Six Tools for More Effective Meetings

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I have noticed some common challenges in my work with meetings held by leaders across a range of organizations:

• They can be large (more than 8 or 10).
• Time may be used inefficiently or unproductively.
• Discussions get stuck in details.
• A few individuals seem committed while others sit back.

Sound familiar? Various writers and consultants have offered advice on how to improve meetings. Many of us are familiar with their recommendations but little seems to change. What else can you try?

Most advice for running better meetings falls into one of two “schools.” One school would have us follow various rules or guidelines for how we should conduct a meeting. In the heat of a discussion, however, rules tend to be resisted or ignored. The other school wants us to adopt more skillful behaviors for listening and talking together. Unfortunately, such behaviors are hard for many of us to remember and apply, particularly in difficult conversations. Fortunately, there is a third way to conduct better meetings—a way that engages everyone in the work to be done, while managing time and building commitment to outcomes. This approach relies on using meeting structure to naturally enable more effective dialogue and decision-making.

All meetings have structures that influence which participants speak, how they sit, how time is managed, how thoughts are shared, and how decisions are made. People act as they do in a given structure because that’s what makes sense to them to do—without even thinking about it. Some structures support a better meeting, but others do not. Most structures go unnoticed even as they influence the way the meeting works. Fortunately, you can easily choose and implement more effective structures, and a more effective structure naturally builds productive discussions that help the group stay on track and on time.
I have identified a range of tools for creating more effective structures. These are tools that leaders can use without a facilitator or any special training. While each meeting is unique, there are a handful of tools that I find most useful in many situations. I share six of these tools here. They can be used alone or in combination. Some may seem familiar, but all have a unique role to play in creating a robust structure for your meeting.

Below is an overview of each of the six selected tools. Full directions for applying these tools are included at the end of this paper. For still more information, see my book, *Leading Great Meetings: How to Structure Yours for Success*.

**1-2-All**

This is a simple process that improves how participants share their thoughts. After some presentation or proposal just ask participants to reflect on the subject under consideration and make a few notes. This is Step “1.” Then ask everyone to turn to someone beside them and share their thoughts (Step “2”). After these pairs have shared, the whole group discussion begins as the small groups share a key point from their discussions (Step 3 “All”). **1-2-All** allows everyone to organize and test his/her thoughts with another person. The use of the group’s time can be very efficient and easily managed. It also means that all get to speak and be heard on the topic (at least in a small group). It keeps everyone engaged, even when the meeting is quite large and some people would begin to “tune out.”

**1-2-All** can be used with Three Reaction Questions (see below) and works well when you have used Seating Arrangements to shift who sits beside whom.

**Four Responsibilities.**

There are four responsibilities that should be fulfilled to have a well-run meeting: discussion leader, timekeeper, recorder and minute taker. Many meetings have a secretary to take minutes, but this does not address the need to have a recorder who tracks the process of discussion where all can see it (see Visible Note Taking). Nor does it address the need for a discussion leader or timekeeper. Often, the leader covers many of the responsibilities to some degree with limited effectiveness. Instead, the responsibilities can be shared with participants. This tool helps to specify the needed help and share the responsibilities.
Seating Arrangements
This tool highlights a simple, but often-ignored aspect of meeting structure—participant viewpoints are influenced by who sits where and beside whom. This is particularly true if you plan to use **1-2-All** for part of the discussion.

The best seating arrangement is usually around a circular table. A square table is the second best choice. Plan to direct people to their “assigned” seats as they arrive. You don’t want to (try to) move people around once they sit down.

Whatever approach you use, it helps to explain why you are changing the seating. You can point out that you simply want to create the opportunity for new and different exchanges among participants.

Three Reaction Questions
This is a way to get more balanced reactions to some proposal and slow the tendency to focus on the “negatives.” After some plan or decision is proposed, the president asks the group to address three questions:
1. What did you like about this plan?
2. Where do you need more information?
3. Where do you have concerns?

Depending on meeting size, the leader can ask the group to discuss their replies in small groups first (i.e., **1-2-All**). When the whole group discussion resumes, take replies to the three questions, **one at a time, beginning with the first**. In this way, all hear first what they like before raising questions and concerns.
Time Planning Tips
Many meetings are planned and run as one big discussion with only occasional attention being given to how to use time wisely and well. Somehow, everything is supposed to fit the time available (or just run a little over). There are many different ways you can plan to use meeting time creatively and cost-effectively. In particular, consider the use of various small group discussions rather than relying solely on one whole group meeting discussion. (See the full descriptions that follow for specific tips).

Visible Note Taking
Most meetings have someone taking “minutes.” While these provide an important record, they don’t aid the progress of discussion in the meeting. In a longer discussion, meeting participants can lose track of what has been said and how the group’s comments are (hopefully) building toward conclusions. Visible Note Taking supports the group’s memory of what it has discussed and how its decisions are evolving. It also shows each participant that his or her comments were heard and recognized.

Can These Tools Make a Difference in Meetings?
The best way to know is to try them. As one board president told Rick after adopting just a few tools,

“Your suggestions, were very helpful and proved to be most effective with the board members. The attendees felt included throughout the meeting and left energized. I kind of marvel at how well the discussion went and so easily. The approach was really a “no-brainer,’ yet we’d never done anything like it before.”

Full descriptions of each tool follow.
What Is It?
1-2-All is a simple process that gives everyone a chance to organize and share his/her thoughts. You can use this tool anytime during a meeting when an important new question or proposal has been introduced and you want to provide all with a chance to contribute.

Why Use it?
1-2-All helps you address various barriers to full participation.
• You have a large group.
• You expect that some participants may monopolize discussions.
• You feel that some members may refrain from speaking to the whole group (but work a point of view privately).
• You are concerned about managing discussion within the available time.
• You need to work with differences in language fluency.

How to Apply 1-2-All
After introducing a subject or question to be addressed by the group, complete the following steps.
1: Individual Reflection. Check to make sure everyone understands the question or topic for consideration, and then give individuals a minute or two to gather their own thoughts. (This is the “1” of the tool.)
2: Small Group Discussion. Next ask participants to turn to their neighbors to form small, 2-3 person groups to share their ideas. Explain the time they have for their discussion and ask them to make sure everyone in their small group can share his/her thoughts in that time.
All: Whole Group Report. Ask each group for a brief report (typically 1-3 minutes) summarizing their small group discussion for everyone.

Related Tools and Information
Other tools that help balance participation include PALPar and 1-2-All also works well paired with Three Reaction Questions. See Leading Great Meetings for more information and examples.
**Four Responsibilities: Sharing the Work of Running the Meeting**

**What Is It?**

*Four Responsibilities* describes the four supporting roles for any effective meeting.

**Why Use It?**

These responsibilities need to be fulfilled in most meetings. Sometimes they are all fulfilled (partly) by the leader, which limits meeting effectiveness. Sharing different roles with participants makes running the meeting easier. It also builds a sense of shared ownership for the effectiveness of the meeting.

**How to Apply Four Responsibilities**

At the start of the meeting, ask for volunteers to share the following specific responsibilities:

- **Discussion leader**: Responsible for making sure each person who wants to speak is able to in the time available. This role can rotate and does not have to belong to the senior manager present.
- **Timekeeper**: Keeps track of the time available. Alerts the group when time planned for a discussion is running out. Asks the group what they want to do if more time is needed.
- **Recorder**: Uses flip chart or white board to visibly record the progress of the group’s discussion where all can see it. This should be done in a way that uses a few words to capture each speaker’s comment(s).
- **Information manager/secretary**: Responsible for maintaining the formal documentation and recorded minutes of the group’s work.

Make sure each volunteer understands the scope of his/her responsibility for this meeting.

**Caution on Recorder’s Role**: Some people will “record” by making their own notes and then transferring these to a flip chart at the end of discussion. This does not help the group keep track of its discussion and can take extra time when the recorder must then create the flip chart. Instead, encourage the recorder to write key phrases where all can see them, as they occur. You can make a joke about how penmanship and spelling “don’t count.”

**Related Tools and Information**

Supporting tools include *Visible Note Taking* (see *Leading Great Meetings*).
What Is It?

Seating Arrangements is a reminder to consider where participants, and the senior managers present, are seated as this can have an impact on dialogue and decision-making.

Why Use It?

You can create a more even exchange among participants by planning seating to give all a “good” seat at the table and avoid the impression that one area is where the power and influence reside. It is particularly important to consider how you want people to be seated if you are inviting new or different participants or when you want to use small group discussion (e.g., 1-2-All). In all these situations, thinking about seating in advance can make your meeting go more smoothly.

How to Apply Seating Arrangements

Decide whether you want particular individuals to sit together. Is there a reason for some people to be seated with or apart from each other? Most of the time the best choice is to mix participants so that the same people don’t sit with and talk to the same folks as usual.

Plan to direct people to their “assigned” seats as they arrive. You don’t want to (try to) move people around once they sit down.

- If there are materials for the meeting, you can put participant names on the packets and place them in front of chairs in the desired locations.
- At the very least, you can just take a different chair yourself. If you always sit at the head of the table, move to the side and see how others adjust their seats.
- If it’s a large group, create small circles of chairs.

Whatever approach you use, it helps to explain why you are changing the seating. You can point out that you simply want to create the opportunity for new and different exchanges.

Related Tools and Information

Related tools include Circle Up and Fitness Checklist (see Leading Great Meetings).
Three Reaction Questions: Gathering Balanced Feedback

What Is It?
Three Reaction Questions supports balanced reactions to a proposal, idea or decision. It begins with individual reflection on 3 questions before sharing responses to those 3 questions, one at a time.

Why Use It?
You can face several challenges to full and balanced feedback when a proposal is presented in a meeting. Those challenges include:

• Hearing first from those who “think on their feet” and react right away.
• Hearing only from a few individuals who seem to dominate the discussion.
• Hearing first (or only) about the various concerns and not about what people like about the proposal.

By reflecting on their reactions before speaking, participants can consider the range of their thoughts. Participants then hear more balanced feedback as they all listen to each other’s likes, as well as questions and concerns.

How to Apply Three Reaction Questions
After you present the proposal, ask participants to reflect on their own or (even better) to talk in small groups to answer the questions below. Try not to take any questions at first, as this will open up the discussion before you give them all a chance to reflect on their reactions.

1. What do you like about [the proposal]?
2. Where do you need further information?
3. Where do you have concerns?

After a few minutes, take reports (from individuals or small groups), one question at a time beginning with the first. Make sure you get all replies to the first question before proceeding to the second.

Once all the reactions have been shared, ask the group, “What are we learning about this proposal/decision?” This last question is intended to help everyone integrate all that s/he heard and arrive at overall conclusions.

Related Tools and Information
Go-Around and 1-2-All are additional ways to support balanced discussion. Three Reaction Questions is adapted from a process developed by Kathie Dannemiller and colleagues (Dannemiller Tyson Associates, 2000), (Jacobs, 1994).
Time Planning Tips: Planning and Managing a Scarce Resource

What Is It?
Time Planning Tips is a collection of practices for more reliably and productively structuring the use of time in meetings.

Why Use It?
Time in meetings should be planned and spent as if it were money—which in a way it is. Meeting time is a scarce commodity. Unfortunately, most meetings use time very inefficiently, frustrating participants as well as leaders. I believe this happens because most leaders have not had the time or the insights necessary to structure an effective and efficient use of meeting time. This tool can help.

How to Apply Time Planning Tips
Consider how you want to engage participants in discussions and decisions on a task-by-task basis, using the following tips and recommendations.

Plan for individual reflection and small group sharing. A tool like 1-2-All enables everyone to get his/her thoughts together and have a chance to speak to the topic. It is also a great way to control time so that everyone is able to speak and the total time for conversation is fixed.

Use multiple, concurrent small groups to hold parallel discussions. Using small group conversations can speed up the conduct of the overall meeting. A point that might have required considerable time for the whole group to discuss can be fully considered in less time in small group conversations (e.g., 1-2-All). Everyone gets to share his/her thoughts, at least in the small groups. You can also give different assignments to different small “Break-out” groups so that more aspects of a subject can be considered at one time.

Clearly specify (in writing) the work to be done. Many meetings waste time because participants don’t all have the same understanding of what it is they are trying to accomplish. A clear statement of the meeting task can help here, but each time the meeting divides into sub-groups, or a new stage in deliberations is reached, it is important to have clear questions or actions to address along with the time they have to complete them. These instructions should be written, not verbal, for ongoing reference by the group(s).

Plan agenda timing realistically. Try not to have an agenda with many short items that are each supposed to take a few minutes to “cover.” The difficulty with multiple short items is that they give a false sense of what can be accomplished in the meeting. The more short topics on an agenda, the greater
the likelihood that time will slip by a few minutes on each item, soon putting the whole agenda off schedule.

- If group comment or input is expected, there is little likelihood that an item will take only a few minutes. Allow at least 10 minutes for any point requiring discussion.
- Consider whether any short “updates” might be better communicated in a memo outside of the meeting.

Limit presentations to 15 minutes or less. When formal presentations are part of a meeting, try to limit them to 15 minutes or less in length (20 minutes on the outside). If the presentation really needs to be longer, try to break it up into separate sections with opportunities for group interaction in between. Long presentations send an unspoken message that participants are here to listen, not contribute. The level of interaction will go down and a long presentation is less likely to communicate its key points effectively.

Allow participants to co-manage the work to the time available. Share the responsibility for managing time with participants. Plan and communicate the intended time available for all aspects of the agenda. Ask someone to be the timekeeper and stress that s/he should let the group know when there are 2 minutes left on a given item. When this occurs, if it seems that more time is needed, ask the group what they would like to do. (See Four Responsibilities for more on timekeeping).

Control time for group reports to whole group. When you have multiple small groups that need to report back to the whole group, the reports can be redundant and lengthy. You can avoid these problems by one of these means:

- **“Popcorn” reports:** Take a sample of the various small group conclusions by calling on a few groups to share their conclusions, and then checking with others as to whether they had further/different points to share.
- Give each group a strict time limit for reporting, and ask the timekeeper to help you manage reports to time available. Most small group reports can be kept to 3-5 minutes or less if specified in advance.

When groups are working on more than one question, take replies to one question at a time. Ask for one group to report their answer to the first question, then ask the other groups for additions or other comments just on that first question. Then go to another group and ask them to report on the second question and repeat the process. This avoids redundant reporting and keeps the process moving and building.
Related Tools and Information
Related or supporting tools include 1-2-All and Go-Around as they help you to set up efficient participation or to sub-divide the work. PIP (Presentations in Perspective), and Four Responsibilities help you manage other aspects of timing. The results of your planning should be part of a STARS Agenda. See Leading Great Meetings for more information on these tools.

Visible Note Taking: Recording the Progress of the Group’s Discussion

What Is It?
Visible Note Taking supports the group’s memory of what it has discussed and how its decisions are evolving. It also shows each participant that his or her comments were heard and recognized.

Why Use It?
Many meetings have “minutes.” While these provide a record, they don’t aid the progress of discussion in the meeting. In a longer discussion, meeting participants can lose track of what has been said and how the group’s comments are (hopefully) building toward conclusions. Finally, the notes provide the basis for any minutes prepared after the meeting.

How to Apply Visible Note Taking
• Maintain an ongoing record of comments, using each speaker’s words as much as possible.
• Record the comments where all can see them. Best choice is usually a flip chart. Some abbreviation of comments is fine as long as you capture the essence of what the speaker said.
• You can use headlines, different colored pens or other means to highlight and organize the information on the pages as you go.

Plan Where and How You Will Take Notes to Serve the Work
• Arrange for a note-taking area in view of the whole group. A flip chart is often the best because you have multiple pages and the completed pages can be posted on a wall to keep them visible as you need more space. Avoid just turning over pages on a flip chart, since this hides previous notes from the group’s sight. A white board or black board can work as well, but you have to manage the notes to the space available.
• If you expect to generate many ideas and want to use Affinity Grouping later as you build decisions, then take notes on large sticky notes, one idea or comment per sticky note.
• If you are taking notes on a computer, use an LCD projector to show the notes as they are entered. But, a computer makes it difficult to use other tools like Multi-Voting and Affinity Grouping, so this is not always a good choice.

Related Tools and Information
Affinity Grouping is an aid in organizing many diverse contributions. Four Responsibilities reminds you to divide up roles and allows the note taker to fulfill just this one role.

Looking for More Ideas on Running Effective Meetings?
All of the tools described here plus many more are contained in Leading Great Meetings: How to Structure Yours for Success. This book explains how you can use the structure of your meetings to make them naturally more productive. It provides 12 choices and 32 tools to plan and conduct a wide range of meetings, including virtual meetings.

About the author. Rick Lent has spent 25 years identifying effective meeting structures and applying them in his work facilitating large group meetings in businesses, non-profit organizations and communities. Leading Great Meetings distills what he has learned into an easily applied set of choices and tools to help leaders get better results from their own meetings.

Rick delivers workshops and presentations on how to employ a structural approach to better meetings. He coaches leaders on how to improve their meetings and he designs and facilitates meetings of all sizes in many settings. He shares his perspective on meetings on his blog at www.meetingforresults.com/blog. You can reach him at rick@meetingforresults.com, or follow him on Twitter @RickMLent.