

Guide to:

Making Meetings Meaningful

Be better at meetings

Meetings are much like relationships. When they are going well everyone is attentive, energy levels are high and there is a desire to make it successful. When they go wrong enthusiasm plummets, things get destructive and we start to ask ourselves if all the hassle is worth it.

Meetings are part of work. They are often the best and only way to get things done. To be successful participants need to have something relevant to offer. They need to contribute to the debate and be part of delivering the outcome. Like a worthwhile relationship we need to invest time and energy to make sure they are deep and meaningful.

Know what and who you're looking for

If you're flirting with a meeting, first of all make sure it's the best way of getting the outcome you're after. Could you get a good result on your own, through an email or by a few targeted phone calls? When you invite someone to a meeting you're asking for commitment so it's only right you make sure that time will be well spent.

Try not to tease people about what it's about. Start with the purpose then carefully choose who you are going to invite based on their technical expertise, areas of responsibility and their influence. It's good practice to state the purpose on the invitation then everyone knows why they are coming.

If you are on the invite for a meeting check the purpose, are you the best person to attend? Try not to go just because you want to catch up on



the gossip and the coffee is better on the fourth floor. Someone else might be more informed on an issue than you or needs to be part of the decision making process.

Knowing what and who you're looking for ensures you don't make false promises, raise unrealistic expectations and there are no regrets the next morning.

Making a good first impression

Like an all-important first date, preparation will determine whether it's a meaningful meeting or a disaster. Your agenda needs to be designed logically to take the meeting through the key stages required to achieve your outcome. Think about what you must have done by the end of the meeting and put that at the beginning. The things that really should be done need to go in the middle and the 'nice to do' can go at the



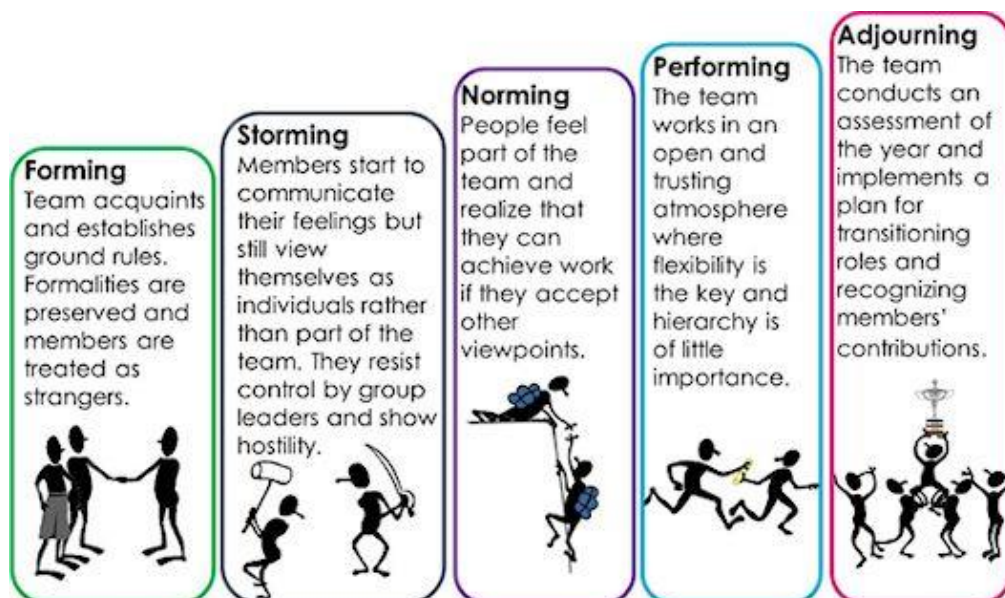
end. Some people put timings against each item to denote their priority which can keep you on track. This avoids the tendency to tackle the quick and easy things first leaving no time for the really important items.

So, you have a reason to have a meeting, a defined purpose, a stunning agenda and you've got the right people there. You'll also make sure all the logistics are right. The minute taker, the notes beforehand, the venue and the refreshments will be ready and waiting. All you need now is for the people to turn up. However, like the blind date with the person you thought was just right for you but doesn't quite live up to expectations, people can ruin all your best plans. So let's see what can be done.

Building a future together

After the excitement of the first date you start to relax, you might even have your first difference of opinion. A bit of debate and compromise is healthy; it starts to define boundaries and expectations. It's bit like that when individuals come together in a meeting room.

Tuckman's Stages of Group Development comes in very useful for meetings. To make them work he has identified a 4 stage process consisting of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing.

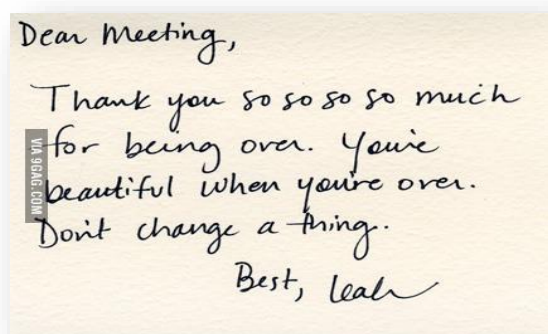


People need to “Form” first so provide a cup of coffee, encourage a chat about the weather, and make quick introductions around the table to allow individuals to find their place in the group and settle down. Then comes the “Storming” phase, actively seek differences of opinion, allow expressions of feelings, and perhaps air some contentious issues all in the spirit of getting the group through to “Norming”. Allocation of tasks is useful here, confirm expertise or accountability and help everyone see the role they and others are taking. Finally “Performing”, sending everyone out on a high to do the things that have been agreed.

By understanding how individuals behave in groups you can refine your agenda to meet their needs and get the outcome you’re looking for. Like all good relationships there needs to be compromise and an airing of views. Arguments can clear the air, make you stronger and of course making up is nice to do!

Making a good first impression

All relationships go through rough patches from time to time and the same can be true of meetings. At some point you’re going to have to deal with difficult characters. People like ‘George from Finance’ who goes on and on and is a signal for you to pick your nails and half of the other participants to start planning their evening meal. If you are running the meeting you need to be gracious with people and ruthless with time. You need to know whose opinions and expertise you want at which points in the meeting and bring those people in if they don’t speak up. Be ready with some suitable phrases to quieten down those who have forgotten to stop speaking. Try, “thank you for your very valid points which I’ve noted. Now we



really must move on”, which, of course is short hand for, “Enough! You’ve had your say and others would like to get a word in edgeways”. Developing these skills will get the best both out of the group and the individuals at the meeting.

Now take a good hard look in the mirror

It apparently takes two to tango. Our behaviour will influence others in a positive or negative way so you need to make sure you’re not the one treading on others toes in a meeting. Check yourself against these classics in a meeting then check them when you get home this evening!



Winning at all costs – do you have to have the final say, nail your colleagues to the wall, and get your ideas adopted?

Not listening – you’re too busy looking at your watch or fiddling with your phone to listen to anything. So you can’t really contribute and when you do you’re repeating what’s been said five minutes ago.

How about making excuses – it's never your fault that you haven't done what you said you would do. It's her, him or the dog's fault.

If only – are you one of those that stand by the coffee machine after the meeting muttering all the things you would have loved to have said if only everyone would have shut up, observed a reverent silence while you said what you wanted to say and didn't interrupt you?

A healthy relationship needs give and take, compromise, the ability to listen to other's points of view as well as clearly stating your own. Meetings are no different. If you can't do those things, you shouldn't be there, you're not contributing and short of bribing people with flowers or chocolates your meeting are never going to work.

Summary

So finally, create a robust framework around your meeting, bring together people who can contribute to a great outcome and if you're in charge be firm and respectful. Be aware of your behaviour and make sure it's not getting in the way. A great relationship can be the bedrock of your happiness. Successful meetings can do the same for you at work. Cue violins, a beautiful sunset and a happy ever after.