

# Leading Effective Meetings

***72 Tips to Save Time,  
Improve Teamwork, and  
Make Better Decisions***

**By Dianna Booher**

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*"Sometimes I get the feeling that the two biggest problems in America today are making ends meet—and making meetings end."*  
—Robert Orben

Why suffer through another monotonous meeting? Conduct successful meetings where business is accomplished instead of time wasted.

You have attended scores of them. Probably even a few this week. And for some reason, the thought of sitting in on another one leaves you nauseated. They're called *meetings* and they're an integral part of business life.

Actually, they are a pretty good idea. Gather a group of talented people, pool their resources and expertise, hash out some issues, devise a game plan, and everyone is the better for it.

Unfortunately, not all meetings follow that agenda. Instead, busy people with complicated schedules reluctantly congregate to vent their frustrations, complicate matters, and pontificate pet peeves. And everyone ends up with more work.

Meetings are here to stay, and sooner or later, you'll likely be asked to lead one. Understand the basics of how to conduct a meeting and you'll be known as one who gets things done; neglect these basics and you'll only waste everyone's time.

Meetings can bring the world to peace—or kill fifteen hours a week for even the

best time manager. Communicating ideas and creating solutions as a team take the best of attention and skill. These guidelines will help you lead and participate in team discussions both to contribute and evaluate ideas.

### **Tip 1: To meet or not to meet—study the question.**

How many times have you accepted an invitation to a lunch meeting only to realize that you spent an hour and a half on something that could have been done in a five-minute phone call or a ten-minute memo? The higher you go, the busier you get. And the meetings you attend must count. If you get a reputation for conducting useless meetings, the busiest and best people won't show up. If you're asked to attend someone else's typically unproductive meetings, defer with one of the following: "Is attendance mandatory?" "I'm unavailable. Is my attendance important enough to change my schedule?" "Could I send a representative?" "Would you mind if I offer my input in writing or by phone?" Others will generally surmise that you expect meeting time to be well spent.

### **Tip 2: Call a meeting only for the right reasons.**

When you call a meeting, make it significant and be prepared. In a client situation, you may have been working on a deal for months that will either thrive or nose dive on a single meeting. The higher you go in your own

organization, the more expectations others have for your abilities to conduct yourself in a meeting—either as a participant or leader. Take things seriously.

Skip the meeting if you have nothing special to discuss, if you don't need others' input, if you have already made up your mind about what you plan to do, or if getting others involved would only complicate your plan.

Do call a meeting if you need to present information to a lot of people quickly and you don't want to write it, if you want input from others on your idea, if you want to gain "buy in" from the team, or if you want to motivate and energize the team about the idea.

So how about the wrong reasons?

Meeting as a substitute for work.  
Rubber-stamping a decision.  
Complaining. Demonstrating power to make everybody show up. Because joy and misery love company, sorting out true motivations may require some soul searching.

### Tip 3: Set an agenda.

Some people think that agendas lend too much structure to a meeting, that people can't be spontaneous, or that the atmosphere will be too formal.

Nonsense. That's like saying that if you plan for a vacation by packing the right clothes, arranging for transportation, and

deciding on a destination that you can't relax and be spontaneous along the way.

If you're leading the meeting, set an agenda. Use active verbs, summarize in a sentence the issue at hand, and let the group know what you expect on each issue—"for discussion only," "for their information only," "to collect your data," or "for decision." Whether you stay right with the agenda or take a few minutes' detour, having an agenda will give others a little peace of mind that the meeting is going somewhere.

### Tip 4: Start with the most important idea or issue and work backward.

There's a great temptation to begin with the routine matters—the FYI items. But the all-too-frequent problem is that when you save the most controversial and important item until the last, you run out of time. Maybe a Freudian move?

### Tip 5: Think carefully about your attendee list.

Use the following checklist: Who can provide necessary expert advice? Who will support your cause? Who will oppose your cause? Who will sabotage the project if they don't "get in on the ground floor"? Whose commitment do you need to "make it happen"? There's your guest list.

## Tip 6: Own the setting.

If you plan a clandestine affair, go for a dark bar with soft music. If you want an energized group, go for a well-lit pool-side table. If you want an informal chit-chat session, try somebody's office. If you want an equal, on-target exchange, look for a conference table in neutral territory. If you want authority and a no-nonsense atmosphere, schedule the boardroom. If you want to play host-and-guest, provide coffee or snacks in a parlor. Whatever your choice and purpose, if you're in charge, be comfortable with and "own" the surroundings.

## Tip 7: Stay out in front if you intend to lead.

Nothing frustrates more meeting attendees than having a supposed leader who doesn't lead. State your role at the beginning and what authority the group will have. Do you intend simply to facilitate a discussion? Will you let them set the process and agenda? Do you intend to tell them how you will discuss each idea and come to decision—consensus or vote? Do you intend to have the final say or will the group have authority to make the final decision? Are you going to keep the discussion moving or abdicate that responsibility to others randomly?

Are you going to be a silent observer on each idea or do you plan to put in your two cents' worth? Are you strong enough to stop a feeding-frenzy should the stronger people begin to attack the

weaker person's ideas? When the groups starts spinning its wheels, be there with a comment such as: "Where do we go from here?" "What's the solution?" "Which way do you want to go?" "Let's back up and redefine the problem."

You don't have to have all the answers and make all the decisions, but you should be out in front. Either lead or give the responsibility to someone else and get out of the way.

## Tip 8: Take your seat with forethought.

Choose seating arrangements as carefully as your meeting site. Where you sit makes a great deal of difference in how you interact with others and how they interact with you. Studies show that people seated across the table from each other tend to communicate more than those seated to the left or right.

That across-the-table communication, however, may be adversarial rather than supportive. If you plan to present important ideas at the meeting, make sure that you're comfortable with the surroundings. When you arrive, take notice of where any AV equipment is, what distractions the windows might create, the chance for interruptive phone messages slipped through the door, a ringing telephone, plants that might block someone's view, or a lectern that signals authority.

## Tip 9: Take your body with you.

Appearances and posture count even when you're in an informal meeting, seated around a table. Yes, rolled-up sleeves, open collar, and stocking feet may be the attire for a "working meeting," but that's not always the attitude to convey. Someone who's "laid back" (meaning loose papers scattered, ruffled hair, sprawling in the chair, hands playing with trinkets and toys) conveys an informal look—and a disorganized mind and agenda. If you have something important to say, look like it. Sit erect. Organize your props and paperwork. Look alert and thoughtful. Your body reflects your mind.

## Tip 10: Encourage participation from others—if you want it.

Some meetings serve only to inform. If that's your purpose, tell them what you're going to tell them and be done with it. But if your intention is to generate ideas, get feedback, or come to a decision, you may need to take a more active role in encouraging participation.

Try these techniques: Ask for a show of hands on an issue. Toss out an open-ended question and see who takes the ball. Toss out an open-ended question and suggest that you go around the circle and let everyone give his or her views individually. Present your question or issue in writing, give all members a

copy, and ask them to jot their responses quickly. Take up the responses and read them to the group for reactions. Invite non-participants by name: "Carl, we haven't heard from you—what do you think?" Finally, you might assign two or three people a devil's advocate role and ask them to toss out any objections they can think of.

Participation takes effort, and some people are too preoccupied, uninterested, or tired to contribute without encouragement.

## Tip 11: Don't set people up to refute you.

If you've already made a decision and intend simply to present the decision at a meeting, say so. If you still have doubt that your decision or planned course of action is the best, say so. But not like this: "I've decided to do X unless someone has a serious objection." Few will have the chutzpah to speak up. If you want to get feedback anyway whether or not you plan to change your mind, try something like this: "I've decided to do X. What do you think the fallout will be from our customers/employees/management?" Or: "I plan to proceed with Y; what positives and negatives do you think I might have to deal with?"

In any case, don't announce your decision or plan in such a way that people have to "refute" or "oppose" you to give you feedback. If you want feedback and forewarning of the

difficulties, make it easy for people to speak their minds.

### **Tip 12: Don't use the group as camouflage.**

Don't use a meeting as a way to make your point with someone else when you don't have the courage to make it directly. Meetings are not battlefields.

### **Tip 13: Discuss taboo issues anonymously.**

If you know certain issues are hot topics and politically dangerous to careers, you have to work hard at creating a safe environment. Consider doing an anonymous survey on the issues and simply "reporting the results" for discussion. Or, you can quote anonymous sources from the grapevine. Say: "Someone has expressed the fear that .... How do you think we can handle that fear?" "Other people have stated that they don't intend to ... What would make people feel that way? What suggestions do you have for convincing them otherwise?"

### **Tip 14: Don't expect participants to pool their ignorance.**

Some issues, problems, and decisions require information and expertise, not just untrained opinions. If your issue falls into that category, don't bring it up in a meeting format where your colleagues there are uninformed. If you

do toss out the idea and they offer their ideas and opinions in a noble effort to help and you find their "help" inadequate, you'll force yourself into the position of having to ignore what they've said. And if they've wasted time and effort in the process, they're going to be angry. If you want to get input from only those with knowledge or expertise to do so, either go to them privately or call for their input specifically by name.

People feel much more comfortable with—and do a better job of—discussing what they know rather than what they don't know.

### **Tip 15: Learn to play several positions in the process.**

Good meetings require a process. The Traffic Cop makes sure everybody gets a turn to speak, shuts up the monopolizers, and generally ensures that everybody receives fair treatment. The Coordinator continually brings people up to date as each item is concluded and calls for the next step. The Compromiser takes an active role in bringing disagreeing people together on an agreed-upon next step. The Commentator reads everyone's body language and verbal clues to give the group updates on the progress they're making toward their goals and points out where, when, and how the group gets stalled. The Clown throws out one-liners either to get attention for an idea or to break tension in the group. On occasion, you'll need to learn to play each role.

### Tip 16: Call for a process check occasionally.

At times, the group process will stall. You'll be talking in circles, covering the same territory. You'll hear tempers flare. You'll feel that people are under personal attack. You'll notice that you are deciding, undecided, and re-deciding the same issues. Be the one who calls attention to such breakdowns: "We don't seem to be getting anywhere. Let's see where we got off track. We had started to brainstorm the Y issue. Does somebody have a more effective suggestion for moving us along?"

### Tip 17: Remind yourself and the group that all ideas are not created equal.

In the course of any one discussion, team members may generate several suggestions for dealing with a problem. Don't fall into the trap of giving them all equal billing with something like: "Okay, we have five alternatives on the table. Let's discuss the pros and cons of each." In many situations, only two or three of the many ideas offered are serious contenders. Don't waste your time with all the details of the other, lesser ideas.

### Tip 18: Use the "What a baby!" response.

Doctors, politicians, and pastors have perfected this technique. The proud

father stands outside the hospital nursery looking through the glass as his red, wrinkled newborn. He nudges the doctor beside him, "Well, what do you think, doc?" To which the doctor replies, "What a baby!"

When someone presents an idea that you don't approve of or one that seems inappropriate, don't feel you have to accept it or take time discussing it. After they finish speaking, look at them a moment and say something like: "That may be true." "That's another idea." "Interesting." "Some people seem to think so." "Possibly." "Hmmm." Then break eye contact and move on. That person will rarely know how to take the comeback.

### Tip 19: Don't digress, ramble, or side-track.

Determine that you'll not be part of the biggest meeting problem of all. Stay on target. If you can't remember the issue, jot yourself a note as the group moves from agenda item to item and refer to it often. Not only is the agenda topic important, but also you should keep track of where you are in the process of dealing with each topic. Are you into the overview? The analysis? The idea-generation phase? Suggesting solutions? Testing agreement on the proposed solutions? Don't be two or three steps behind everyone else.

**Tip 20: Omit war stories.**

While they have an audience of admirers, some people fall to the temptation of telling war stories, sharing inside jokes, and recounting wonderful things they once did. Unless time is of no importance to the rest of the group, don't.

**Tip 21: Support, explain, or reject only one idea at a time.**

Poorly facilitated meetings encourage people to dump everything once they finally get the floor. That is, because they have had to wait so long to get air-time, once it's granted, they dump their ideas about everything that has been said so far. Don't dump. Unload your thoughts only on one issue at a time and then get off the court. If people learn to trust that you're not going to sidetrack them on several issues at once, they'll let you take the court more often.

**Tip 22: Stop a filibuster.**

If one person continues to monopolize the discussion on your idea, use body language to cut her off. Break eye contact. Lower your eyes to the paper in front of you. Turn your body away from her direction. If necessary, firmly but kindly say something like: "Lisa, I think I understand your viewpoint. Let's hear from somebody else."

**Tip 23: Use a prop to tag the motor mouth.**

Now that we're big into incentive awards for team effort, you've probably seen the idea of the roving trophy that moves from winning department to winning department. Try the same idea in a meeting to "subtly" remind motor mouths that they're being repetitious and/or long-winded. A foghorn. A whistle. A bat. A balloon. A broken record. Whatever the object, place it in the center of the table. Then when someone bogs down the meeting, push the prop into that person's space at the table. At its best, it stops the offender; at the least, it generates a laugh and breaks the tension.

**Tip 24: If you don't have something to say, don't say it.**

Participating doesn't mean that you should necessarily feel obligated to comment on every issue. If someone hands you the baton and you have nothing to contribute, pass it on: "I think everybody has already expressed my views." "I don't have an opinion one way or the other." "I don't know a thing about that subject and don't want to confuse the issue." "Thanks, I'll pass." People will love you.

### **Tip 25: Don't ask a question simply to ask a question.**

Some team members become uncomfortable with silence. So when a colleague tosses out an idea that is met with silence, some people feel compelled "to get the ball rolling" by asking a question. Don't. If you don't really have a legitimate question and don't care about the issue one way or the other, don't add to the problem by opening your mouth. Hours have been lost by people chasing down answers to questions that should never have been asked and bear little or no relevance to the decision or problem.

### **Tip 26: Avoid answering questions that nobody has asked.**

In presenting ideas, try to anticipate others' objections and questions and be prepared with answers. But that doesn't mean you should dump that data without cause. Such thinking leads to talking in circles, digressing, and rambling on with the same information given four different ways. Make your point succinctly. Then pause. If you get questions, pull out your bag of tricks and answer them. If not, don't dump.

### **Tip 27: Control interruptions.**

The only way to prevent people from interrupting you is to insist on finishing.

You can call attention to the interruption verbally: "Pauline, I didn't get to finish. What I was about to say was ...." "Sorry, but you interrupted me. I had one more item to mention....." "Please let me finish...." Or, you may choose to prevent an interruption with body language and voice. Raise your hand to the interrupter and continue to speak at the same or louder volume. Keep talking until the interrupter realizes you do not intend to relinquish the floor.

### **Tip 28: Don't assume the role of translator.**

Example: "I think what Phyllis is trying to say is that her staff is ..." Trying to "translate" for others conveys very loudly to them that you don't think they voiced their ideas well. It also irritates the group to have an echo effect in the room. Finally, you'll be embarrassed if Phyllis responds that you did not translate correctly. Some people are inarticulate; learn to live with it.

### **Tip 29: Avoid letting others put words in your mouth.**

If you've expressed an idea that someone feels the need to "interpret" for the group, don't let them misquote or misinterpret you. Example: "No, Bill, that isn't exactly what I meant. I meant...." "Wait a minute. I said it exactly like I intended to. I'm saying that...." "No, that's not what I meant. Maybe I was unclear. I'll try again...."

Only you know what you meant to say. Say it directly without an interpreter.

### **Tip 30: Don't set a pattern of expressing the "downside."**

Yes, you will disagree from time and time and make a valuable contribution by expressing that differing viewpoint. But don't make it a pattern. Offer solutions and encouragement when the others get down, dumb, and defeated.

### **Tip 31: Know the difference between being realistic and being gloomy.**

Have you ever known people who think only their view is the "realistic" one? Their comments begin: "Let's get real here about...." "You've gotta be realistic about...." "People won't buy that unless it's realistic." "Let's use a more realistic number for...." The difference? Realism focuses on the facts; gloom comes from attitude.

### **Tip 32: Apply the "you break it, you buy it" principle.**

Never be the one that tears up everybody else's ideas and then has none of his own to offer. If you criticize the best solutions others have tossed out, you're obligating yourself to present substitutions. According to author Milo

Frank, this idea originated with Larry Kitchen, retired chairman of Lockheed. Based on the frequent sign in curio shops "You break it, you buy it," Mr. Kitchen applied the principle to stop people who continually tossed water on others' ideas with their routine negativism. Example: "Joan, since you have serious reservations about the proposal we're discussing, why don't you do a more thorough study of the ramifications of its implementation and bring us an alternative proposal next week."

Caution: The idea is a poor one if your intention is to encourage openness and avoid "groupthink." So apply the principle only to those routinely negative people who run down every idea.

### **Tip 33: Disagree without being disagreeable.**

Never let yourself become a victim of "groupthink," a condition in which group harmony becomes more important than results. If the purpose of a meeting is to generate ideas and get input, by all means speak up when you disagree. Just don't be disagreeable. The difference is attitude.

### **Tip 34: Strip ownership from views.**

If you're functioning as a team, you will want to bring all contradictory facts and viewpoints into the open rather than pretend they don't exist. Try to strip away direct ownership and the

associated ego to evaluate the ideas independently. "We have a proposal and two viewpoints on the table. One that the plan will take too long. The other view that the cost takes away Marketing's veto power. Let's discuss the first objection. What support do we have for that?"

Notice that all names have been removed from the suggestions and viewpoints. Treat conflicting ideas openly and objectively. People hold on most strongly to ideas that haven't been discussed and especially to ones bearing their name.

### Tip 35: Use positive questioning to allay your reservations.

When someone brings up an issue you don't agree with, your questioning can put them on the defensive. However, not to ask the questions and express reservations defeats the purpose of the discussion. To overcome the dilemma, make sure your questioning can be taken only in a positive way. First, demonstrate that you have heard what the other person has said by paraphrasing it, and then lead her through your confusion or reservations with positive questions: "Jeanine, I understand your position. You want to use contractors because all the projects planned to date call for a specialized expertise that we don't have on board, right? Well, help me understand why your people who have the same degrees as the contractors you've mentioned don't have the expertise.... Now, I'm still

confused about where we could find the experienced contractors on such short notice.... Okay, what would you suggest we do about the up front payment most will require?"

This line of positively worded questions emphasizes your openness to answers while still surfaces your issues of concern. If the concerns can't be answered adequately, the owners of the ideas often conclude that they have defeated themselves because they didn't have the answers—or a good idea, whichever is the case.

### Tip 36: Avoid invalidating others' feelings.

Examples: "Jim, I don't know why you're so punchy about that." "Jennifer, there's no reason to get so defensive." "It'll be okay, Javier—really, it will." To say or imply that people don't have a right to their feelings makes them robots. Man does not live by logic alone.

### Tip 37: Legitimize others' feelings without agreeing.

When you present an idea and hear someone's emotional disagreement, you can legitimize that feeling and then move on. Legitimizing is not the same as agreeing with the comment.

Example: "Yes, Phil, I can understand how you might be concerned that X would come across hypocritically to your staff." The speaker hasn't agreed with Phil, but simply said that he has a

legitimate concern. Phil will appreciate that acknowledgement and usually quit pressing to make that point.

### **Tip 38: Lighten up; the point doesn't have to be perfect.**

All platforms and purposes are not created equal. Your career will not rise or fall based on every meeting interaction. If a particular meeting is not necessarily "yours," jump in and participate even though you may not have given it thorough preparation. Spontaneity still succeeds.

### **Tip 39: Don't engage in a one-on-one battle.**

Avoid letting a discussion degenerate into dialogue with one other person. Inevitably others in the group become lookers-on and begin to take sides. Then the opposing ideas become an ego issue and the discussion has a winner and loser. Bad for morale. When you realize that only you and one other person remain in the discussion, say something like: "Well, let's open it up again. Charles, you said.... and Eugenia, you mentioned that...." The idea is to leave the impression that all have contributed to the exchange and that you are conceding to the group opinion.

### **Tip 40: Don't harpoon the idea because it's a poor swimmer.**

All creative thinkers and technical wizards are not effective communicators. Be careful that you don't ignore their ideas and responses to your own ideas simply because they did not phrase their idea well.

### **Tip 41: Use another's question as your platform.**

An excellent way to get a message across without having to hog the floor is to look for someone's question as a platform—an invitation to speak up. Have your prepared message ready and look for the opportunity to step in when someone raises the appropriate question. You'll be accomplishing your goals on someone else's time.

### **Tip 42: Be flexible on the issues.**

We're not talking about flip-flops like the politicians make—whatever the polls support today they "believe" tomorrow. Instead, be open to the facts and flexible in your feedback. The purpose of meetings—most staff meetings anyway—is to exchange ideas. If someone presents facts and sways your opinion, don't hesitate to change your position. That's not being wimpy; it's democratic.

### Tip 43: Listen to what's going on.

Consider listening more than the absence of talking. It takes careful attention. And listening increases in difficulty as the number grows from one person to a group of individuals all competing for air-time. Listen and interpret so that you're not the one who's always asking for a repeat of issues already discussed and clarified.

### Tip 44: Don't derail others' proposals while they're still on the track.

Follow what's going on before you propose something new. If you want a really upset crowd, let a speaker propose an idea, with all the related facts and analysis, ask for discussion, and get just to the point of calling for a decision ... and interrupt with a proposal of your own. Your insertion at the wrong time may derail the entire train of thought for the group. Pay attention to the logical process and avoid bringing up out-of-order proposals. After you get past the idea stage and into the proposing stage, let the first proposal work its way through the group discussion and be accepted or rejected before you toss your alternative out for evaluation.

### Tip 45: Remain seated to emphasize that you're tossing out ideas "off-the-cuff."

Bringing up an idea while seated plays down your forethought and preparation. It conveys that the ideas are spontaneous and relevant to the issue at hand. Your position says that you're on equal footing with the rest of the group and that you encourage give-and-take. As a result, you'll probably get feedback, pros and cons, agreement and disagreement.

### Tip 46: Stand to convey authority and/or underscore the importance of an issue.

When someone "rises to the occasion," the team generally settles back and lets him or her have the floor. The group dynamics change from an informal team discussion to formal presentation. A formal presentation says three things: "I have an opinion already on this issue." "I am well prepared with supporting details." "The issue is bigger and more important than the routine ones we deal with."

From your physically elevated position, your words take on more authority; the group is likely to grant you control of the meeting, even if only temporarily. As a result of all these dynamics, you probably will get less feedback on your idea. Those who support will withhold their comments, thinking that you obviously sound authoritative and need

no help in garnering others' opinions. Those who disagree with you may hate to buck authority before an audience; they often save their negative comments for the hallways.

You can sometimes "have it both ways" by presenting your proposal standing up and then taking a seat for the follow-up discussion and turning over the facilitation to someone else.

### **Tip 47: Opt for a stool if you want to walk the fence.**

If you still can't decide whether to stand or sit, you may want to opt for a bar stool. You convey authority because of the physically elevated position and the "prepared" appearance while creating a relaxed attitude by sitting down.

### **Tip 48: Take stage; don't just "drift in."**

When you intend to present your own ideas, take stage just as a performer does. None of this: "Just a minute, before we go on here. I've been thinking about something." "Maybe this has already come up in earlier meetings, and I missed it." "Don't want to get us off track. But it seems to me we should be looking at this a little differently." "I'm not saying I disagree with what we've already said, but just another, you know, thought about how we could approach it...."

Instead, when you want attention, take it. Sit or stand erectly. Get your papers in order. Project your voice. Use a confident tone. Spit it out.

### **Tip 49: Grab 'em fast; forget the warm-up drill.**

Ever since students have been assigned high-school essays, teachers have required introductory paragraphs. Business professionals are still stuck in that rut. Forget the introduction when you're offering informal comments. Start at the point of new information or the new idea. "Two comments: The machine will be quicker and easier to run." Then pause and take your cue from others. If they want elaboration, add it. If they have questions, answer them.

### **Tip 50: Try being obscure.**

Try the direct-mail approach; start with a provocative or intriguing statement to get attention and whet people's appetite for the main course. "So I think maybe we should hire only PhD's." "I've got an idea—let's beat them at their own game." When the point's "not all there," you'll grab their attention for your elaboration to follow.

### **Tip 51: Set yourself up to keep the floor until you finish.**

If you fear that someone will interrupt you before you finish presenting your

ideas, preface your ideas with something like the following: "After listening to what has been said, I have four observations to make about the X situation. First,..." and then keep enumerating as you go along so that people understand that you're not finished when you take a breath.

### **Tip 52: Be conversational; don't move into "meeting mode."**

Nobody said formal ideas had to be presented in lecture format. Use your conversational voice, not your lecture tone. Lecture tone: "I want to inform you that..." Conversational tone: "I just want to let you know that..." Lecture tone: "Please voice your objections if I'm wrong, but..." Conversational tone: "Please say so if I'm wrong, but ..."  
Lecture tone: "The Research and Development group of which I've been appointed chair, effective May 1, has asked that you be notified that the team is receptive to your proposals about ...."  
Conversational tone: "On May 1, R&D asked me to chair a team to come up with a solution. So, as part of that effort, we need your input about..."

### **Tip 53: Talk with, not to the group.**

Consider yourself in a conversation with more than one rather than "addressing a group." In most situations, that means you'll pause to let others speak or ask questions if necessary for clarification as

you move through your ideas. You'll use the "we" and "us" approach rather than "you" and "I." You'll use terms they'll understand rather than lapsing into jargon. You'll make eye contact with everyone around the table and not read from your notes or stare at the floor, ceiling, or favored ally.

### **Tip 54: Remember that people are most interested in what's on their own minds.**

If you want to grab attention for your ideas, you have to start where people are and lead them to where you stand, not expect them to meet you half way. What policy is bothering them? What do they fear might happen tomorrow? What frustrates them today? Start there and tie your idea into that concern or hope.

### **Tip 55: Make abstractions "hit the gut."**

Accept the fact that we don't make all decisions from logic. When people get emotional about an issue, accept that emotion, show that you understand it, and then when they regain composure, ask if they can share the reasons for those feelings.

When it's in your interest to do so, play to others' emotions. Abstractions are difficult for people to rally around. Tie them to specifics so that people "feel" an issue. For example: If you want your team to give input to designing your

corporate policy about charitable contributions, don't deal with nameless agencies and noble causes. Talk about specific people who benefit from these contributions and specific agencies who will be receiving the money allocated by the policy your team helps draft. If you generate appropriate emotion, "dull" tasks can take on new life and importance.

### **Tip 56: Don't plead with puppy-dog eyes.**

Your eyes can say you're sincere, you're courageous, or you're confident, but don't let them cry "help." When presenting ideas for approval, don't let your eyes fall into a puppy-dog plea. Those who disagree with you will hop on that body language and drag you through the streets. Present your ideas confidently and then wait for response and approval. If approval isn't forthcoming, don't beg.

### **Tip 57: Don't build your case—for or against—on second-hand information.**

On important issues, refuse to give second-hand information the same credence as first-hand information. When Helen says that Jack said that Lybert thinks, stop right there. If the information is crucial to the decision, verify it. Make a phone call or postpone the discussion until such relayed information can be verified.

### **Tip 58: Present your proposal only one way and be specific.**

When you're courting several people with differing viewpoints, it's natural to think that the more general you can make your idea, the more "hooks" you're creating for people to latch on to. In that effort, you tend to explain your idea first one way and then another. You use this analogy and that. You think maybe this and maybe that would be part of the final product. Often the intention with the elaboration is something to offer that will appeal to everybody.

A broad generally expressed idea, however, usually has the opposite effect: everybody hears something that they disagree with. And you wind up spending time dealing with the minor details and "what you didn't mean to imply" than you do with the general thrust of the idea.

The group has the sense that your proposal has been thrashed to death, when in reality only the chaff around it has been discarded. Prefer, instead, to propose the idea succinctly, only in one, specific way. Let it stand there in all its glory until people force you to add details by their questions.

### **Tip 59: Listen to the counters to your proposal rather than planning your rebuttal.**

Do you recall presidential debates when candidates seemed to have gone to sleep when their opponent took his turn? The same happens in meetings. Don't get so carried away in preparing to defend your ideas when the next person quits talking that you miss what that person says throughout his or her full turn. If you do, you may find yourself focusing on an issue that the other person has just conceded and failing to respond at all to the new issues raised. You can't take a time-out while the ball is in the other court. You have to stay alert while the other guy serves.

### **Tip 60: Don't withdraw your proposal simply for the sake of harmony.**

Encourage others to express either support or disagreement, but don't let people turn the idea down simply because "someone doesn't like it." Ask for supporting explanation and be sure that everyone either accepts or rejects the idea for objective, logically sound reasons. If you're going to toss an idea out, support it until someone changes your mind or the minds of the rest of the group members.

### **Tip 61: If you can't manage a touchdown, try for a first down.**

If you can see that your idea will not be accepted in total, settle for measured success. Suggest that the team give you the go-ahead in a limited way. Ask for a "test run" at some phase of the project "before too much money is spent." All you may need is a little running room to prove that your idea or plan has merit. Don't give up simply because you don't make a touchdown with the first play.

### **Tip 62: End with impact; don't just fade away.**

If you're presenting an idea, don't limp away with a sputter. Don't simply drop your eyes, tune out with body language, or let others grab the floor and run away with it. Bring the discussion to closure. Summarize your idea, the pros and cons mentioned, any decision made, and suggest the next follow-up step. Also take responsibility for the fate of the entire meeting. Do your part to make it successful. If the meeting is unproductive and disruptive, decide on the corrective action you'll take next time to change the dynamics.

### **Tip 63: Don't sound like a broken record.**

Present your idea and support it. After a fair hearing, if the group nixes it, move on. Bring that discussion to an end and meet the next agenda item head on.

Nothing irritates others more than having someone continue to bring up a pet proposal or peeve and whine, whine, whine.

### **Tip 64: Build support for your ideas behind the scenes.**

Take your model from congress and The White House on this technique. Just as the President calls individual representatives and senators to the Oval Office for a "briefing," rally support by giving a preview of your ideas before you ever go into a meeting.

You'll overcome the element of surprise that blocks some decisions simply because people don't want to "be rash" and make a decision "too soon." You'll also have the advantage of hearing opposing viewpoints so you can prepare your counter before the formal presentation in the meeting. If you think that people might be hesitant to give you negative views one on one, encourage them with something like: "Help me see the other side of this issue if you don't agree." "If somebody were to object to this idea, what do you think that objection might be?" "What ideas do you have for responding to those who may be unhappy about this?" A behind-the-scenes briefing wins more friends than it creates enemies.

### **Tip 65: Don't surprise your boss.**

Husband and wife, Glenn and Nelda, attended a community auction for a local charity. In a feverish round of good-natured bidding where several CEOs present began to challenge each other to "dig a little deeper" for a good cause, Glenn popped up to say that he'd pay \$10,000 for a canoe trip for six down the Mississippi River. Sitting beside him, Nelda almost gasped aloud. They had agreed before the auction on how much they could afford to give. Glenn's "surprise" angered her as much for his taking the liberty of not including her in the decision as for the large amount she didn't think they could afford.

Bosses feel the same way occasionally. Generally, it's better to present the idea to them privately before springing it on a group and chancing a public embarrassment for them or a reprimand for yourself. The boss may suggest that you "wait on that idea until X happens" or tell you to go ahead and bring up the issue even though she doesn't fully agree. Either way, you've followed corporate protocol.

### **Tip 66: Ask for input and approval from your superiors.**

Don't leave a meeting in which you've presented information or proposed a plan without having a clear mandate for the next step. If response is slow to come, and you want input and honest reaction,

ask the lower-ranking superiors for their feedback first. If you want a quick yes-no decision, go right to the top. Ask the senior person for questions, a response, or a go-ahead. After the highest-ranking person speaks, you'll get conformity from there on. There's no use being given "busy work" from the lower-ranking people if the answer from the top will eventually be "no."

### **Tip 67: Withhold your ideas until last if you want to encourage others' input.**

This strategy makes sense if you're in a position of power to make the final decision. If you state your views first, your team may lapse into groupthink and let the matter pass without expressing concerns or opposing views. When that's the case, toss out the issue minus your opinion, and ask for others' reactions first. The responses may be more honest.

### **Tip 68: To shorten the decision-making process, call for a vote.**

Yes, I know the nice thing to do is to build consensus so that everybody agrees with every decision. On occasion, that never happens. When you feel bogged down, call for a vote. Voting brings the matter to closure.

### **Tip 69: To shorten the decision-making process, abdicate your right to make a decision.**

Your second alternative to end frustration when the team can't come to a decision is to call attention to that fact. "It seems that we just don't have enough information to make a thorough analysis. I suggest that we leave the decision to Jack and his department—that they finish their research and then make their decision based on that information." Nobody says you have to accept all authority handed to you.

### **Tip 70: Call for a Q&A session at the end.**

Although many people allow questions and answers at the end of oral presentations, some do not think to do so at the end of meetings. Frequently, the questions will be about how to carry out actions or conclusions decided in the meeting. Never leave a meeting with fog still hanging in the air.

### **Tip 71: Thank others for their contributions.**

Even bad ideas have some merit. "Thanks, Joel, for bringing up the analogy of the socks. That provided a simple way to look at things." If the ideas were helpful, new, insightful, resourceful, supportive, convincing,

relevant, or any of the above, say so. Commendations keep them coming.

## Tip 72: Play Santa.

People work harder and quicker for rewards. Figure out ways to reward yourself and team members for contributing ideas and solutions. After you've made a quick, effective decision, suggest a reward: "We put that issue to bed in ten minutes. Let's grant ourselves a five-minute caffeine break." "Great. We have everybody on board and feeling positive about this plan. Let's pig out and order pizza." "Well, we've just worked out the last detail to make this idea fly. I say we all take part in the presentation to the board. Everybody should share in the glory. What do you say?" The reward doesn't have to be big—a shared bag of Snickers, a break, time off, recognition for individual contributions to the group, a verbal pat on the back for the team. It's the idea that counts.

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**Dianna Booher, MA, CSP, CPAE**, works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, and interpersonal communication.

CEO of her firm, Booher Consultants, Inc., she is also a prolific author of 43 books (21 on communication), and has published with Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books, Warner, Random House, Ballantine, and McGraw-Hill. Her latest books include:

*The Voice of Authority: 10 Communication Strategies Every Leader Needs to Know*  
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Good Morning America, CNN, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *New York Newsday*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Forbes*, *Success*, *Entrepreneur*, NPR, CNBC, Fox Family Network, and Bloomberg have interviewed Dianna for her critical opinions on workplace communication. *Successful Meetings* magazine has named her to its list of “21 Top Speakers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” and she has been inducted into the CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame<sup>®</sup>.

Booher Consultants, Inc.  
2051 Hughes Road  
Grapevine, TX 76051  
1-800-342-6621  
Fax: 817-318-6521

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