

**Briefing Notes:**  
**Effective Strategies to Increase Engagement in Meetings**

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The most important feature of a good meeting is feeling like there is a rich conversation, in which participants build on one another's insights while still able to surface and work through significant differences. The following are strategies, to be used selectively and in moderation, for vitalizing meetings and increasing the presentness and mindfulness of all who are attending.

**Setting norms.** Early in a meeting's or group's life, setting norms and enforcing them creates a vitalizing climate for work. Examples are: starting on time, letting the leader know about absences, having a member brief someone who has to be absent to keep the group up to speed, ending on time with clear next steps, etc.

**Attend to transitions into meetings.** Where have you—as the leader—just come from? How much time did you have to collect your thoughts and get centered on what you want to have happen (like surgical scrubbing before an operation)? Where have others come from, and how might briefly checking in be relevant to the work the group has to take up?

**Notice who is absent.** Differentiate who has indicated in advance their absence and why, from those who do not show up. At the end, invite someone to brief absent members on the deliberations.

**Set the pace, tone and climate.** Take a minute to set the tone. Think musically about the flow—take time on important issues, move quickly on less significant issues. Invite people into the conversation who are hanging back. Check if there are felt stakes if the conversation feels flat. Interrupt a pattern of hub (you as leader) and spokes (each individual member) versus a conversation in the round.

**Use silence.** Requesting participants take a few moments to quietly jot down their ideas for addressing an issue greatly increases thoughtfulness and diversity of ideas. Especially when materials have been circulated in advance, inviting each participant to take a few minutes to revisit their notes and flag particular points that are relevant to the core agenda. Making each person do their own thinking helps control counter punchers who specialize in hanging back and then critiquing others' ideas. Silent individual work helps people transition into the meeting from what they were doing before. In the meeting, tolerate silence (30 – 45 seconds) after posing a key question to pull others into the conversation.

**Use subgroups.** Especially with large groups (more than 12 participants), invite people to converse informally in smaller groups as part of an overall working session. Then pull themes across the groups (not full reports from each). Straw polling can be a quick way to check if the theme or idea from one group was talked about in other groups.

**Invite caucuses of similar people to explore differences.** Paradoxically, when working across differences (such as in location, role, specialties, professions, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.), spending some time in homogeneous groups can be powerful. When each sees the other perspectives working in parallel, it creates more edge in a conversation and sharpens some of the differences before they are engaged and worked through with cross group conversations. For example, in a working session on translational research, there might be moments when it is useful to have subgroups of clinicians and scientists, as well as mixed sessions.

**Straw polling can be used directly with larger groups.** Ask for a quick show of hands to get the sense of a group or board on various options to test the need for more discussion. When people do not know one another, for example, at new faculty orientation, invite people to indicate some aspects of their background: clinicians, basic scientists, administrators, etc. to facilitate their networking informally.

**Match space and setting to the type of meeting.** Pick spaces that fit with the task. Smaller rooms can energize groups. Subgroups working in parallel in a large room can be more energizing than if they are all in their own spaces. Fixed seats and typical boardroom setups can create a more formal dynamic that inhibits easy exchange and results in more speaking to be heard than to engage.

**Facilitate thematically, not by listing who wants to talk.** Often, when groups take up important issues, many want to jump into the debate. Leaders too often identify by sequence the next three to four speakers to allocate the scarce airtime. But the third or fourth person had their thoughts before listening to contributors two and three, and so are not building on each other's ideas. Instead, ask who wants to join and extend the initial idea or position, assuring others that after

exploring coherently one position on the issue, next the group will take up another point of view, and the person who was eager to get airtime can introduce that theme.

***Summarize next steps.*** Effective meetings are a system that link preparation, the meeting, and followup. Make sure that the next steps are clear and who is on the hook for taking the lead/responsible role for continuing the work on the issue and where the issue will go next.

***Periodically invite reflections on what has been effective and ineffective.*** Meetings are living entities that can greatly benefit from brief discussions at the end on what features are helpful and not helpful to accomplishing the work efficiently.

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