

Stop Wasting People's Time with Meetings



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Summary. Some organizations are trying to get a grip on wasteful meetings, introducing no-meeting days, empowering people to make their own decisions, and improving the way meetings are planned and facilitated. At their best, meetings are purposeful, inclusive (of the...

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Meetings provide a platform for people to investigate issues, explore new avenues, and agree on actions. They're also an opportunity to highlight leadership skills, interests, and managerial styles. However, many fall [short](#) of this promise. Ask yourself how much return you get from your involvement in all meetings, but especially the board and executive meetings you attend. How much time and [energy](#) do you have left in your schedule to think, [imagine](#), and communicate in other ways?

Some organizations are trying to get a grip on wasteful meetings, introducing [no-meeting](#) days, empowering people to make their own decisions, and improving the way meetings are planned and facilitated. At their best, meetings are purposeful, inclusive (of the people who actually need to be there), and [participatory](#).

Nevertheless, some leaders don't pay much attention to their own contributions to meetings, whether they're leading or attending. Mark,* an executive I worked with, contributed substantively and listened attentively in meetings. But truth be told, he was bored of playing the same role and concerned his lack of enthusiasm was damaging his [personal brand](#). When I asked about his strategy for meetings, he replied, "I don't have one."

In a world where there's more focus on the quality of meetings, it pays to take the opportunity to showcase your [best self](#) to your colleagues and make the most of your own time and energy. The following five strategies should help.

Articulate Your Ambition Clearly

Too often, it's not clear what a meeting is meant to achieve. Instead, the chair starts with the meeting with some pleasantries before rattling through the agenda.

Tom Fussell, CEO of BBC Studios, uses a different approach. He maps agenda items to the organization's strategic priorities to focus the discussion. He also starts meetings by reminding people what they're there to do. He encourages everyone to speak, noting that "it may take longer to make a decision, but it's faster to make better decisions."

If you're looking to establish a clearer ambition for your meeting, take the following actions:

- **Invite clarification beforehand.** Avoid assuming that everyone agrees with the agenda. Encourage people to call out clarifications or disagreements before the meeting. Doing so increases the quality of discussion and buy-in of the group.
- **Explain why the meeting matters.** During the meeting, describe the relevance, materiality, and urgency of the discussion in relation to the organization's strategy and [journey](#). Be explicit about what you'd like to achieve, using statements like, "I'd like this meeting to

move us closer to..." and, "We have an important decision to make in relation to..."

- **Convey your belief in the group.** If you're looking to tackle complex issues (as meetings should; otherwise, let people get on with it themselves), you'll need everyone to share their best thinking. Put them in a positive frame of mind by signaling your belief in their abilities, for example, by recalling past successes. Use a statement like, "remember when we had a great discussion about..."
- **Work out how you want to show up.** Don't forget to develop your own ambition. What do you want others to think, feel, and do because of your contribution? What lessons can you learn from your impact in previous meetings?

Decide What Roles You Want to Play

Many executives adopt roles in meetings based on what they think is expected of them or what they've done before. For example, a CFO will represent the finance function and lead on finance-related discussions. Doing this can limit your sphere of influence – and your contribution. By deliberately shaping the role you want to play, you can quickly uncover new information, invalidate long-held assumptions, and test scenarios that may initially seem improbable. Here are a few roles to try out:

- **Catalyst.** Initiate a discussion and stimulate fresh thinking through analogies, stories, or precedents.
- **Custodian.** Ask how a decision will play out in the organization and what it would take for it to land well.
- **Challenger.** Question the logic, coherence, and validity of an argument with data, experience, and/or intuition.
- **Convener.** Encourage full participation by inviting others to join the discussion, making connections ("[bridging](#)") between points and the people involved.
- **Decision-maker.** Frame the topic clearly, invite discussion of the issues and options, and make a decision in the meeting (avoiding taking it "offline" whenever possible).

Sometimes it pays to be open about the role you're adopting, if only to encourage others to follow suit. One CEO I worked with liked to allocate roles when faced with a particularly tricky issue. That's fine as long as it doesn't become like "performance [theater](#)," in which participants act out a conversation as if reading from a script.

If you're left to your devices, select a role that the discussion requires and that you enjoy playing — for example, a "custodian" when considering the integration challenges of an acquisition. "Be careful not to play multiple roles at the same time, otherwise you risk confusing and disenfranchising others," says Scott Newton, partner of Thinking Dimensions Global Consulting and experienced board advisor. He adds, "Once a CEO I worked with realized they needed to split their role of running the meeting and providing input, their decisions became more actionable, clearer, and the group felt more committed to the outcomes." Use spaces between agenda items or pauses in the discussion to signal a change in your role. Help others understand this by saying, "I'm changing [thinking hats](#) here, so I'm going to focus on the facts" or, "I'd like to adopt the perspective of a customer listening to this conversation."

Work Out Your Most Distinctive Contribution

An effective meeting requires a [range](#) of perspectives, skillsets, experiences, and styles, especially when the subject matter is complex. The challenge is for you to demonstrate your best self while being a good team player.

One executive, Molly,* talked a lot in meetings, often winging it. Her 360-degree feedback indicated that her colleagues were unsure of the value of her contributions to the group. To address this, I helped her focus on the quality of her contributions, rather than the quantity. This required more preparation and discipline in choosing when to speak up and when to listen.

If you're looking to make a more distinctive contribution, start by working out where your [strengths](#) can best address the topics of the meeting. This could be from your:

- Credibility, or license to contribute from prior successes.
- Subject matter knowledge.
- Ability to problem solve or [reframe](#), for example, using scenarios.
- Insights from other organizations, industries, or ecosystems facing similar issues.

Create "profiles" of other meeting participants in the same way you might for your [customers](#). Map out their backgrounds, interests, perspectives, questions, and historical contributions. This helps you identify:

- [White space](#). Topics where you might have more to contribute than others given your expertise and experience.
- **Complements**. Allies who share a common interest, experience, or background with you.
- **Conflicts**. Colleagues who have an opposing view to yours.

Use this insight to anticipate the perspectives, contributions, and reactions of others. Look to influence people in advance, if appropriate. Don't go too far, though. Being distinctive isn't about you winning and your colleagues losing – it's about using your strengths to set yourself apart from others. It also shouldn't leave you inflexible or dogmatic, loaded with [limiting assumptions](#) that may not prove to be true.

If you're on an established team, reflect on your experience from a series of meetings and think about the capabilities you need to develop to make a distinctive contribution. For example, if you're regularly dealing with sensitive topics, you'll need to listen attentively to fully understand the perspectives of others before exploring options. Or, if you're tackling a crisis, interrogate the issues by using problem-solving skills. Work out the best way to enhance these capabilities, from observing others who possess them to creating

your own [personal learning cloud](#) of online courses and tools to using an external coach.

Use Signals Wisely

Meetings are full of signals and [cues](#) as to peoples' interests and intentions. But many executives don't take the opportunity to be intentional with their own signals because of a lack of preparation and self-awareness. They also fail to capture what's said (or implied) in the meeting.

We've all seen the person on "[autopilot](#)." Their mind is elsewhere as they replay what happened in the previous meeting or plan the next one. And, over time, their colleagues get frustrated, or worse, disillusioned with their contributions.

One executive I worked with, Sarah,* thought carefully about what she wanted to convey in a meeting, both in what she said and how she came across. That meant using her words, voice (pitch, volume, intonation), facial expressions, and body posture to signal her:

- Interest in the topic.
- Determination to solve a pressing problem.
- Creativity in developing new ideas.
- Ability to listen, recognize, and respond to perspectives of different people.
- Confidence in high-stakes situations.
- Positivity in challenging circumstances.

She also felt that the summary of actions and key points from the meeting only captured a fraction of the richness of the discussion and the dynamics between individuals. Instead, she used what she learned during the meeting to assess her team's:

- Ability to meet performance goals.
- Alignment in the execution of the strategy.
- Capacity to take on new initiatives.

- Interactions
- Overall mood, health, and well-being.

She found it helpful to write down the questions she sought answers for – or at least the hypotheses she wanted to test – before the meeting. That allowed her to start the meeting with greater intentionality. She also scheduled proper [reflection](#) time, immediately afterward and a few days later.

Manage Yourself in the Moment

Meetings can be emotional rollercoasters, especially if there are big characters and pressurized circumstances. A comment, suggestion, or implication from a team member can provoke a strong reaction, including frustration, [insecurity](#) about your position, or anger.

The challenge is to maintain enough of your composure to think clearly and communicate effectively. Avoid an overreaction that can linger in peoples' memories and erase many of your positive contributions.

You can make strategic choices about how to manage yourself in the moment by:

- **Being clear about where you should focus.** If you're clear about the topics you truly care about – and think the group should care about – you'll be more selective about which battles to fight and which ones to steer clear of.
- **Anticipating the triggers.** Write down a list of topics (“We must do something about our customer service”), events (“Whenever we've tried to launch a new product, it's gone wrong”), or people (“Whenever they interrupt me”) that will trigger an emotional response in you. Then develop a list of more constructive responses (“That's the past, we're a different organization now,” “I'll come to you after I've finished my point, if I may”).
- **Labelling your reaction.** When you feel an emotional response, label it (in your head) as if you were a dispassionate third party.

Pay attention to where you're focusing and how you're feeling while recognizing your limitations (so-called "[meta-awareness](#)"). Create some [distance](#), even in the moment – look out the window, have a glass of water, control your breath, or center yourself physically (feet square to the floor, sit up straight).

- **Refocusing your attention.** Remind yourself of your ambition and focus, then look to [reframe](#) the discussion by refocusing attention on different ways to address the issues at hand.

Becoming more strategic in meetings is not about being self-absorbed or ultra-competitive. It's certainly not about over-planning to the point that you become rigid in the meeting itself. Rather, practicing these five strategies will help you be more intentional with your actions and more likely to bring your best self to the discussion.

** Real names have been changed.*

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