

10 Ways to Better Manage Your Meetings

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At most colleges and universities, summer offers a blessed break from the regular meetings of the academic year. It's a relief to have a few months' free from having to jockey for air time, listen to long-winded people opine on matters they know little about, navigate petty factional skirmishes, or shore up colleagues whose ideas are routinely shot down.

Now that it's September, the prospect of returning to meeting-heavy days may seem enervating. But what if we made 2019-20 the year in which we change the traditional dynamics of our meetings? Could we find ways to make them more productive, less

contentious, and more open to voices that usually get muffled or silenced?

Amplifying diverse voices is not a radical idea — it is, after all, a fundamental way that good leaders make people feel included. But giving others a voice does more than foster a sense of belonging: It leads to greater innovation and more strategic decision making. When the usual suspects do all the talking and the loudest voices drive all the conversations, we miss opportunities to consider better options.

So as you begin the new semester, I invite you to put a spotlight on the meetings you are leading and/or attending, and ask these questions:

- Who is doing all or most of the talking?
- Who is not listening?
- Who can't seem to break into the conversation?
- And most important, what are we going to do to break those patterns?

That last question feels especially urgent. In my various roles in HR and campus administration, I hear from people both inside and outside my own university who long to be seen and heard in meetings, yet feel like their voices don't matter. With varying degrees of pain, outrage, and/or exhaustion, they utter words like "ignored," "dismissed," and "silenced." Their outrage doesn't discourage me because I always like a good fight, but I get worried when I sense exhaustion. Nothing good happens when people are tired and hopeless.

Part of the problem stems from repeat offenders: leaders who dominate discussions, loquacious coworkers who routinely hijack agendas, appropriators who repackage someone else's idea and claim it as their own. But people who feel ignored and silenced also lay the blame on those running the meetings. Why? Because those leaders have the power to manage the meeting's power dynamics and floor time — yet too often fail to do so.

Now is your chance to change that and spur productive and inclusive conversations. Here are 10 strategies to get you started.

Respect different thinking styles. We all have different ways of processing information. Some people think on the fly and rarely know what's going to come out of their mouths until the words have been uttered — they think by talking. Others need time to consider possibilities and are uncomfortable voicing opinions or sharing ideas without extended reflection. To honor those diverse styles and to ensure that both introverted and extraverted thinkers are positioned to be full participants, send out meeting agendas and information in advance.

Track who's talking. The [Are Men Talking Too Much? app](#) is a fun and discreet tool for tracking gender differences in a meeting. But to figure out more specifically who is consuming the most airtime, I use a more-precise and low-tech approach: At the beginning

of a meeting, I write down everyone's name. Then I make tick marks as each person speaks. Over time, I have confirmed that a few attendees tend to dominate the conversation in certain meetings, and at least 25 percent say nothing at all.

To be fully transparent, I must confess that when I first started tracking this, I was chagrined to see an excessive number of tick marks by my own name. Fortunately, this self-monitoring strategy has motivated me to be more judicious about when to share my thoughts, and when to create space for others to speak.

Establish ground rules. In my experience, any proposal to set ground rules for a meeting is initially met with heavy sighs and eye rolling. The rule-making process strikes many as overly formal and even juvenile. Yet stick with the exercise and people often report that an agreed-upon set of discussion rules is a powerful expression of values that significantly improves meeting dynamics.

The rules don't have to be complex. They can be simple commitments like: Raise your hand to speak; don't revisit agenda items that have already been decided; call out credit-stealers and interrupters; and have the meeting's leader make sure that everyone who wants to share a perspective has an opportunity to do so before others are allowed to weigh in again.

A little awkward? Yes. Effective? Absolutely.

The beauty of ground rules is that they create a useful structure for assessing a meeting's effectiveness. (For a high-level set of conversation principles, check out Google's "[Community Guidelines](#).") Many high-performing groups make it a practice to engage in regular meeting debriefing: Did we follow our ground rules? Did we stay on track? Who talked? Who didn't? Did each of us feel heard? Did we make necessary decisions? Was this gathering a good use of our time?

Rotate meeting leadership. Too often the person with the most organizational power in the room will lead the meeting. That creates two key challenges:

- First, it is hard to be both a meeting facilitator and a full participant. Few of us can balance both roles effectively.
- Second, when the person with power expresses an opinion, that can discourage people from sharing a conflicting idea.

Consider rotating the leadership responsibilities of the meeting. That not only gives the powerful people a chance to listen, it also encourages broad participation and builds the meeting-facilitation muscles of everyone on the team.

Gather people's ideas in creative ways. [Liberating Structures](#) is a collection of meeting tools designed to harness the intelligence of groups. One of my favorite tools is called "[1-2-4-All](#)." Here's how it works: A question is posed to the group and everyone is given a few minutes

to write down their thoughts (that is "1"). Next, meeting attendees pair up ("2") to discuss what they have written and create a response that reflects both of their perspectives. Then two pairs get together ("4") to engage in a similar process. And finally, everyone comes back together ("all") to hear from several sets of four.

The "1-2-4-All" tool is an effective way to hear from individuals yet also encourages them to work together and refine multiple approaches in a supportive manner.

Manage interruptions. Make sure that everyone knows how to manage chronic interrupters. That's easier said than done, of course, when certain participants are loud, energetic, and opinionated. But it is possible to politely cut off stage hogs. Veronica Rueckert shares some artful techniques in [her new book](#), *Outspoken: Why Women's Voices Get Silenced and How to Set Them Free*.

I especially like a strategy that she calls "the snapback." When you are interrupted, lean forward, hold up a single finger in the general direction of the interrupter, and say, "I want to finish this thought." If that fails, Rueckert recommends the "nuclear" option: "Carl, you interrupted me. Let me pick up where I left off ..."

Enlist allies. Challenging blowhards and interrupters can seem — and may well be — risky for those without much power. It helps to collect your allies in advance. That might take the form of asking a colleague to be on the lookout for interruptions and speak up on your behalf: "Hey, Cecilia was in the middle of making a point."

Allies can also create room for a quiet voice to jump in ("We haven't heard from Sam yet — let's get his thoughts before we move on") or rein in the credit-stealers in a subtle way ("I like how you are building on Adela's idea").

Stand up to bullies. Few things chill a productive conversation more than aggressive behavior and personal attacks. Civility protocols should be part of your ground rules. However, if you are running a meeting where there are no agreed-upon ground rules, make it a practice to call out rude and intimidating behavior. Sometimes you will have to be blunt: "Marla, seriously?" or "Javier, it's fine to disagree, but Clarise is not an idiot."

Silence emboldens bullies. Break the cycle of abuse by pointing it out publicly and making bad behavior obvious.

Allow people to contribute afterward. Even when you've done all you can to make a meeting safe for everyone to speak up, you may find that some colleagues find it difficult to participate. To reach reluctant public speakers, try setting up a routine to collect further input after the meeting concludes.

Of course that option needs to be open to everyone. When an issue is not time-sensitive, invite people to weigh in later: "Thank you for sharing your perspectives today. If you have additional thoughts, send me an email by Tuesday and I'll include your input in the meeting minutes."

Consider that you might be the problem. I recently worked with a senior leader at another higher-education institution who was struggling with an underperforming leadership team. When detailing his challenges, he complained that — despite the team members' expertise and experience — none of them introduced new ideas or proposed solutions. He expressed frustration that he was forced to do all of the thinking.

Later, as I sat in the background of one of his meetings, the cause of his frustration quickly became obvious: He dominated the conversation, answered questions that others could have easily tackled, and talked over people who attempted to share a different point of view. He had unwittingly trained his team *not* to speak up. Annoyed that others aren't talking? Try keeping your mouth shut for a while.

Are there other techniques you have used to keep meetings on track and to encourage all people to share their views and ideas? I would love to collect suggestions and create an inventory we can all use.

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