

Agenda Frames for Efficient Meetings

What are the purposes of meetings?

Meetings with different purposes can be usefully structured to provide a much more effective use of everyone's time.

- Is the meeting's purpose for sharing information and to check for understanding that everyone is 'on the same page'
- Is the meeting principally to check progress and exert peer-pressure to perform
- Is the purpose to involve and create new learning and develop new ideas?

There is little point in having a meeting if people do not understand the desired behaviors and outcomes. A list of subjects (agenda) may not cut it – an agenda quite reasonably looks like a sequential process, but does not usually describe the expected behaviors and outcomes wanted. And a list is hardly a good start for stimulating creativity! There is a much better way to run meetings, by setting out what we call, 'Agenda Frames' (AF).

Agenda Frames for Behaviors and Outcomes

Let's re-frame our meetings to include subjects (for telling, sharing, developing, creating) and also, to work to a structural format that expects a specific set of behaviors and outcomes. Unless we prepare people to behave and be productive (as well as define and understand the subjects) we will not get the most out of any meeting.

Firstly, you can set out a number of ways in which people will come together and behave –these categories are 'Agenda Frames'. Once you set up your own agenda frames and make these overt, they form the basis of 'how we do meetings around here'. Here are four examples of my own Agenda Frames together with example subjects that might fit into each Frame.

Agenda Frame	Subject/Objective/Time
Show & Tell	Tom on implementation of new Infection Layer measures (15m)
Performance & Priorities (Individual & Project)	Sales Development (45m)
Participate & Develop	New Product to meet customer needs (50m)
Blue Sky	Product Adaptations and New Markets (50m+50m)

For clarity, you could set the scene for each type of Agenda Frame (AF) as shown by example, below:

AF: Show & Tell

These Frames are principally for information to keep one another on the same page. Meetings are short and time-bounded. Questions are invited for clarity only.

AF: Performance & Priorities

These Frames are to maintain individual and team performance, identify weaknesses, to be open to the expression of issues and problems, to create support-strategies to keep us on-track, to define and to re-define priorities in terms of both effort and time-span. The facilitator will revolve at each meeting.

AF: Participate and Develop

Participate & Develop (P&D) Frames are tabled to create practical solutions and strategies leveraging all the skills and experience. Innovative thought is desired and we will be quick to develop ideas and slow to judge. The meetings will be facilitated by a Project Head from another Division in return for our facilitation of their P&D meetings. This will enable all of us to concentrate and collaborate exclusively on the development of ideas and solutions, rather than process.

AF: Blue Sky

These Frames are arranged to explore the answers to 'what if' questions and explore innovative solutions, without judgment. The Blue Sky meetings are also externally facilitated and after a refreshment break (for reflection and discussion). Blue Sky Frames are followed by P&D Frames to hone in on potential new projects.

Once you set out your own Frames, your people know more than the subject heading; they also understand and can prepare to behave in a way that will help achieve the desired outcome.

Meetings: Leveraging Success

Having created new Frames for meetings and explained the behaviors expected, you are already ahead of the game. But there are other factors that will improve the benefits obtained from meetings.

Meetings: Interim Activity

Where meetings are regular, but have long spaces between them, perhaps for financial or logistical reasons, it is useful to keep the work of the frames moving ahead by creating interim activity. Traditionally, this has been done by having working groups reporting back by certain dates. We prefer focus groups that only survive for one objective and then disappear. You are then creating team-development skills among the participants each time a new group is formed. Have several Focus Groups and keep the Frame objectives in the minds of all participants.

As a Project Lead or facilitator, you can generate other interim activity by asking new questions relating to each Frame and diarizing these questions to space out over the period. These questions will probe for depth of thinking, innovation and consequences; they will invite discussion, perhaps via email or live, virtual get-together opportunities.

Meetings: Timings

One of your authors (McLeod) was working for an R&D consultancy business some years ago. There was a cultural lack of discipline in meeting-management. Meetings always had a start time on the hour and often no finishing time. Meetings never started on time, so people tended to drift in late. Agendas were lists of subjects – none of them giving any indication of depth of discussion, expected input from any individual or the time to be allotted. Typical management meetings would last between an hour and a half and two hours. Whenever the ‘any other business’ was exhausted and the end of a meeting appeared to have arrived, someone would re-open a previous topic, even though that had been discussed in depth. In some meetings, a main-Board Director would be invited to open the meeting and then leave. This was uniformly unappreciated and de-motivating. Their interest in our Division was simply cost-saving and bottom-line, nothing else.

As the most senior of about eight direct reports to my Divisional Director, I decided to run my meetings differently. I started out by time-tabling meetings at a quarter past or quarter to the hour and giving a budget and target for the duration of the meeting. These were rarely more than thirty-five or forty minutes. This was warmly welcomed. People arrived on time (or soon afterwards) and meetings never over-ran the budget. I then started to run meetings at ten past, twenty past and so on to get more concentration on start-times – this worked. I do not recall anyone being late again. No-one tried to track back to earlier subjects. If they had, I would have directed them to take it up with one or more of the individuals concerned and left the meeting. When I left the business three years later it gave me pleasure to note that some other senior managers had also started to emulate my meeting-policies – the culture had changed.

Meetings: Involve People

If someone is not contributing, then ask yourself why they are included? If they could contribute, then you need to have a 1-2-1 to find a way to get the benefits you are seeking. For example, you might seek a tabled report from them or offer training, or coaching. Connect with them on a 1-2-1 basis to encourage them, not make them feel embarrassed or angry. Invite further inputs and leave a space for the quietest to speak. Rushing from one thing to the next will not help the shyest or most reflective individual to participate.

Meetings: Notice Engagement – Vary Inputs

Good trainers always keep monitoring the ‘energy’ in the room. In virtual meetings this is still true; notice if the energy is poor and seek to lift it to encourage participation, understanding and challenge. If the energy is low, a five minute break may be useful for bathroom breaks or refreshment.

When presenting, try and vary the means of delivery (video, slide-show with multiple formats, charts, grids, limited text and audio). Zoom and other meeting apps allow break-out rooms for activities to increase cross-fertilization, bonding and energy). Include scoring opportunities to get everyone to thought and action. Switch facilitators to reduce monotony.

There are always those who you can involve in the delivery of key messages and information for a range of reasons – expert input, supporter, the Devil’s Advocate, detailed thinkers etc. In terms of impact though, there are those who will carry more weight than others, not through assertion or dominance but because of gravitas or earned-respect. Brief these people separately and ask them to be involved with the inputs of your messages or facilitation of the discussion. This will vary the input and change pace. Ignore status in selecting thought-leaders, unless detrimental to the quality of the messages – the message needs to be that, you run quality meetings with quality people.

Meetings: Time Out

There are good reasons to program time-out into meeting structures. We have seen that the outline description for Blue Sky Action Frames included a break mid-way. The reason for that is to enable reflective processes and creativity to suit the needs of different people.

In meetings, at any one moment, there will be people who are processing information or emotionally reacting to something. The processing may include a number of internal, mental processes such as rehearsing, interpretation, anticipating etc. But when people are internally reflecting, they are no longer listening! By and large we need people to be engaged in the meeting. But how can we get the benefits of (internal) self-reflection AND have full engagement of everybody. In truth we cannot, but we can engineer things to help!

In Blue Sky and 'Participate & Develop' meetings where creativity and innovation is required, it is worth building in reflective-periods. These quiet periods may only have durations of two or three minutes. A model for this comes from decades of learning from the training-room, where self-reflective pauses are common practice. It would be foolish to ignore their positive impact in the context of meetings. In practice this only requires the making of a silent space:

Okay, we have covered a lot of ground in considering the options for moving manufacturing off-shore. Let's have a five minute pause to quietly and individually reflect on what we have so far. There will be time afterwards to discuss any new thoughts. Please keep your cams running!

Meetings: Challenging the Status Quo

I once attended a meeting at the Department of Trade and Industry in London. There were at least thirty-five people there for several hours. The meeting was so dull that the sensors in the room failed to notice any movement over a duration of ten minutes - the lights went off. Someone had to stumble in the dark to get the lights back on!

Rotate facilitator and consider external facilitation (another department or consultant) to refresh the efficacy of regular meetings that have become tired. If you have been dominant in meetings and have a protégé that could facilitate, withdraw from one meeting and then seek feedback on the result. If you return, do so as a delegate, rather than the lead.

Meetings: Honoring

Remember to give credit to those people whose ideas and commitment have moved things forward. If you can do this both privately AND openly, you get two separate motivations for the price of one.