

# Make Meetings Work

Antoni Lacinai; Micke Darmell



Antoni Lacinai & Mike Darmell

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1<sup>st</sup> edition

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# Why should you read this book?

This book is for you if you want to create and run better meetings, or if you want to participate better in meetings run by others. It's loaded with tips, tools and methods – all very concrete and practical. We are not focusing on big events here, just on the everyday meetings you have at work: the morning meeting, the staff meeting, the information meeting, the customer meeting, the weekly meeting...

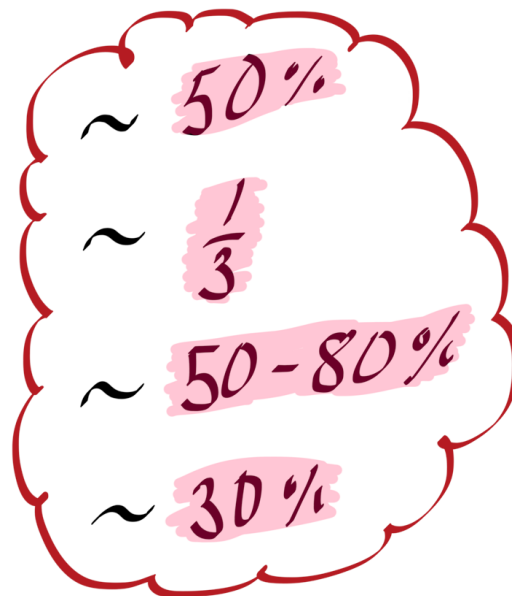
You will find that the magical number is three: every way of wrecking a meeting is followed by three specific ways of doing it better – avoiding the pitfall. Why three? Because we remember things in triads (*here, there and everywhere...father, son and holy spirit...Stop! Look! Listen!*) We have followed the Rule of Three in many ways:

- The book takes you maximum three hours to read.
- Our facilitator training is three days long.
- The book (or our lecture if you'd like one!) is divided into three parts:
  - ✓ **Before** is about how you ensure that the purpose and goals are clear to all participants, set an agenda, decide on who to invite, get the working space (real or virtual) set up...
  - ✓ **During** is about how you and others communicate during the actual meeting – playing roles, delivering messages, exploring options...
  - ✓ **After** is about what you do with the outcome – commitment, action list, follow-up communication...

Your authors have a long experience with meeting management and effective communication. We love great meetings!

Here we go!

# 1 Before before



## How to wreck a meeting? Deny these facts...

...which come from the analysis-company 3S in Sweden, who conduct surveys about this kind of thing – using a big sample of thousands of people. The results are often a bit scary.

(Yes... Yes...these findings are for mainly Swedish meetings in mainly Swedish enterprises staffed mainly by Swedes. It may be that you, dear reader, are in slightly better shape. Or worse, of course...)

## 1.1 Facts about meetings

1. A non-manager spends about 25–30% of working time in meetings. For a manager you can double it, and then some: 50–80%.
2. Half of those meetings lack a clear goal or purpose, meaning that participants (and often the facilitator) don't know why they are there or what they should contribute!
3. About a third of all meetings drain energy from the participants rather than boosting them. Stress, depression, demotivation...many people are effectively allergic to bad meetings.

## 1.2 Why does it look like that?

1. Nobody owns the responsibility of creating a better meeting culture – not HR, not Operations, not Project Management. We've asked them all. 'Not my job...' Nothing is measured, no rewards offered nor sanction threatened.
2. Very few companies embrace 'continuous improvement'.
3. Hardly anybody has been trained in how to run great meetings.

So the bad habits just go on...

## 1.3 The value if we do it right

1. Effective meetings free up time and boost energy, creativity, loyalty...
2. A purposeful meeting can be linked to the organisation's goals, and add value...
3. Examining and measuring meeting culture are steps to a learning organisation.

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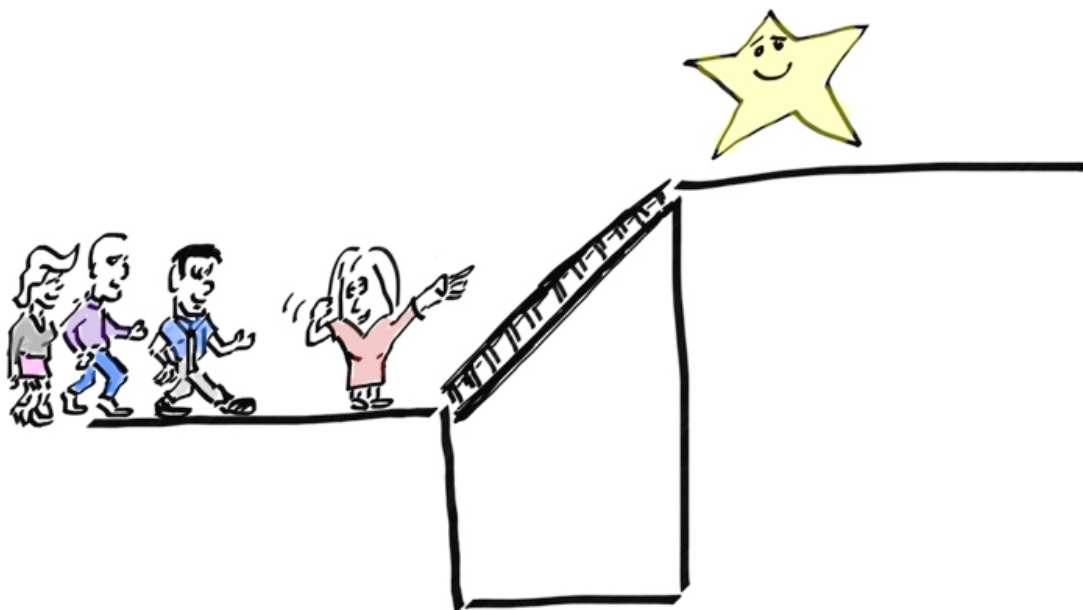
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## 2 About the purpose and goals



### 2.1 First, the purpose

**Want to wreck a meeting? Just make sure you don't really know what it's for.**

Manager: *Lucy! Great to get hold of you! Our colleagues from China are here. They want a meeting at 1pm, but I can't make it. You'll have cover for me.*

Lucy: *OK...but what's the purpose of their visit? What do they want to take away? I need to get the focus right...*

The manager: *Oh come on! Just show them the PowerPoint deck on our org-matrix. Good luck! Gotta run...*

**If you call a meeting:** Not knowing yourself what it's for is a splendid recipe for disaster. You know that uneasy feeling in your stomach? The inner voice that says you probably should know, before you waste everyone's time and make yourself deservedly unpopular? Don't ignore it! Your conscience is right! Let's find a way to put things right, shall we?

Why are so few really good at nailing down the purpose of a meeting? Because it can be really tricky to do. (We have seen it over and over, exploring this stuff with various clients.) But if you do manage to nail it down, you have a lot to gain.

### 2.1.1 Why it's good to have a clear purpose

1. **You will be more inspired and inspiring.** People will notice if you act with a clear purpose as your guiding star.
2. **You will be future-oriented.** The question “why” isn't about the past. It's about the future – all those opportunities, dreams, rewards...
3. **It will give everyone more energy.** Knowing *why* is a boost – motivation, resilience, perseverance...

#### 2.1.1.1 Then the goal

##### Want to wreck it? Keep the goal vague and fuzzy!

High jump coach: *Okay, come on! Jump!*

Trainee: *But you haven't set the bar...*

Coach: *That doesn't matter...jump as high as you can...or as pretty...or as fast...whatever...*

**If you're running a meeting:** So first, you are unsure about the purpose of the meeting. And now you don't know what you want to accomplish with it? Great wrecking!

As we said at the start, about half of all meetings lack a clear goal and purpose. Let's do the arithmetic. Say you spend two hours a day in meetings. That means that one hour each day, you will be confused, frustrated and angry. If there are eight of you in the department, that adds up to one full-time employee wasted – ‘opportunity costing’ says this is wrong; so does common sense.

Locke & Latham, gurus of goal psychology, tell us that the average performance improvement in organizations that start putting solid goals in place is 16%. They measured above 50% increase in some cases. These numbers are not specifically for meetings, but for any goals involving quantity, quality, efficiency and so on (a modern take on dear old Management By Objectives), so the principle applies to meetings as well. Let's say that you can raise the performance levels by 15–30%. That's a lot. How would you deploy those resources?

### 2.1.2 Clear goals give advantages

1. You can get more out of each meeting, or
2. You can have fewer participants at the meetings, or
3. You can have shorter meetings, producing the same output.

### 2.1.3 Think about this when you set your goals

1. **Make them concrete and clear** e.g. *“When this meeting is over we will have identified 3 new markets for our product”*
2. **Make them action-oriented** e.g. *“After the meeting we will be clear about who’s going to do what”*
3. **Limit the number of goals** per meeting, to stay focused and make sure you don’t ‘fail’

### 2.1.4 Goal setting – tools and techniques

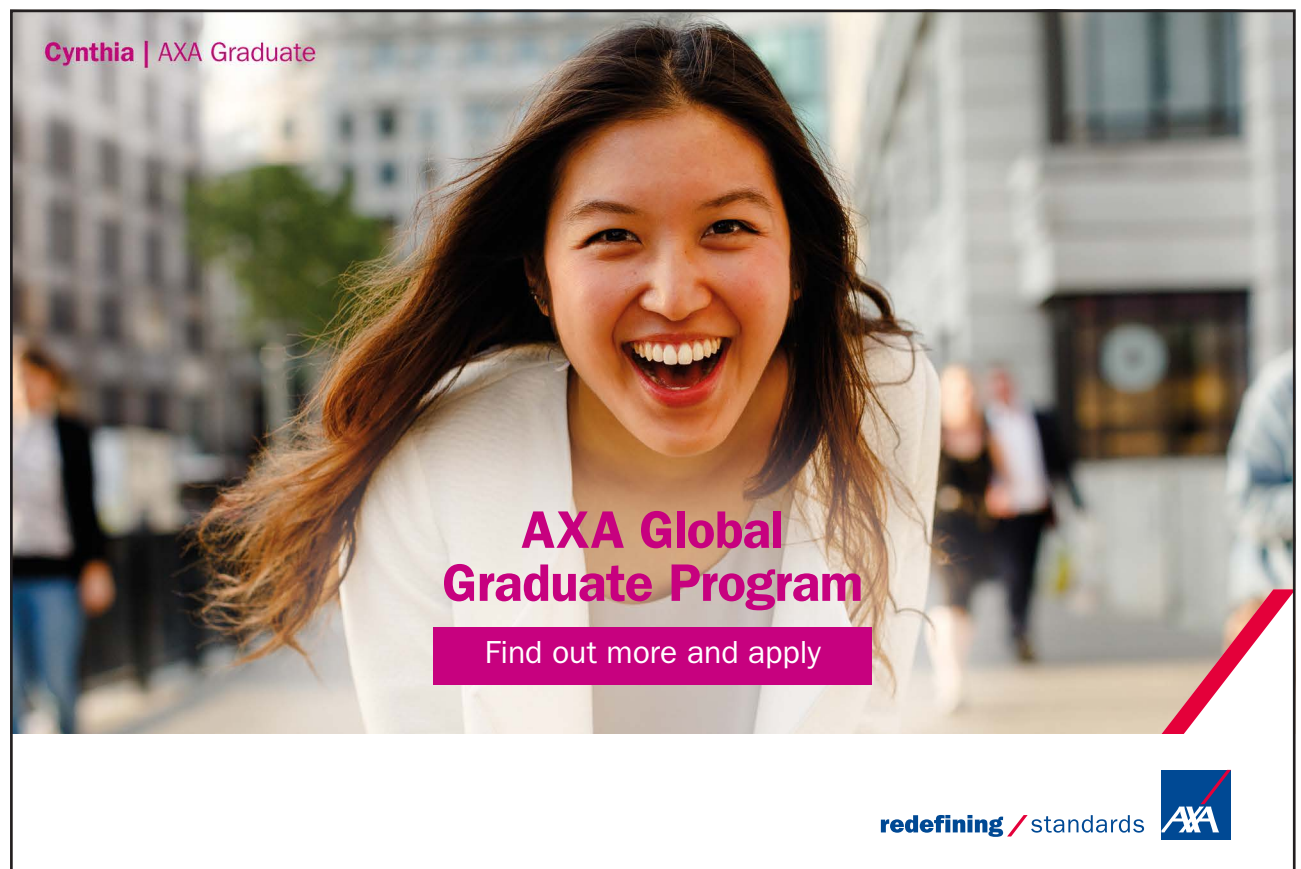
Communication, Motivation, Delegation...all the good stuff applies, like “Know-Feel-Do”, “SMART” and “KISS”

#### 2.1.4.1 Know – Feel – Do

##### Know

Say you have an information meeting. What do you want the participants to know when you are through? What should stick in their memory? What will they remember if you wake them up in the middle of the night?

Focus on that and skip the rest – send it by email, deal with it at another meeting or put it in the database and tell people how to find it.



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**Feel**

What kind of atmosphere do you want to create? How do you want the participants to feel? The mood matters a lot! When you want people to pay attention, absorb material and remember it, a sour, cranky climate is no good...no good at all.

**Do**

What do you want them to do during the meeting? Switching off their smartphones is only the beginning. *I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.* Even in an information meeting, you want some sort of action. And later? What do you want the people to do then? Comply? Change? Spread the word? Decide in advance!

**SMART**

According to Wikipedia, this model became public knowledge in the eighties, since when various definitions have evolved. Here's a good one:

**S = Specific**

The more specific, the easier it is to perform. Let's use the example about launching a product on new markets. *"We are gathered here today to talk about possible markets for our product..."* will not do the trick. The same goes for: *"Let's do our best to find..."* This is better: *"90 minutes from now when this meeting ends, we will have come up with 25 ideas on new clients for our product, across all regions, and a top-5 list of activities – with appointed people taking responsibility for getting things done, by an agreed deadline."*

**M = Measurable**

If the goal is clear and specific, it is also possible to measure. Good: now you can follow the progress. Make sure that your goals for the meeting are measurable: 90 minutes; 25 ideas; a top-5 list; a time frame. These are all countable. For others, go for quality: *"How well did we succeed with A? Have we moved a bit towards a solution to B that makes everyone happy? Next time somebody asks about C, will you be more comfortable?"*

**A = Agreed**

It is easier to move towards a goal if I accept the goal, and much easier if my colleagues feel the same, so that we don't push and pull in different directions, or encounter blocks put up by someone who isn't properly aligned. If the goal you set is going to create friction with another department (common enough in large organisations) you must negotiate an agreement. Otherwise, you've got anger, frustration, waste...again.

**R = Realistic**

This is often a weak link in SMART. *Realistic = not impossible = not too challenging = an easy life for everyone, please...* Hardly a formula for peak performance. Ambitious is good...it's good to stretch...if we don't aim high we ain't gonna finish high. Get the balance right: challenging but achievable.

**T = Timebound**

Proverbs again: *He who hesitates is lost...Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today...Procrastination is the thief of time.* How long will you allow a discussion to last before moving on? Coffee break: what discipline? Action points – to be agreed before people start worrying about bus/taxi/train/airport schedules?

**KISS**

The last model, which we found in the “The Decision Book”, derived from U.S. Navy parlance. We like it. KISS stands for Keep It Simple, Stupid! Don't over-complicate things. Just ask yourself: *When the meeting is over, what should have happened?*

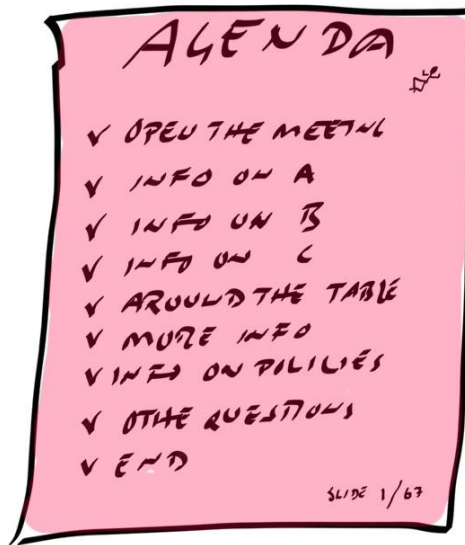
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### 3 About the agenda



#### Wreck it? Use the same agenda all the time

Agenda in Latin means ‘things to be done’. How sad that for so many people now it means ‘a list of boring formalities and procedures to make sure there’s a bureaucratic feeling of safety and order’.

**If you’re in charge of the meeting:** When you craft your agenda, give some thought to how the *participants* will get involved at each stage – helping to fire the bullets, not dodging them. And those breaks – coffee, tea, lunch, whatever – plan them properly and don’t kid yourself that trimming and tightening will make you more efficient; people who are resentful at being rushed through their well-earned refreshment time will regress into a zombie state. People need rest and recuperation...quite apart from the benefits of networking outside the conference room. Informal buzz groups networking around the sandwich table can generate more valuable ideas than the slog through the official agenda...

### 3.1 Design your agenda

1. **Be concrete with each item on the agenda** so people can think about it properly; a vague, fluffy, wishy-washy generalization doesn't help people to think. Try putting a code-letter beside each item: **I** means it's an **information** session, so the participants can get into 'student mode'; **d** tells them you're hoping for a **discussion**, so they can assemble relevant facts and feelings; **D** indicates **decision** time – be ready to take up a position, or even cast your vote.
2. **Recognise the importance of breaks**, especially if the meeting is a long one. Mark the breaks on the agenda – **coffee/tea/lunch**, of course...but why not '**breathing space** to consider what you have learned, prepare your next contribution, or gently meditate', or '**networking slot** to make new friends or catch up with old ones', or '**digital time** to make calls, check emails and all that stuff you really shouldn't be doing during the meeting'?
3. **Allow time for a summary at the end**, and label it in the agenda, so the clock-watchers don't start shuffling sighing and zipping their briefcases before you have confirmed consensus around the decisions and nailed down the action points and timeframes. (We'll be coming back to this).

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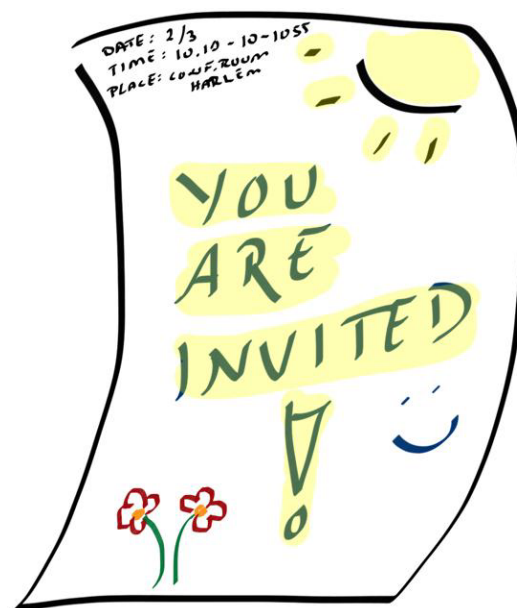
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## 4 About the invitation



### **Wreck it? Invite the wrong people...or play safe and invite everybody!**

*“Welcome to this startup meeting. Nice to see that so many of you could come. Well, the thing is, I got an assignment from my boss. And I thought that if I invite you all, then I can show off – the importance of the project and my own high status. Besides, I need some help to understand where I’m going with this...and why. My boss never said anything about that...”*

**If it’s your meeting:** It pays to spend time on your invitation. Those you call up should be given a message of competence – ‘You’ll be in good hands at this gathering’. Set the tone, state the aim, give hints about your own thoughts on the topic; show you’re prepared, so they feel inclined to make some preparations too. The opposite? Well, how often have you, as an invitee, thought ‘This looks like a waste of time, but I suppose I’d better shuffle along and show my face...go through the motions...pay lip-service...’?

**If you’re an invitee:** Are you *really* going to this meeting – body, mind and spirit? Can you say for sure that you should be there, rather than doing other things? One third of all participants don’t know why they were invited, but go to the meetings nevertheless! Good reasons for going: the meeting has relevance for you; you have relevance for the meeting. Poor reasons for going: because you feel flattered at being on the list; to fill an empty seat so the meeting has more credibility; because nobody else in your department is going, and something might – just *might* – be said that will affect you; to find out why you were invited in the first place; to catch the keynote speaker at the end and raise a completely different issue; to avoid another meeting that promises to be even more boring; because there’s a good espresso machine in the corner...



## 4.1 Rules for the invitation

1. **Decide who should come and why.** It'll never be perfect, but surely you can do better than 33% of the group not knowing what they are there for...and probably wishing they were somewhere else. Make the invitation informative: *Your experience in the area of xxx will be valuable...the discussions and decision around yyy will have an impact on your project...the action points to be allocated under item zzz might affect your group's priorities...* If that seems laborious, just put on everyone's invitation *If you want to discuss why you should come, please call me!*
2. **Spell out the purpose and goal(s) of the meeting.** People like to look forward with an idea of 'success' versus 'failure', so sharpen their appetites: *The hope is that this meeting will solve the problem of aaa...a clear result on the issue of bbb will save time and money in the next trading quarter...an agreement on the message to be delivered at the exhibition – especially regarding ccc – will enable us to brief the design consultants more effectively than we did last year (when it was a bit of a flop, frankly)...*
3. **Be creative.** An ugly or boring invitation will inspire nobody; grab Attention, create Interest, stimulate Desire and encourage Action. (If that's new to you, google 'AIDA'!) A little picture can be good – but please, not a cliché emoticon ☹... It's easy to google 'please come' or 'important meeting' or 'decision time' then click on 'Images' and find a ton of eye-catching pix to cut-&-paste...even into your Outlook message. Outlook doesn't allow much creativity with layout, but you can add a little spice to the words themselves. Why not ask a question? Is a statement the only way to make a point? How many kinds of question can you ask? Will one of them catch your invitee's attention? See? Works, doesn't it?

**Bonus tip:** Think Freud. It is said that Sigmund, the psychology guru of therapeutic sessions, only had 45-minute sessions with his patients instead of a full hour. Why? He had a severe toothache, and needed a frequent morphine dose to ease the pain. The numbing effect lasted 45 minutes, then it was 'Thank you and goodbye' while he took another hit before the next patient came in.

So you just freed up 25% of your meeting time. Not bad. Our experience is that all clients who try this never go back to full one-hour sessions again.

# 5 During

Rules, procedures, choreography, relationships, communication...How can you act *during* the meeting so that it will be enjoyable, efficient and effective? (Maybe even a bit *exciting*??)

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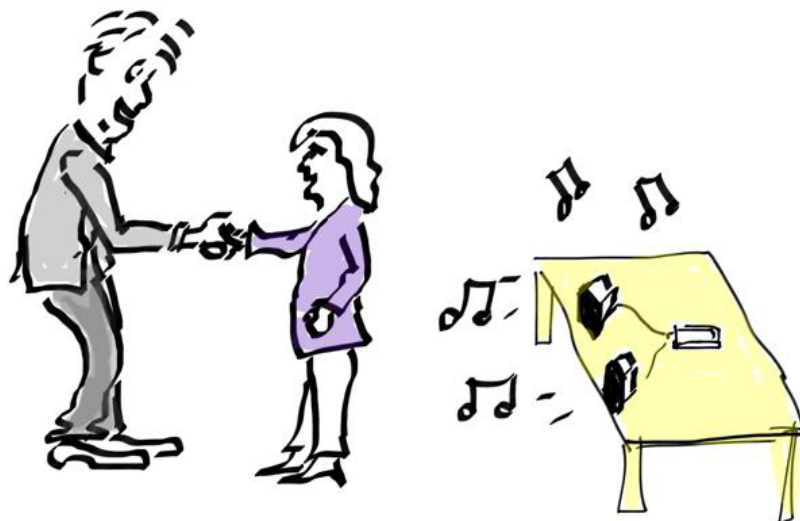
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## 6 About the moments just before the meeting starts



### Wreck it? Be late!

*“Ah...Hi, sorry I'm late. My other meeting just ended. Let's see...where's the projector? Oh, there it is. Anyone got an adapter for a Mac? No? Fred, can I borrow your PC? Good. You got a USB-stick as well? No? I just have to run and get one then. Why don't you all grab some more coffee in the meanwhile...?”*

**If you're in charge:** Have it all ready at least five minutes before kick-off. Furniture, lights, heating, air-conditioning...Make a bad start in one of these areas and you might not repair the damage. First impression? *This guy doesn't have a clue!* Rest of the meeting? *Microphones? Projector screen? Name badges? I hope somebody's taking the minutes properly...*

**If you're one of the crowd:** We understand: sometimes you can't help being late because the previous meeting ran a bit over time, finishing two minutes after the hour, and this one – starting on the hour – is three minutes' walk across the carpark. And even if you don't have a meeting before, why should you be on time, when you know this meeting won't start when it's supposed to? It's infectious, this attitude. But just because a lot of other people slide in late, that doesn't make it right. Right? Be there on time. Lead by example. (There's an important 'cross-culture' element here, and your authors, as Swedes, recognize that many professionals living and working in other parts of the world have a less strict attitude to timetables and schedules. Still...it can never be *wrong* to turn up on time, can it?)

## 6.1 Get a good start

1. **Check any technical equipment, the agenda etc.** Be ready with these five minutes before the meeting starts. If you're to use technology – projector, computer, Wi-Fi – chances are that something won't work. And while you're at it, check the white board pens as well (not dry or smudgy), and that you have an eraser...and enough paper on your flip chart if you need it. The agenda: any changes? What if one of the presenters has cancelled, or the guy with the display material has got stuck in traffic, or the finance expert has just told you he has to leave early... is the agenda still valid or do you need to make adjustments?
2. **Look each the participant in the eye on greeting.** When chimpanzees have been out working and return to their pack, the leader immediately establishes eye contact with the other chimps. If he doesn't, it creates negative energy and anxiety in the group. The same goes for us humans. Avoid anxiety: when you welcome the people, look them in the eyes and make them *feel* welcome. They want to be seen; they need to be seen. While you're at it, why not shake hands as well? (Culture again: we Swedes are known to be relatively reserved and cool...so if you're reading this within a touchy-feely-huggy-kissy tribal zone, well...let's all try and get the balance right, shall we?)
3. **Play music while people are arriving and settling in their seats.** It's a great mood setter. It can help the participants rinse their minds of thoughts from their last meeting, or the email they read in the lift, or last night's family row...

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# 7 About the start of the meeting



## **Wreck it? Complicate the introduction...or skip it altogether.**

*“Ladies and gentlemen. Let me initiate proceedings by elaborating on the hoped-for outcome versus the prognosis during Q3, during this gathering of seasoned colleagues and subordinates – some of them newcomers but all welcome. We measured a 12 per cent positive variance, which means we have an input value for Q4 that the finance controlling function is rather pleased with. During the next three hours – 18 bullet points plus 192 slides – I would appreciate it if you could all pay the fullest attention, as we work our way through a rich and varied menu of contributions from the seasoned colleagues already mentioned...”*

**If you're running the show:** Communication...where to begin? For sure it's harder than we think. We seldom put across what we mean, since everything is being filtered three times; we generalize, we distort and we delete information before we even open our mouths. What's left is not what we actually believe, or want to transmit; close, maybe, but never right on the button. Or have you never, ever, been misunderstood?

Another challenge: if you speak for more than, say, a minute, the audience will mostly remember the beginning and the end of your presentation, and hardly anything from the middle. And Sorry, but showing an agenda-slide with 18 bullets will not help at all.

**If you're one of the cast:** When you try to absorb what the director/facilitator is saying in the introduction, you will have the same three filters operating – generalization (picking up the gist), distortion (subjective interpretation of crucial words) and deletion of details (not getting snowed under). OK, so it's mainly the transmitter's responsibility to ensure that the information is well organized and clearly expressed, but that doesn't mean the receiver – you – can be totally passive; you have to *try to understand*.

## Get off to a good start

1. **Learn the first 30 seconds by heart.** Earn credibility: speak from the heart, so they know that you know what you're talking about – that you 'own' the idea rather than just parroting it. Once that's established, you can start looking at your notes if you like.
2. **State the central message:** Create a focus for the task at hand in a few short, simple words (KISS, remember?), at this early point when attention is high. Promise, sincerely, to be repeating the point again later. Repetition is not boring. Repetition is not boring.
3. **Check their expectations.** *Is that OK with everyone? Are we on the same page?* Look around: nods and smiles are good...blank stares or shrugs are not, so if you get some of those, dig a bit deeper: *Something missing, Mary? Not what you were expecting, Jose?*

**Bonus tip:** Let each voice be heard in the beginning of the meeting, even if it's only a *Hello*. (Maximum 10 people for this, or it gets stultifying.)

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## 7.1 About meeting norms and rules



### Wreck it? Make sure you have no rules.

*“Well, let’s start then. Hi and welcome. Today we will...(ring tone!)... Yes, you can take the call Mohammad... (door rattle!)... Hi, Christina, we just started. Robin, how about you start informing us about that meeting you went to yesterday? Robin? Robin? Can you please close down your Facebook page for a moment and... Phil, you were there as well. Please tell us... Oh, he’s on his way to the bathroom...”*

**Running the meeting?** If you have regular meetings with the same group, let ‘Ways of Working’ be established at an early stage: OK to read emails during the meeting?...come and go as we like?...tell funny stories sometimes?...pass notes or send texts round the room?...interrupt/contradict/ask for a vote on contentious issues?...

A lot of this is up to you, but without some kind of agreement, you run the risk of frustration, inefficiency, poor motivation, conflict...Even at an *ad hoc* meeting, a few simple rules (three?) on a flip chart can create a good feeling. Example templates below...

**A willing participant?** If there seem to be no meeting rules, ask for some. At least find out if phones should be on or off!

### 7.1.1 Agree on rules

1. **Use a flip chart.** Put up the simple template below. Agree upon what responsibilities the facilitator has versus the participants. This template is sufficient for most groups and teams.

**Meeting rules:**

<b>RESPONSIBILITIES</b> <b>facilitator</b>	<b>participants</b>
Before:	
During:	
After:	

2. **A more extensive variant** – perhaps for a group with regular meetings, who want to invest a bit more time in the Do’s and Don’ts:
- Each individual fills it out independently, marking the box they agree with most strongly
  - Then you work with each statement, going around the table so that everyone can explain why their markings. Harvest all the opinions and reach a group consensus
  - Take a fresh template and mark the group’s decisions
  - Pass it round for everyone to sign – including you.

Make sure you have plenty of time for this exercise; people who have suffered lousy meetings for a long time might seize the opportunity to let off steam – sorry, ‘air their views.’ And don’t worry too much where exactly the group makes its mark (unless you’re a manipulative narcissistic despot – in which case this book is not for you). The most important thing is to understand each other better. Here we go:

7.1.2 The role of the facilitator

The facilitator, running the meeting, can guillotine any discussion he/she feels is going off track, or not leading to the goal.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

The facilitator decides the agenda

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

The facilitator should always put allocate time at the end of the meeting, to get some feedback on how the meeting went – what worked or and what didn’t.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

7.1.3 The role of the participants

Anyone who chooses to be silent implicitly agrees with any decisions.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------



At our meetings, it is best to stick to issues without displaying emotions.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

Anyone in the group should feel free to raise questions regarding the meeting itself – environment, methods, co-operation *etc.*, even at the risk of disturbance or discomfort.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

7.1.4 The technology

At our meetings it is forbidden to read emails.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

At our meetings the phones are off.

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

At our meetings we abolish PowerPoint

Totally agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Totally disagree
---------------	--------------	---------	-----------------	------------------

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3. **A simple ad hoc exercise** – no fuss, but better than no rules at all: ask quickly at the start for a show of hands on key questions. *Phones ON?...OFF? Laptops ON?...OFF? Questions AS WE GO?...AT THE END?*

**Bonus fact:** The brain can only focus on one thing at a time, so if you bring your digital friend to a meeting, you're losing contact with analog people every time you take a sneaky look at Facebook, or click a Reply to an email. In effect, you're walking away from the meeting without permission, and your more polite meeting partners will put you in the 'bad manners' category.

## 7.2 About communicating at the meeting



### **Wreck it? Make sure you have a really boring meeting**

*“What are you laughing at?? Do you think you get paid for that? This is a serious working place, so take that silly grin off your face. Like Now!”*

**If you're setting the context:** Positive atmosphere? Energy? Synergy? Motivation? Personal and Professional Performance? Accentuate the Positive and Eliminate the Negative? OH!...you mean you're gonna let them *HAVE A BIT OF FUN????!!!* Good!

**If you're within the context:** The thoughts you frame, the words you speak, the actions you take – they all feed back into the way *you* feel, and spread around the room affecting the way *they* feel. Even if you've got real problems back at the office, or at home, put on a reasonable happy face at the meeting, for everyone's sake. If you have some bad news to deliver, or are compelled to disagree with another's opinion, there's no need to be all Mr Grumpy. Steer away from sarcastic criticism and practice support, praise, warmth. Costs nothing; it will make a difference.

### 7.3 About inspiration



**Wreck it? If it's not in your job description, don't do it!**

*"...hi...maybe we could...decide...something...or...I don't know...I haven't really... prepared...sorry about that...well...maybe somebody else...?"*

**For you if you're running the meeting:** You don't *have to* inspire. But if you can, the meeting will go better. You really don't have to beat the drum or put on a silly hat. But if you show some sparks of leadership, the participants will respond.

**For you if you're participating:** Inject enthusiasm, take a few little risks, stick with the winners!

#### 7.3.1 How to be an inspirational facilitator

1. **Believe in what you say.** If you don't, why should I? If you do, it will be visible in your body language, audible in your voice. So people will see it, hear it...and feel it in their stomachs. The key to your belief – the fuel for your enthusiasm – is in the *purpose*. So if you're shaky or unsure, contemplate the good things that will happen if the meeting is a success.

2. **Find the balance between control and energy.** Control brings clarity, but too much can make you boring. Energy brings engagement, but too much make you a clown. Find the thrilling balance and you'll be exciting...charismatic...inspirational.
3. **Be prepared.** In earlier pages, we've touched on the agenda, the invitees, the shape of the table... Prepare yourself, too: the image you want to project – not out of vanity, but for the sake of the participants, who will contribute better if they feel good about you steering the meeting.

### 7.3.2 Body language



**Wreck it?** Zero body language. Flat line. Play dead.

*“Oh, I thought this all about meeting management. And now you’re asking me to make a presentation? I feel uncomfortable with all that strutting-round-the-stage stuff. I usually just flip through the slide deck, sitting in my facilitator chair. Nope, I think I’ll pass on this one...”*

**Running the meeting?** Standing? Sitting? Adopt a straight and steady posture, in a good position where you can see the people and they can see you, and put in a bit of dynamism – looking at Person A for a few heartbeats, pausing, smiling at Person B, pausing, making contact with Person C... Think of your hero-communicator and emulate his or her model. Not an ego-trip, just a way of creating positive momentum. Eyes, hands, voice, tempo...

**Participating?** Don’t be shy or self-effacing. A balanced body language – eyes, hand gestures, an air of confidence – will add power to your interventions and contributions.

### 7.3.3 The body speaks

1. **Dare to look the participants in the eyes.** Not a gaze in their general direction, or a shifty rapid scan from face to face; these create a feeling that you are prevaricating, or lacking belief in what you are saying. Bang goes your credibility! Long fixed stares at Person X, Y or Z send signals of aggression (or lust). No contact at all? Looking at your shoes or out the window, or gazing at the screen in the hope that their attention will be fixed on that damn slide? Forget it!
2. **Keep the nose and chin down.** If you lift your face up an inch, chances are you will look superior and arrogant. You don't want that.
3. **Use arms and hands to strengthen and show.** Think charades but don't go overboard. You transmit a different, better energy if you use your hands and arms instead of locking them behind your back or folding them in front of your crotch, or do that hand-wringing thing (washing the dishes? making meatballs?). Imagine a zipper from your armpit to your wrist. Unzip it all the way. Now you are free.

**Bonus tips:** If you making a claim, turn your palms down towards the floor and end the sentence on a lower note. That sends a signal that you are confident and sure about your statement. If you are inviting a dialogue, put your palms up and end the sentence on a rising pitch. The same goes if someone in the room raises their hand, wanting to speak. If you let your arm end with the palm up, you are giving permission for the person to speak. Palm down means you're not...or at least that they need to wait.



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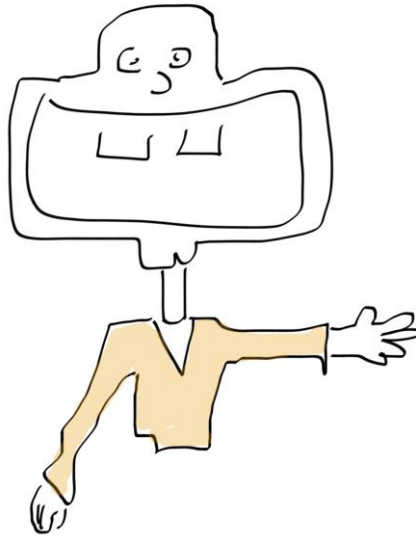
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## 7.3.4 The art of listening

**Wreck it? Be like a crocodile. No ears. Big mouth.**



Antoni asked his youngest son, when he was around six years old: *“What’s the difference between hearing and listening?”*

The boy thought about it for a moment and then said: *“Well dad, hearing is just not being deaf. But listening is to really try to understand.”*

Antoni beamed: *“Welcome to the firm, my son!”*

**For those who run meetings:** An employment agency recently did a study to find out what qualities a great manager should have. Responsiveness came on top of the list. As a facilitator or “meeting leader” you have a special responsibility to not only do the talking but also to listen. As opposed to just hearing.

**For those who participate:** Of course this goes for you too and not only for the facilitator. And if you are perceived as a person who really listens, your own messages will be taken more seriously as well. As the late dr. Stephen Covey wrote: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”*

Did you know that you can listen at different levels? Here are three:

### 7.3.5 3 levels of listening

1. **You don't really listen.** Sometimes this is called *inner listening*. Anything that other people are saying, passes through your filters, models and prejudices of your perceived reality. Sometimes you just hear a word and you're off associating that to what ever comes to mind, or to a specific solution you want to talk about. In this level you aren't really interested in what the other participants really means.
2. **You listen to the content.** In this phase you are interested of what other people are saying. You don't judge everything according to your own preferences and you are curious about what they mean and where they are headed. You are *interested* instead of *interesting*. You also follow up with questions that will add to the discussion and the content.
3. **You "take in" the whole person.** This is when you have your radar on. You perceive nuances in the choice of words, the pitch, the body language including micro expressions, that reveals the other persons feeling etc. You feel empathy. You use your intuition and detect what is not said as ell.

### 7.3.6 How to be a better listener

1. **Stop talking.** There is no better way of listening than to shut up. And that goes for the little voice inside your head as well that is constantly talking, evaluating, reasoning, expressing opinions and so on.
2. **Be interested instead of interesting.** When you listen: try to let go of your own ego for a while and instead focus on understanding the other person. As an interesting side effect, what will happen is that you will actually become more interesting by being interested. Because not so many people are. Not so many other people really listen.
3. **Ask instead of guessing.** If you don't know, ask. It's often better to ask and appear ignorant than to not ask, and be ignorant. Also. According to Neil Rackham, author of SPIN-selling, asking the right questions is one of the keys of understanding, and eventually selling. He also found that open questions (why, what how etc.) would be answered with more than one word 90% of the time, while a closed question only will be answered with more than one word 60% of the time. Both works. Choose which ones are most appropriate.

7.3.7 How to treat other people



An advertisement with a background of yellow circles of varying sizes. On the left, the text "DON'T EAT YELLOW SNOW" is written in large, bold, purple letters. To the right, a purple speech bubble contains the text "What will your advice be?". Below this, a white box contains the text: "Some advice just states the obvious. But to give the kind of advice that's going to make a real difference to your clients you've got to listen critically, dig beneath the surface, challenge assumptions and be credible and confident enough to make suggestions right from day one. At Grant Thornton you've got to be ready to kick start a career right at the heart of business."



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**Wreck it? Treat others like you want to be treated!**

*“I always give straight answers and feedback to my colleagues and subordinates. I always say that conflicts are good – even desirable...clearing the air. What? Do they feel uncomfortable with my approach? Not at all. Or at least, not to my knowledge. They haven’t said anything to me about it...”*

**For you who run the meeting:** You have come a long way if you realise that we are driven by different motives for different reasons. We have different ways of communicating, thinking and acting. By deepening your insights of how you yourself prefer to act, speak and think, at the same time realising that we all have different preferences, it will be easier to understand others. The best communicators get this and are able to adapt their communication style, displaying empathy and a desire to understand others’ motives, sensitivities, appetites, hopes, fears.... One size does not fit all. So instead of agreeing that you should treat others the way you want to be treated, we take the liberty of disagreeing – because you don’t mind, do you? We propose the following: *Communicate with others the way they want to be communicated with.*

**For you who participate:** Same thing goes. And remember: If you feel a lack of chemistry, it could be because you and they/he/she have diverse preferences – different tastes in behavior – especially communication. You might both love cats, but you have different ways of experiencing and expressing that love. Incompatibility? Or complementarity? If you, in spite of different preferences are able to value the complementing differences, you can make great things happen.

### 7.3.8 We are all different

The psychologist Elias Porter has presented what he called Relationship Awareness Theory, where he describes four personalities. The fourth is a mix of the first three. Perhaps you identify yourself with one of them?

1. **The one who values relationships.** Take Thomas Teamplayer. He has a Nokia phone because he likes their old slogan “Connecting people”. Thomas likes people. He likes his group and he wants people to feel good. Thomas is always supportive. Of course he realises that the organization must produce results and reach targets, but according to Thomas, treating employees and their stressful situations as kindly as possible, with all the changes, meetings and high workload in mind, is what matters. If a person enjoys the working place he/she will perform better. Thomas often begins a meeting by saying *“Right let’s get started. How was the weekend?”*

2. **The one who values results.** Regina Result is her name. She likes the Nike Slogan much better: *Just do it*. She get things done, she is ambitious and driven and not very comfortable information or directions, or cuddling with the team. Before a meeting she already knows what she wants to achieve, and a quick decision is best. Regina is self-confident, and she knows she can persuade people to accept her opinion. She starts a meeting by saying, “*Let’s get to it. This is a decision meeting, so let’s do just that: make decisions and be done in good time. For those of you who want to chitchat, please feel free to do so after the meeting.*” This is if she attends the meeting at all, rather than being out doing stuff.
3. **The one who values quality.** Quentin Quality has a motto: *If things can be done better, then good isn’t good enough*. Quentin is motivated by decisions being taken after careful analysis of facts and possible consequences. He is not hasty. First you analyse, and then you decide. If a change is to happen, Quentin wants to ensure that it is done carefully, with a rational structure to ensure the highest possible quality – no risks, no regrets. He begins a meeting by saying: “*This is the 14-bullet agenda as you can see on the slide, and we will work through each point in great detail – no short-cuts or compromises, please...*”

Why is this good to know? Well. You will have all three of those personalities in your meetings. Their driving forces are very different. So you need to meet them where they are and adapt your communication style so that you can not only reach out to the group, but also reach in – to what makes each participant tick.

### 7.3.9 How to address challenging behaviors

#### **Wreck it? Let everybody behave just as they please**

Eric: *Let’s do some brainstorming. Could anyone...*

John: *Oh come on! Not the Post-it game again. Brainstorming is sooo 1990! Do we really need to waste our time on this?*

Eric: *Well...I just thought that.... OK, Tina, what do you think?*

Tina: ---

Robin: *I CAN TELL YOU WHAT TINA REALLY MEANS AND THAT IS THAT MY OPINION IS BLA BLA BLA*

Eric: *Thanks, Robin for your...er...input. Maria, how about you?*

Maria: *What? What did I do? Why are you picking on me? You all are!*

**If you're in charge:** Let's face it: whether they do it on purpose or not, many of the participants can/could/might ruin your meetings. Or at least make them uncomfortable and less productive. The first thing you need to consider is if such a person will be a one-time participant, or if they are 'regulars' at a routine meeting. If he/she is a one-time visitor, you might choose to 'let it go' – not spend emotional energy on 'improving' their behaviour. Otherwise, if you have an agreed set of ground rules (see the earlier chapter), you can refer to this agreement, using the group conventions – and the group will – to bring Mr or Mrs Difficult into line.

**If you're making a contribution:** Be honest, now...have we struck a nerve here? If you are one of those who hinder/block/disrupt meetings, take a good look in the mirror and think hard about how you can change your behaviour and start contributing instead. And regardless of your own personality, pray that you aren't stuck in a meeting where the facilitator is one of the personalities below. If so, we feel deeply for you.

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## 7.3.10 Difficult personalities – and how to handle them

1. **The ones who hog the airtime.** You recognise them: (a) the gasbag – verbose, garrulous, discursive, wordy...perhaps very sociable, having a hard time sticking to the topic in hand, drifting away in random directions. Time flies...people yawn...the agenda creaks and groans; (b) the attention-seeker, one of whose common strategies is late arrival – not sneaking in quietly at the back, but making an entrance that will not go unnoticed...coat off, scraping chair, hissing of gas as the top is screwed off the mineral water, grunts and sighs as the laptop (Yes...) is plugged in...

**How to handle them?** In reverse order (wake up at the back!)...Attention-Seeker: when he/she enters the room you keep quiet. Nobody is listening to you anyway, so you wait till the disturbance is over, then carry on. Afterwards, you can have a quiet word, asking him (OK, Yes, It's usually a man) to cool it and play the game – like being on time and showing respect for other people. GasBag: this one requires frequent control...*“Can we park that discussion and get back to the issues at hand?”* or *“Is this really relevant to the issue on the table?”* or (a bit gentler) *“Thanks. Coming back to Item 3...”*

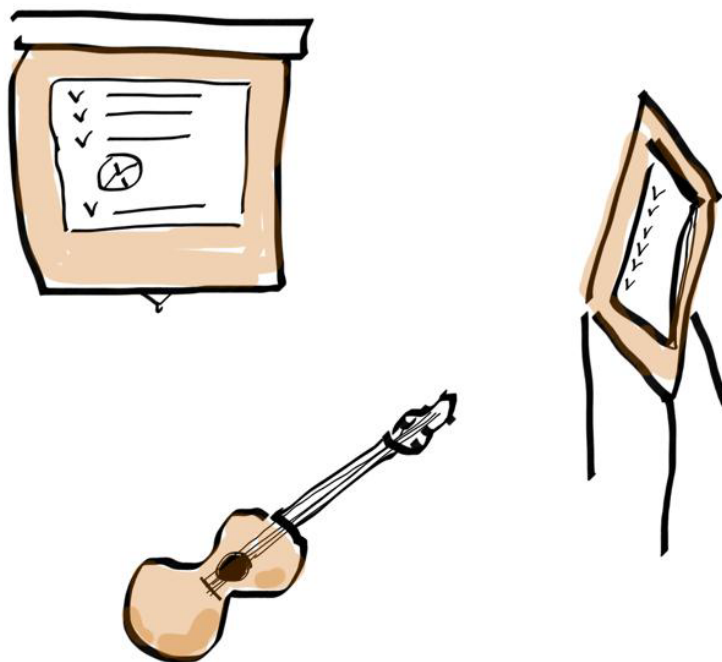
2. **The ones who will pick holes in everything.** You could be burdened with (a) a know-all who has a personal need to exhibit superior knowledge, or (b) a sniper who has a mission against you or what you represent, or (c) a poor creature who is having a really hard time in some different arena of life, and is venting his resentment, chip on shoulder, wherever he goes... Whatever the 'reason' you can expect criticism – overt or veiled, deliberate or unconscious – at every turn: (a) *Whilst we can all see advantages in that course of action, and the urgency of a decision, we should take into account clause 17 in the Appendix to the general report filed yesterday by our subsidiary in Rubovia, where it clearly states...* (b) *That contradicts what we agreed earlier, doesn't it?... I know a lot of people who might disagree with it, but you haven't asked them to this meeting, of course...* (c) *That might make sense in this narrow context, but in the bigger picture I can imagine plenty of pitfalls, disappointments, blind alleys...*

**How to handle them?** Know-All is a tricky one. Say *Thanks for the input*, then throw it open to the rest of the room – *Anybody like to pick up on that?* – whilst maintaining your own good relations with signals of appreciation and admiration, asking for his/her opinion on a different issue later. You can do that with Sniper, too, but watch out for the sneaky one who uses questions that are just masked criticism – *Is that a fixed plan, or can we expect the usual so-called 'adjustments' after we start the work of implementation?* If that happens, turn the tables, with a sticky question in return: *On a scale of 1 to 10, how pessimistic do you think we should all be feeling right now?* That approach might strike Chippy as yet another stab in the back from a cruel existence, so make it a bit gentler: *Would it be useful if you and I had a little chat about that later, so you can voice your concerns at greater length?* Why not? As a great facilitator, you might sometimes be acting as counsellor-therapist – or at least sympathetic listener.

3. **The silent, barely visible ones.** Perhaps they just want to be in the background observing and reflecting. Perhaps they are naturally shy or timid, that every verbal communication effort is a great strain for them. Or perhaps they are so anti-everything that they don't want to participate, and sit there exuding a negative vibe that spoils everyone's day.

**How to handle them?** Reflectives: set up a process that will extract some words from them without your bullying – perhaps by saying *When each person speaks, he or she should look round the table and name the next speaker.* Timids: since they don't like pushing for speaking time, set up another process – like *For a change, let's all spend 2–3 minutes writing a tweet-sized comment on this issue, then we'll all read them out.* Antis: call a short break and say *Have a chat for five minutes with someone you don't know well, or check your emails, while I invite X outside for a moment...* and then deliver a calm assertive ultimatum: *For everyone's sake, I'm offering you a choice. You can rejoin the meeting with a different attitude, or you can leave now. What's it to be?*

#### 7.4 About supporting tools/aids



#### Wreck it? Use PowerPoint!

*“The graph in the bottom right hand corner can be a bit tricky to see from where you are sitting, so let me guide you with my laser pointer...there, you see? No? I am a bit shaky, so...and the text to the left, yes the small one, what it really says is...hold on. Let me put my glasses on...”*

**If you are using the tool/aid:** Come on, now...be honest: have you never heard the expression DEATH BY POWERPOINT? We googled it and got 14,400,000 results – twice as many as we got when we googled LOUSY COMMUNICATION. HaHa. More seriously, as long ago as 2003, the renowned semiotician Edward Tufte told us that ppt was dangerous – that if it were an over-the-counter drug, it would be banned for the damage it does to the human brain. BUT there is nothing wrong with ppt, just as there is nothing wrong with a whiteboard, a flipchart, blackboard-and-chalk, a stick to draw in the wet sand when the tide goes out...What is wrong is the lazy use of the thing; to quote Tufte:

*The standard PowerPoint presentation elevates format over content.*

So for each slide, ask yourself: *Am I really trapped in this format, or can I just use the 'Blank' slide and paste in something to clarify/illustrate/stimulate discussion/help the people to remember?* The AID should be that – something that helps...including Lego, Postits, a ukulele, something you picked in the conference centre garden during your morning walk... And if it doesn't help, it isn't a supporting tool. It's a wrecking tool.

**If you are 'benefitting' from the tool/aid:** We totally get it. You will doze off or daydream rather than suffer through another bunch of painful slides, at yet another boring meeting. Our advice: pull the plug, steal the power cord, hide the projector, anything to block the slide supply. You'll be a hero! After some confusion, there is a tiny chance that you will find new, better ways of acting in the meeting. Suggest a break or an "energizer" (we'll come to that later).



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We are not PowerPoint antagonists...not really...well, maybe we are...just a bit... Let's share some Pros and Cons, and some tips on how to use it if you really must.

#### 7.4.1 So there are some advantages with PowerPoint

1. You can prepare your slides in advance, instead of drawing ugly sketches on a whiteboard.
2. You can show relevant pictures that strengthen your message
3. ...nope, we could only find those two.

#### 7.4.2 But Oh! So many *more* disadvantages

1. **You believe your preparations are done** after spending too much time creating and shuffling slides, and then putting them on a USB-stick. Well you haven't. Because you still don't know what to say if the projector goes down.
2. **You don't know how to use PowerPoint** and pack each slide with all the text you can think of – slogans, messages, quotes, paragraphs from the HQ guidelines... This leads to participants, at best, sitting and reading the text faster than you can read it out loud – contact lost! (One way to avoid this is to use 10-point text, so they can't see it – reputation in tatters!)
3. **The participants can't focus on you and the slide at the same time.** Their working memory will be Zero if they try. John Sweller from NSW University has done research showing that we can only use one sense at a time. So either we listen or we watch. This goes so fast normally that we don't think about it. In a PowerPoint context, it means that I can't listen to what you are saying while trying to decode the slides. I choose, or get a short circuit trying. Of course, the more information on the slides, the worse it gets – blown fuse, burnout, power cut.

**Bonus disadvantage:** PowerPoint meetings are boring!

#### 7.4.3 If you still insist on PowerPoint

1. **Use relevant pictures.** If a picture isn't relevant, it is at best a decoration, at worst a confusing distraction.
2. **Less is more.** Take away everything that doesn't add true value. Maximum one message per slide with *maximum* six objects (including logos, headlines, graphs, bullet points, header-footer, snazzy cartoon, photo of the CEO *etc.*) Remember: the slides are there for the participants and not for you, since you already know the content by heart. *Don't you...?*
3. Use the **B-key** often; it blackens the screen. W is also good: white. Just like the in-off switch on the good old overhead projector. *Look at me now, while I inform you/sympathise with you/entertain you...*

**Bonus tip 1:** If you are to share the material afterwards, make two ppt versions: one reader-friendly with ample text since you won't be around to explain everything; one presentation-friendly with much less information, so you can deliver the punch lines, with a lively intonation, and bring the whole thing to life with your empathy, charisma, and stagecraft.

**Bonus tip 2.** For every hour you invest in slide preparation, spend 30 minutes practising your speech. Your presentation will be 800% better. (That's just a ball-park figure...no empirical studies on the actual percentage...but you get the idea.)

What about other classic tools?

#### 7.4.4 Flip Chart

1. You can prepare some of the papers before: flip-flip-flip...like a TV chef, bringing out the ready-dressed salads
2. You create in front of the group: nice fat felt-tip...like a good schoolteacher, explaining the graph/pyramid/statistical table as you build it
3. You can save the papers for later: even taking a photo of each page and distributing them... like your Grandpa with the holiday snaps

#### 7.4.5 Whiteboard

1. As with a flip chart, you create in front of the group – involvement
2. You can erase and adjust as you go – a dynamic model
3. You have more space to draw on – and bend, stretch, use that body language

**Bonus tip 1.** If you happen to draw on the whiteboard with a permanent flip chart pen (whoops!), you can still save the board. Draw over the permanent lines with a 'proper' whiteboard marker, then use a damp cloth or water spray to get back to white. (After-shave from your sponge-bag or a miniature bottle of vodka from the flight work too...)

**Bonus tip 2.** Erase from top to bottom instead of sideways. You will appear more controlled.

**Bonus tip 3.** If you have sloppy handwriting, use markers with a pointed tip, so it's just a *bit* clearer...

#### 7.4.6 Smartboard

1. Best of both worlds – saving the material, as with a flip chart, erasing and adjusting, as with a whiteboard.
2. You can often print the material
3. You can often email the material



The disadvantage is that the technology can throw you off-balance; somehow it just ain't natural. (Primary school classrooms have interactive whiteboards that never get switched on.) And if you have an audience of techy types your credibility crashes each time you mutter to yourself *How the hell do I change from red to green?* But once you get the hang of it...

## 7.5 Ice breakers, warm-ups, energisers and other group exercises



**Wreck it? Make sure people are passive, and stay that way!**

**If you're facilitating:** Passivity is numbing for most people. Few like to be spoon-fed with information then left alone to digest and reflect; most want to be involved, one way or another. In many meetings, you have a chance – the right, the duty – to apply methods that will activate and engage the participants. (Just think about what that word means, please.) Different methods suit different learning styles: here are a few...

**If you're participating:** Congratulations! This meeting can give you energy – an active role to play. Feed your facilitator with ideas on different exercises that you know work – especially if they seem a bit short of ideas to begin with.


7.5.1 Great energy gives better meetings

1. **Break out of old habits and patterns.** Routine gets boring after a while, limiting our ability to be more effective.
2. **Start with an icebreaker.** Boost the energy right at the beginning, even for the shy ones. Many people find it easier to speak professionally if they have been given space to say something informally at first.
3. **Be ready to throw in an energizer.** If the participants can take a mental (and physical) break from the official agenda, and do something a bit different, it will refuel their energy level.

7.5.2 Ice breakers

**The oddest common denominator**

- Split into groups of 3–5 people.
- Group goal: find something unusual/amusing that you all have in common. Five minutes!
- Start the clock and let them buzz, getting to know each other in this new way
- Let them share, and decide on a winner, by yourself or by taking a vote
- The group with the weirdest common denominator wins a prize



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**The brick**

Before your businesslike brainstorming session, try this to warm them up:

- Small groups again, with pans & paper or huddled round a flip chart
- Give them two minutes to come up with lots of ways of using a brick
- The winner: either the longest list, or the most bizarre/inventive suggestion

**The waste bin**

Stressed-out participants dragging their feet as they arrive? Try this:

- Ask them to write on a piece of paper the things that stress them/ preoccupy them – things irrelevant to the imminent meeting.
- After a minute or so, walk around with a waste bin and ask them to crumple the papers and throw them in the bin.
- Ask if they are ready now to be mentally present. Or tell them that you expect it. Expectations and performance go hand in hand.

**7.5.3 Energizers****Two truths and one lie**

Time: depends in the group size. 5–15 minutes.

- Divide them into groups of 3–8 people
- Allow 1–2 minutes for each individual to come up with (or jot down) three statements about themselves: two honest facts and one fabrication
- Let each person tell (or read out loud) their statements. The others then guess which are true and which is the LIE.

**Energy mingle**

Time: 5 minutes

- Ask everyone to stand up
- Tell them: *We are now going to mingle and look each other in the eyes. Every time you make contact, you say something positive to each other. Anything from: “You have a nice smile” to “You are helpful when I need it” or “You are always on time and I appreciate it.”*
- Put on some music in the background while they mingle.
- Afterwards, share your feelings. Usually, this gives plenty of energy and unites the group.

**Improve**

Time: 5 minutes

- Split them into pairs
- One of them makes up a story (e.g. Once upon a time...) about any subject, people, time, place...
- The other says random words out loud – every 20 seconds or so
- The storyteller's task is to quickly integrate these words into the story and keep going
- After half the time, they switch roles.

This exercise is great if you want people to practise spontaneity and improvisation.

**7.5.4 Other ways to engage the participants**

After 30 days, we will remember very little of what was said at a meeting, if we are passive spectators. According to one of the training companies we talked to, we can remember around 70% if we participate actively and are able to discuss the topic. This time you'll get more than three methods. We go for nine instead.

**Write on Post-its, then talk**

- Give the group a question
- Every participant writes down his or her own answer
- Afterwards they can discuss in smaller groups or in front of the whole group

**Beehive: discuss, then share**

- Give them the question
- Instruct them to talk in smaller groups
- Call them back to the big group and let them share their ideas, opinions, answers *etc.*

**Interviews**

- Divide them into pairs
- Let them know the question(s) in hand
- Tell them to interview each other
- (Optionally) ask them to share the outputs with the bigger group

**Open discussion**

- Pose the question
- Invite everyone to share their thoughts and moderate the ensuing discussion
- Make sure you have some follow-up questions
- With a large (potentially intimidating) group, you can ask a couple of participants in advance, to raise their hands and share their views, just to get the ball rolling

**For or against**

- Set up the contentious issue – a principle, a strategy, a value...
- Split them into two teams
- Tell one team to come up with arguments 'for' and others to prepare the 'against' case
- Give them time to sharpen their arguments, then chair the debate

**Different assignments to different groups**

- If you are a bit short of time, divide the group into smaller ones
- Give them different tasks/topics/themes
- Suggest each group elect a timekeeper, note-taker, spokesperson
- All back together, the spokespersons deliver, and the big group can add little bits if they like

**Expand – prioritize**

- Let the group come up with as many ideas as they can in a given time – maybe slapping Post-its on a whiteboard
- Cluster/categorise/ link together their results if needed – doing it yourself or making it a group activity
- Pick one cluster as the hot issue/key leverage point/urgent-important action list....

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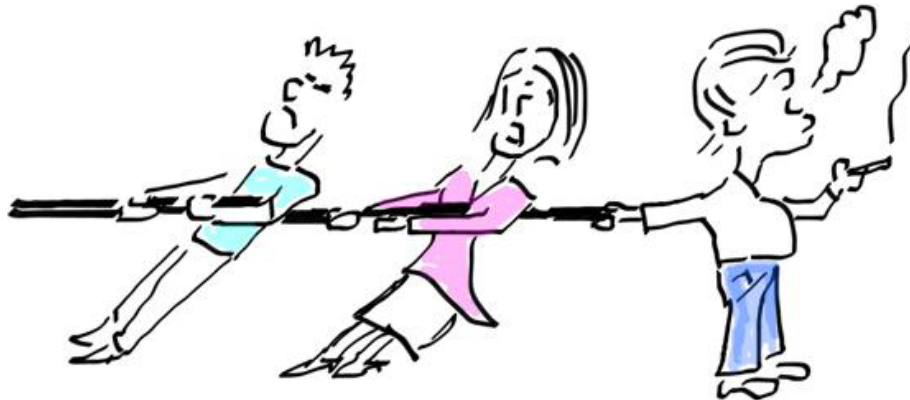
**Start with a model**

- Draw a “4-field” diagram, for instance a SWOT:

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

- Divide them into 2 or 4 groups
- Get them working with one or two of the squares
- Let them present the result

7.6 About group dynamics



**Wreck it? Ignore the pitfalls.**

*“I’ll take it gently today. It’s been a bit much lately. Now it’s time for others to step up to the mark; at this meeting I’ll just say my piece. With any luck, everyone will be charmed and go along with it.”*

**If the meeting’s your responsibility:** You have your management team, your department or your project group – your place on the organigram. What can possibly go wrong in a meeting? Plenty. If, for example, the group is too homogenous, sharing one point of view, one sense of direction, one mindset. Or if it’s a new group, unsure of each other’s experience, qualifications, knowledge, skills, influence, attitude, hobbies, hope, fears, ambitions...? Or if they’re complacent...or lazy...(We’ll stop here!)

**If you’re just a (vital) part of the meeting:** Watch out for the signals; consider the consequences. Is the right decision being made or is it bad group pressure? Sometimes you might be the one standing in the way of a really bad decision – if you are brave enough. It’s tough but it can save everyone time, effort, money, reputation and self-respect if you speak up!

### 7.6.1 Avoid the pit falls

1. **Everyone is thinking exactly the same way.** An American cult leader warned that the world would end at a certain date in 2011. (Actually he had predicted the event a few years earlier, but admitted that he had miscalculated slightly; no harm to his credibility, apparently.)

Every person in his sect fell in line and set about selling everything they owned. Then they waited. The date came and went...

Sometimes, a group will be almost too tight, leaving no room for fresh thoughts or for people to disagree. They stop thinking critically or creatively. If their values are good, this is probably OK for a while, but when the group is infected with strong prejudices or ingrained habits, you will see many poor decisions made. This phenomenon is called **groupthink**.

**What can you do?** Make sure your group is heterogeneous when it comes to sex, personalities, competencies *etc.* Or as one of the writers saw on an office board:

*If two persons think exactly the same, one of them is unnecessary*

2. **We take bigger risks in groups.** Another pitfall is called **group polarization**. Let's say you talk to an individual about a possible investment. Then you discuss the same topic with a group. Often, the group will give you advice that involves a greater risk than the individual would. Why? It could be because each member of the group feels less personally responsible. Or it could also be some version of peer pressure.

**What can you do?** Again make sure you have a diverse team. And why not appoint someone to put on the hat of 'consequence analysis'.

3. **Slacking off.** Imagine you are pulling a 100kg weight on a rope, and it's the absolute maximum you can manage. If your colleague, exactly as strong as you, stands behind you and pulls, would you then manage 200kg? Nope. 180kg is probably your combined maximum. And if you are six equally strong guys you'll pull about 300kg. Why is that? It could be many reasons. Misunderstandings, miscommunication, unclear roles and goals are some. And then you have those you are simply slacking off. This is called **social loafing**.

**What can you do?** Make sure you have a clear purpose and goal. Make sure people really understand this, and the direction in which they should aim their effort. Don't give them tasks that are best done individually, but use group intelligence to solve more complex problems. Make sure people are contributing rather than just tagging along. If someone is slacking off too much and too often, you need to be brave and bring it up – feedback time! If that doesn't help, replace the loafer before the situation gets out of hand.

### 7.7 About decision making



#### Wreck it? Take no decisions!

*“How about we all think a little, if you like, about my proposal, but there’s no hurry. Well, maybe there is, but anyway...what do you think? Or do you need to mull it over a bit longer, always supposing you can find the time. Perhaps we can kick it around a bit more, or maybe set up a new meeting some time...or...?”*

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**If you're giving direction:** At meetings, as in life outside, you will encounter people with different decision strategies. If you set up and run a meeting, it's good to accept and understand this, and – with luck and patience – be less frustrated in the process. The right attitude is an important stage in the progression from talk to action.

**If you're taking direction:** Same thing goes for you. Do you want your colleagues and managers to buy into your ideas? Find out how the others prefer to make decisions.

### 7.7.1 Different ways to take and influence decisions

1. **I'm in charge.** People who say that, or feel that they have the mandate, are normally empowered to take decisions – preferably right then and there, so that they can move on. To dwell is not really their thing.

**What to do? Let them decide.** Let's say you're pitching an idea to a manager who favours this style. Rather than proposing the “what” and “how”, you ask them things like: *What is the next step?* or *How would you like to proceed?* or simply *What is your decision?*

Let them decide. They are not too keen on you telling them what to do.

2. **I need time.** Either they don't have the mandate and need to refer back and ask someone who has that authority, or they want time to reflect on your idea (and perhaps compare it with others).

**What to do? Ask specific questions.** Ask how much time they need. Ask what they need the time for. Ask how you can help them come to a decision. Ask when it is appropriate to call for a new meeting or get their considered input. Put that on the action list.

3. **Assure me once more.** These people need you to tell them more than once, why your idea is valuable, beneficial, reasonable. Once is not enough.

**What to do? Collect “Yeses”, then propose.** For instance: *Do you agree that we need X? YES. ...and that we need this because of Y? YES...and that my proposal meets this need? YES...at a cost within budget Z? YES... So can we call that a decision?*

By now you should be able to get to a *Yes* or a *No*, and finally to a *Yes, OK, let's go for it!* If not, go back and find out where the person got lost.

**Bonus tip 1.** Separate the words *inform* and *involve*. If a decision has been taken about something when you start the meeting, don't pretend that this is up for discussion. Just inform them: *Here's the deal: A, B, C.* If on the other hand you have an open situation – room to manoeuvre – *then* you can involve them. Don't try to fool them; they will see right through you.

Of course, even an information meeting can have some level of involvement. If not the *what*, then perhaps the *how*, *where*, *when* and the *who's committed*.

**Bonus tip 2.** A decision meeting may require some time set aside before the meeting to read up. How much can you load them with? If they are swamped with equally important tasks and deadlines, you should consider this before demanding that they sink their teeth into piles of data. Poor things are probably suffering at the hands of those less considerate than you. How can you make it easier for them? If you can condense or distil the material, chances are that more of them will come to your meeting having done their homework. On the other hand, if they are under-informed for whatever reason (*Oh! Nobody told me that!*), you may need to postpone some of your crucial agenda items. Or maybe your established meeting rules state that you can take a majority decision anyway. It's up to you all to choose the wisest path.

## 7.8 About ending the meeting



**Wreck it? Be unspecific and unclear. Then run to the next meeting, since you are late!**

*“Oh my God, is it that time already? OK, that's that then. Got to rush! My next meeting started two minutes ago. Great session, thank you all. You know what we talked about so...well, you know. See you next week.”*

**For the captain:** This is all too common. We sincerely hope that you have planned your day better than this, so you can start and end each session professionally. A good ending creates consensus about what you have decided, and who is responsible for what and when. You have a greater chance of reaching your meeting goals if you plan for a proper ending of the meeting. Also, it will give everyone more energy if they leave the meeting in good time, with all details nicely taken care of.

**For the crew:** Even if your facilitator-captain has done all the planning in the world, it won't help if you are the one who dashes off to another meeting before the deal is in the bag. We recognize your dilemma if you are being summoned to a meeting that is due to start the exact same second as the present one is ending. If so, try to help the facilitator by informing him or her, so that you can do the summary a bit earlier – or send a message to the next facilitator begging permission to creep in 10 minutes late. Spread the word: Freud-type 45-minute meetings make everybody happier and more effective.

#### 7.8.1 Close the meeting on a high note

1. **Summarize the meeting; be concrete.** What will be done? Who will do it? When is the deadline? Perhaps you find this obvious. After all, you've just spent valuable time and energy debating an issue, and you've reached a group decision. Still, too often we have seen how that decision never turned into action, so however obvious, here's the advice: spell it out, ensure that there are no misunderstandings or places for people to hide, and get them all to grunt and nod.
2. **End with a reflection.** Reflections contribute to a better feedback-culture within your organization. If you do this, people can praise what went well in the meeting, and offer advice on how it could be improved. That will lead to continuous improvement, which leads to more efficient meetings, which will lead to better results for the organization – reaching your overall goals quicker and better.
3. **Play some music as people leave the meeting.** Something positive and happy, just like when they were coming in. Again, a good feeling, positive energy, gratitude.

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## 7.8.2 Reflect

Here are three methods you can use at the end of the meeting:

### 1. **What was good? What could go better? How do we make it better?**

- **Time:** Depending on the group size, 2–5 minutes. If you have a group larger than 20 people, divide them in half.
- **How:** Do an ‘around the table’ and ask each participant to answer the headline questions
- **When:** At the end of every meeting.

### 2. **Commitment**

- **Time:** 2–10 minutes. If you have a group larger than 20 people, divide them in half.
- **How:** First, let each one think (or scribble down) what they will do when they get back from the meeting. After 2 minutes, everybody stands up and shares with the group what they will do. They could also mingle around doing the same thing in smaller groups or pairs.
- **When:** Training sessions, during change processes and decision meetings.

### 3. **One word**

- Ask each participant to mention a key word or a feeling that they are taking with them from the meeting.

# 8 After

Follow up and actions! What do you need to do after the meeting, in order to get the greatest effect from it?

## 8.1 What you do when the meeting is over



**Wreck it? Leave the meeting behind you. Move on to the next.**

*“Jeeesus! Another meeting! When will I ever do some work around here??”*

**For you who ran the meeting:** The tension you felt is loosening its grip; the meeting is over. Or is it? We are so sorry, but for you, it’s not over just because the participants have left the room. You can relax and unwind quite soon, but first you have a few things to do. Make sure you have some time in your calendar right after the meeting.

It shouldn’t take you too long to tie up the loose ends, so your meeting has the impact you should aim for. But if you don’t put in that little extra time, you miss out. *The job isn’t finished till you tidy up!* Clean the room, send out the minutes and thank-yous, and plan the follow-up activities.

## 8.1.1 Just do it

1. **Reflect on your own contribution to the meeting.** Did you achieve the goals you set, in line with the broad purpose? Why not ask some of the participants – those whose views you respect – for feedback on your performance?
2. **Send out the minutes of the meeting, within 24 hours,** so that the document reaches the participants before they have forgotten the content, decisions, actions etc.
3. **Set aside time for whatever actions you yourself are responsible for.** And do them! Lead by example.



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## 9 Afterword

For those of you who embraced our tips and tried them: congratulations on running, or participating, in a better meeting.

We know that the advice spread throughout this book works: over 100 concrete tips. If you've read the thing from front to back, rather than just dipping in here and there, you may feel a somewhat overwhelmed. How can you possibly tick the box for each one of them?

Don't think you have to. How do you eat an elephant? One chunk at a time! (That old metaphor...) Every piece of advice – every tip – that you bring into play boost the effect of the meeting. But where to begin? What to do? Sorry, we can't help ourselves...time for another three tips, in summary:

1. **Start from the beginning**, with the purpose and goal(s). If you can nail them down, you will all perform better.
2. **Agree on meeting rules** for your group. This will help you move forward quickly, smoothly, painlessly.
3. **Analyse where the real problems are** and start fixing them. Too many boring slides? Fix it. No one is prepared? Fix it. Some are constantly late? Fix it. No clear agenda? Fix it. And so on...

We are really excited and happy that you share our interest in having great meetings. Just think about it:

- If we have better meetings, then we will understand each other better.
- If we understand each other better, we will eventually have peace on earth.
- If we have peace on earth, we will save the planet.

Being more competitive, earning more money, having energising jobs; these are positive side effects, which you will enjoy into the bargain.

If you have any thoughts, questions, ideas or more successful tips on great meetings, just get in touch with us. We look forward to your thoughts.

Thank you for reading our book and good luck with your future meetings!

Antoni Lacinai & Mike Darmell

[www.hattrickmeetings.com](http://www.hattrickmeetings.com)

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**Mike Darmell** is the meeting evangelist, who is the most sought after speaker when it comes to organizations' meeting culture, and the also about the constant use and abuse of being connected 24-7. He is also the author of a highly noticed book on the latter subject, which is being translated into English, as these words are written. The last 20 years, Mike has worked with meetings, and the last seven year, he has put his focus in increasing the effect of internal meetings. More from him on [www.gr8meetings.se](http://www.gr8meetings.se)

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