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Why the first five minutes of a meeting shape its outcome

You've planned a great gathering for your team. Now it's time to start it off right.

by [Elizabeth Doty](#).



Photograph by Klaus Vedfelt

Meetings that just happen by default waste precious time, invite poor decisions, add to exhaustion, and fray relationships. Given these risks, I proposed [in a previous article](#) that successful meetings are intentionally designed. The basic idea is that to support people and move critical objectives forward, leaders need to ask themselves four questions: Why are you meeting? Who needs to be there? What conversation needs to happen? And how can you create the conditions that will enable that conversation? In my experience, leaders are often able to answer the first three questions with just a little extra effort. But they usually come up empty when it comes to the last one.

The trouble starts before the attendees show up (or log on). Many people arrive at meetings prepared to be disengaged. Whether it is a recurring team call, a project team update, or a longer strategy retreat, participants often lack a clear sense of why the meeting is necessary. And people are distracted. Their minds may still be focused on their last call or an upcoming deadline. These days, they may have kids at home learning remotely or a relative to care for; they may be anxious about economic upheaval and societal uncertainty.

Facilitators clearly can't resolve all these issues, but they can help people to be more present and productive while in a meeting. In most cases, lack of engagement stems from the mistaken assumption that meetings are time sinks. But leaders who routinely host dynamic, high-engagement meetings set up conversations as opportunities for real work — regardless of the specific purpose. They approach and design them with this premise (and cancel them if there is no real work to be done). And, with this simple shift, they tap into one of the biggest day-to-day sources of team motivation: [a sense of progress](#) toward a worthwhile goal.

With this lens, leaders can engage any group more actively and productively. The most important moment, other than crafting your original invitation, is when you begin. I recently interviewed business collaboration expert [Dick Axelrod](#) to brainstorm useful strategies, because, as he warns, "The easiest time to fall out of a canoe is when people are entering or exiting the boat." Here are three ways to safely navigate toward your goal.

Welcome people and help them connect. The best meetings are a group improvisation, a chance for co-creation. Much of the expertise and talent needed to do the “work” of the meeting is already in the heads of the participants. But, just like improvisers on stage, they need to warm up to get in the creative spirit. Neuroscience tells us that to do this well, people must feel welcome and connect with one another. Although the details will vary with your purpose and your organization’s culture, as a general rule, the sooner people speak, the more engaged they will be throughout the meeting. “Even just five minutes speaking freely in gallery view on virtual calls — before you start sharing any slides — can change the entire dynamic of a meeting,” Axelrod told me.

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Start with personalized greetings and then play some upbeat music or invite the participants to grab a refreshment to set a welcoming tone. (If you really want to get people’s attention for a critical virtual meeting, you might even send a simple treat in advance.)

Then, provide a lightly structured activity that allows each person a chance to speak. In some companies, people may enjoy posting GIFs to reflect their emotional state. In more action-oriented cultures, the facilitator might ask, “What is top-of-mind in your world just now...and what feels important about our topic today?” The key here is to keep the tone inviting enough that people can easily respond and broad enough to get a sense of what they are thinking and feeling as you start.

People are often divided about prework or pre-reading; I generally find it useful to suggest short, engaging, optional resources to review or questions to consider. For some learning styles, it’s easier to process information independently and in advance.

Bring the purpose to life. “Too often, meetings get disconnected,” observed Axelrod. “We don’t think about how a conversation fits with our larger mission, our goals, or other groups’ work.” Thus, even if you have stated your purpose explicitly, it may not make sense to participants. And, especially in virtual settings, it is easy to get lost in abstract concepts.

It’s the facilitator’s job to bring the purpose to life, to activate people’s interest in the challenge or task at hand. One way to do this is to have an executive or senior member of the group briefly state the meeting’s purpose in the context of a larger dilemma that requires the assembled group’s expertise or creativity. For example, one senior vice president explained to a gathering of brand experts that there was enormous opportunity if they could create a “signature” customer experience, but that it would be difficult, because the product development teams all worked separately. They were immediately intrigued.

Once you have stated the purpose, spend a few minutes discussing it, so that participants develop an understanding of why they are there and what you hope to accomplish. Your goal here is just to spark the group’s interest; if people start diving into detailed problem-solving, you may need to gently intervene to keep things on track.

Preview the journey. It is now time to outline the work the group needs to do during the session. You will want to get to this relatively quickly, because people will worry about whether they are properly prepared and what you will be asking them to do during the meeting. Both issues can be solved by walking through the agenda, being clear about when you will use any prework and how you would prefer people to contribute. Then pause for questions or concerns, and adjust the agenda as needed.

You may be able to combine specific activities or tactics to save time. For example, you might use a warm-up question related to the meeting topic or allow a few minutes for individuals to independently review and add to their prework during the call as ways to bring the purpose to life.

Let's face it: Meetings are your stock-in-trade — a key aspect of your leadership repertoire, just like quantitative analysis or hiring and retaining top talent. Each step in the meeting process creates the inputs and conditions for those that follow, and each is critical to reaching your goal. Whatever strengths you have now, these tips can help you increase your odds of success. Your team will thank you.

Topics: [collaboration](#), [communication](#), [employee engagement](#), [teams](#), [workplace](#)



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