three main options. These are:

- To brainstorm
- To decide
- To share information (give and / or receive).

The key is this: The leader's job is not only to know the purpose of the meeting, but also to *reveal* it to everyone attending. This allows participants to align their expectations with the announced objective and focus their contributions in support of it. Imagine how helpful it would be to know, at the start of every meeting, why you have been convened. Think about the impact of making this simple change and opening your next meeting with:

“The plan for today is to spend 30 minutes brainstorming \_\_\_\_,” or

“In this meeting, our main purpose is to decide \_\_\_\_,” or

“I'd like to take the next 15 minutes to update everyone on \_\_\_\_, and then hear reactions from each of you.”

With these simple statements, you've let the group know what is important to you, which filter you'd like them to apply, and what the meeting should accomplish. Equally important, your declaration guides what won't be discussed. This discourages the usual meeting derailer of off-topic commentary and grants permission to redirect attention to the articulated purpose. While the simplicity of this method might tempt you to declare a trifecta meeting that includes all three purposes, we strongly urge restraint. As a general rule, limit yourself to two. If you doubt this advice, reality-test it by saying all three prompts out loud and then let yourself feel how exhausting a meeting like that would be.

## Make it “Sticky”

The study of neuroscience reveals that our brains are attracted to information that is personally relevant. The human brain also likes to be stimulated, by information that is novel enough to grab its attention without overstimulating it to the point of overload. This is what neuroscientists mean by making an experience “sticky.” Our brains don't pay attention to “boring.” Things that are meaningful personally and register as new or novel cause the brain to release certain chemicals that physically help it to focus and retain information. These chemicals, particularly dopamine and norepinephrine, alert our brains that something important or pleasurable is happening and tell the brain to concentrate.

Whether it's sharing information in the form of an update, exchanging ideas to brainstorm solutions, or deciding upon an ultimate course of action, the brain is more engaged when the meeting is sticky. As Ursula Pottinger, a neuroscience-focused leadership coach, has said, “The way we loved to learn as children doesn't really change as we grow. We want to have fun, we want the content to be relevant to us personally, and we want it to be structured in a way that is stimulating but not overwhelming. It needs to be exciting and novel, but not too dense.”

## Reach the Room

People engage in different ways and process information differently. It follows that they'll also want different things out of a meeting. To lead a successful gathering, it's vital to connect with a diverse audience – to “reach the room.”

Psychometric assessments studying preferences around learning style, thinking structure, and motivation provide helpful instruction for leading successful meetings. We adapted some of these concepts into easy-to-follow advice about who is likely to be in your room and how to engage them.

- Structure: Individuals who value structure want to know what to expect. If there is an agenda, they want to follow it, and if you're going to hop around the agenda items, please tell them why. They process information analytically and want to make sure that the outputs are logical, well thought out, and correct.
- Results: Some participants want to be clear about the goal of the meeting and the needed outcomes. They will be focused on the details, often want to move fast, and want next steps clarified at the end. And, if it's a deciding meeting, please decide!
- Connection / Collaboration: This preference measures success by the quality of communication during the meeting. These individuals appreciate a check-in, need time for robust discussion of agenda items and are scanning the room to ensure all voices are heard.
- Inspiration: Individuals with this preference bring energy and inspiration to the meeting. They will be the brilliant brainstormers and creative idea-connectors. They appreciate spontaneity and mixing things up a bit. Invite these individuals to lead the meeting “check-in” occasionally and you won't be disappointed.

## Know your ABCs

As the leader of a meeting, you have the responsibility to make it meaningful for others. This requires preparation of a very specific kind: knowing what you would like people to feel, do and understand as a result of the meeting. Social psychologists call these principles “the ABCs” of human interaction: *Affect* (feelings), *Behavior* (actions), and *Cognition* (understanding). Professional facilitator and organizational psychologist, Rae Ringel, pioneered the application of these ABCs to meeting preparation.

Ask yourself these questions as you get ready to lead your next meeting:

- Affective (How do I want people to feel because of this meeting?)
- Behavioral (What do I want people to do as a result of this meeting?)
- Cognitive (What do I want people to understand as a result of this meeting?)

Contemplating the desired emotional state of the people in attendance (A) is often overlooked, but can be the most game-changing consideration because it informs tone and provides a cross-check for the actions you are asking people to take and whether they will be sufficiently motivated to undertake them. The B and C are vital as well; if you can't define those, you should question why you are holding the meeting at all.

## Conclusion

Elevate your leadership in meetings by incorporating four key practices: Reveal the Purpose, Make it Sticky, Reach the Room, and Know your ABCs. These don't need to be incorporated all at once – take your time to become comfortable with each before adding another. Most people find that purpose and ABCs are the easiest to integrate immediately, so consider starting with those first. Once you've mastered them, move onto making it sticky and becoming more mindful about how to engage the different needs of your participants. The ancient Greeks had it right: Meetings matter. You can make them better.

## ABOUT LISA BANKS AND BETSY MILLER

**Lisa Banks** is a certified leadership coach, facilitator, and mindfulness teacher committed to resilient leadership. A former practicing attorney, Ms. Banks is co-founder of Optify, a woman-led leadership development and technology company that develops the next generation of leaders through scaled and accessible coaching programs.

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