

# **Great Conversations - text**

Chapter 5

## **Inspired meetings**

# Inspired meetings

Meetings can be productive, inspiring opportunities to co-create and make decisions. They can also be useless, exhausting and a waste of time. Far too many people experience the latter.

In this chapter, you will bring together everything you have learned about great communication and apply it to meetings to make them more effective and even enjoyable.



For the past four chapters you have focused on skills, attitudes, structures and agreements that support great conversations. We bring all of these ideas together, along with the brain basics from the first two modules, and focus on one form of communication that most organisations spend a lot of time on: **Meetings**.

Meetings can be a great way for people to come together to inform, co-create and make decisions. But so many people complain about useless, exhausting, overly long meetings that don't have a clear purpose nor specific outcomes. Too many people wonder why they are in a meeting or how they should contribute. And at the same time they complain that they can't get their work done because they are always in meetings!

## What derails your meetings?

Meetings are more likely to be inspiring when they are positive and productive and when people feel like they are part of something. But with a meeting room full of limbic systems, this does not always happen.

Reactive emotions and distractions can hijack people's mood and attention.

Let's first look at some common ways that meetings are derailed.

- People don't know why they are there or how to participate.
- Limbic reactions and toxic behaviours spread round the group.
- The discussion is directionless.
- Phones and side conversations are distracting.
- People are stressed and mentally fatigued.
- Some emotions are disruptive and distracting.
- People focus on their own agenda



As you can see from the options, unmanaged brains can cause a lot of trouble in meetings!

It is unlikely that any meeting will ever be perfect as there is always the possibility of unexpected events and reactions. But there is a lot we can do to re-inspire meetings, streamline them and make them more enjoyable and functional, so that people leave feeling that they are a part of something, they are motivated and clearer about their next steps.

In this chapter we focus on managing the brain during meetings using what we have learned about **emotions**, **attention**, and **communication styles**.

## Managing emotions

Any situation where people interact is an opportunity for the limbic system to get its needs met - meetings are no exception. When some people's needs are not met, it can all go wrong quickly. At some meetings everyone will get their needs met and sometimes it just doesn't work that way.


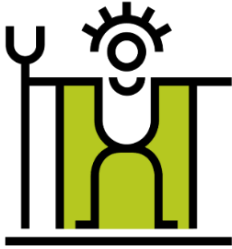


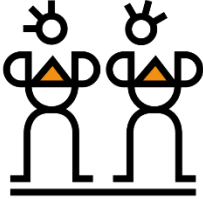
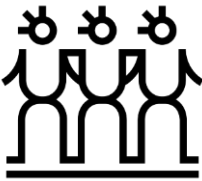
When some people's needs are not met, it can all go wrong quickly.

### When limbic systems are in charge

Given the endless, unconscious and contagious nature of our needs and reactions, a meeting can easily become dysfunctional. When we feel threatened or stressed, we do not listen well, our empathy wanes, we lose our capacities to hold complexity and to entertain new ideas or perspectives.

In other words, a meeting will be less productive and more challenging than necessary when limbic systems are allowed to dominate. Threat-based behaviours such as anger, blame, revenge or disappointment are likely to distract from the agenda.

Take a look at the examples below. These examples draw on your knowledge of limbic system threats and rewards and the Be SAFE & Certain model. You can find an overview of these here to refresh your knowledge.

 <p>One person's need for certainty may create threats to others' need for autonomy.</p>	 <p>The status hungry one gets a dopamine kick when she demonstrates her extensive knowledge of details, while others experience a threat reaction.</p>	 <p>The certainty seeker feels satisfied with details while others feel it is unfair that they have to waste time in the minutiae.</p>
 <p>When someone's expectations are not met, their disappointment may infect others in the meeting.</p>	 <p>Observing one person give strong feedback to another can feel unfair and create a desire for revenge.</p>	 <p>A need for belonging could result in too many people being invited to a meeting.</p>

A quick reminder of the elements of the Model:

## Be SAFE & Certain



# Managing your meetings

It's easy to only focus on tasks and the content of a meeting. But if you learn to put some attention on people and emotional responses, you will be able to address emotions before they become disruptive.

## Strategies to manage threat-based behaviours

Take a look at these strategies that will help you increase overall positivity in your meetings by preparing ahead of time to set the tone, then monitoring and adjusting the mood during a meeting. You can use the majority of these strategies when you are attending a meeting as well as when you are leading one.

### Prepare for the meeting



Set the meeting tone and eliminate some disruptive emotions by planning ahead.

- Use the Feel Know Do model to prepare. What is the desired outcome of the meeting? What information needs to be shared to get that outcome and how will you create an appropriate emotional state?
- Consider how you could add some lightness.
- Provide the agenda ahead of time to set expectations for everyone.
- Let people know how to prepare for the meeting, especially if you want them to contribute something specific.
- Plan the areas of focus and plan questions that will open up those discussions.
- Limit surprises: think about who might be triggered by the meeting content. Consider talking to them ahead of time so they can be ready for the discussion.

### Begin the meeting intentionally



If everyone creates agreements together, they are easier to implement.

- At the start of a meeting, create agreements about how everyone will participate. Recall the metacommunication tips about how to create these.
- Make a plan for managing questions and potentially distracting topics. e.g., have a place to capture them and decide how and when they will be addressed.
- Set expectations and create as much certainty as possible: what is this meeting about, how long is it, how should people participate?
- Create lightness and levity if possible, even around heavy topics. Positivity makes it easier for the brain to pay attention, be solution-oriented and to contribute.

## Support wellbeing and positivity

Support wellbeing so people have the PFC capacity to manage their own emotional reactions.

- Prioritise brain care with breaks and healthy snacks that will keep the PFC engaged and energised.
- Consider 45 (rather than 60) minute meetings to give people time to think between meetings.
- Increase rewards - create a sense of belonging, e.g., "we're in this together!" and look at possibilities for other Be SAFE & Certain rewards.
- De-personalise mistakes and problems rather than blaming an individual.
- Keep practising ABC. Your sense of calm will be contagious and you will be better able to manage any surprises or disruptions.



## Address disruptions in the moment



Despite your best made plans, emotions will arise. This is normal and to be expected but they can derail a meeting. Here are ways to address them:

- Refer back to agreements or readjust if needed.
- Take five or ten minutes to have a group rant to blow off steam, then agree no more complaints: from here we focus on possibilities. Be strict with this timing.
- Pay attention to the mood in the group. Attend to triggered limbic systems (rather than let them fester and spread): slow down, take a breath, ask for what people need. Make new agreements as needed.
- Reduce threats to Be SAFE & Certain elements. Don't put up with insults, blame, hostility or other toxic behaviours. Engage everyone in watching out for these.
- Give feedback and make requests instead of blaming.

## Managing attention

It is inevitable that some things show up during a meeting that shift people's attention away from the agenda.

Left unmanaged, a series of distractions can result in the meeting outcomes not being met.

Think of attention as currency and everyone has a limited amount, but they tend to be reckless spenders. The mind wanders and attention will naturally be drawn to all sorts of sub-topics and aspects of personal interest. Attention may be spent randomly.

### Common distractions

Many common distractions only divert attention for a minute or two at a time. But they add up. Imagine all of these common distractions taking place throughout a 60 minute meeting:

- Emotions are carried over from a previous meeting; people are nervous.
- There's some fun, social chat about a video trending on Twitter.
- The meeting kicks off and a leader adds an unexpected agenda item.
- A virtual attendee has not closed their inbox and you can hear a 'ping' each time they get an email.
- A few speakers ask sloppy questions and open up off-topic discussions.
- The off-topic discussion leads to someone talking about events going on in the world right now.
- As the meeting is off track, a side-conversation starts on the other side of the room.
- A virtual attendee picks up their dog for a cuddle which cues a conversation about life with a dog.
- One person brings the conversation back to work by talking about a success they had last month, stealing the limelight.
- Someone makes a work-related but off topic suggestion that leads to a discussion about the purpose of the meeting.
- Time is up, and the leader quickly wraps up with a vague suggestion that everyone thinks about it further.

Chances are, you have experienced a meeting similar to this one. They are not productive! Next, you will find out how to manage a group's attention in a meeting while still creating a positive atmosphere.

# Managing attention in meetings

As you have seen, there are so many distractions that can arise during a meeting. You probably recognise them as the cause of some meetings being long, unproductive and frustrating.

The question is, how do you maintain a friendly atmosphere in meetings while helping people pay attention and maintain focus?

## Three techniques to tame attention

You can use a lot of the skills you have acquired over the course of this module to help people focus on the meeting agenda.

### 1. Create agreements



Collectively set agreements that will help keep the meeting on track.

- How will you work with devices?
- How will you keep presenters on track, on-topic and on-time? How much time will be allocated to discussions?
- What is the timing of the meeting and how will you stick to it?
- How will you handle questions, comments and other agenda items that are off-topic or relevant to only a small portion of meeting attendees?
- Who will be holding accountability for outcomes from this meeting?

### 2. Manage the brain's needs

Remember that you need a powered-up PFC to consciously point and retain attention.

- Create belonging by maintaining a light and friendly atmosphere.
- Keep to one topic at a time. Shifting and re-shifting the focus of attention will unnecessarily use up PFC power.
- Questions point attention: be intentional about the questions that are introduced. Off-topic questions can spend people's energy needlessly.
- Take breaks and give people time to think.
- Have healthy snacks available.
- Create certainty and expectations by having clear outcomes, assigned tasks and accountability as takeaways from the meeting.





### 3. Metacommunicate

Metacommunication will give people the opportunity to become more conscious and intentional about their behaviour.

- Name what is happening in the meeting, especially when emotions or debate create an unproductive environment.
- Name distractions and point out how they pull people off-topic - table them.
- Ask questions to point the group's attention to the mood and behaviours.



## Bold moves to focus attention

Sometimes, a bold move is required to create more discipline and focus in a meeting. Take a look at these ideas.

*Shelly has a 'no devices' policy in all of her meetings. Attendees are asked to leave phones and laptops outside the meeting room and virtual attendees are asked to close all tabs except the virtual meeting room.*

*Ricardo is strict about only inviting relevant people to the meeting. His policy is that if you do not have an agenda item assigned to you, you do not need to be present.*

*Jack gives people feedback on their distracting behaviour in the moment. He does so kindly but firmly, stating the impact that their behaviour has on the room and suggesting how they could contribute in a more effective way.*

There are so many distractions that can arise during a meeting. You probably recognise them as the cause of some meetings being long, unproductive and frustrating.

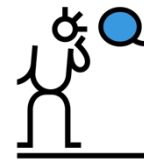
The question is, how do you help people pay attention and maintain focus for the duration of a meeting? It may require some boldness on your part to create more discipline and focus.

## Other bold moves to focus attention

Shelly, Ricardo and Jack offer some great examples and here are a few more to consider.

### Use listening skills and open-ended questions to point people's attention

Questions point people's attention. Be intentional about the questions you ask so you can point people's attention consciously. Challenge presenters to be conscious about the questions they ask too.



### Use laughter and levity

If you tell people to stop having fun with jokes, videos and gossip, this demand is not likely to go over well. Brains need a bit of fun. Laughter and levity help people be present and absorb information. Consider how the group could figure out how to make the meeting engaging and fun while also staying on topic.

### Craft an agenda that meets everyone's needs

If you want an inspired and productive meeting, take the time to find out what is on people's mind ahead of time and craft an agenda to address their needs.

### Set time limits and train people to present highlights.

Consider setting time limits and sticking to them, especially if you have a number of people presenting updates. If everyone agrees to time limits and abides by them, there is fairness and efficiency. Also consider training people to be concise and providing main points while having details available for those who want it - to be sent at a later time, if possible.

### Invite quieter people to contribute

It is important to let the quieter people in the group know that their voice matters. But to avoid putting people too much on the spot, provide an agenda beforehand and have agreements for how to contribute.

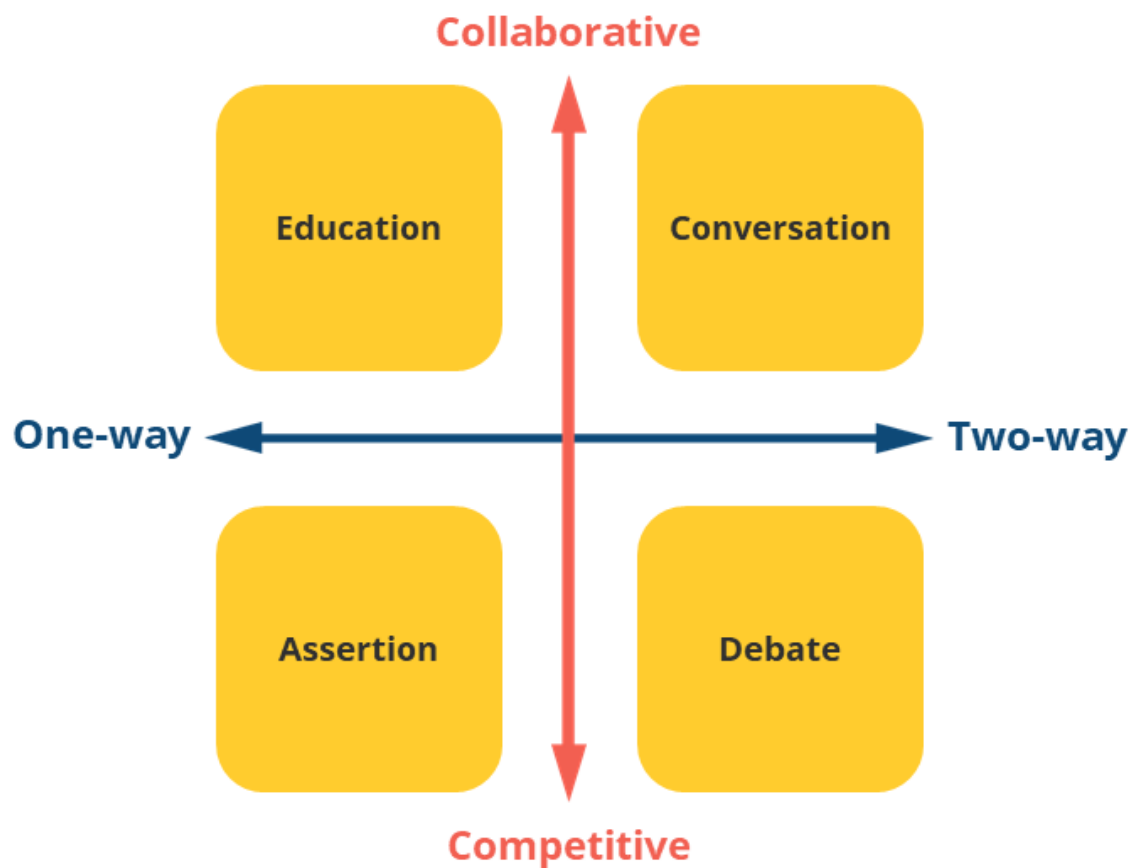
### Plan who holds accountability for what actions are taken after the meeting

Accountability is essential. It is important that you end a meeting with clear actions steps, knowing who is doing what and who is holding people to account.

## Communication styles in meetings

Choosing an appropriate communication style and designing your meeting around it will be helpful to all presenters and attendees. And people need to be informed and prepared for the type of meeting it will be, especially if they are used to something different than what you have prepared.

### Styles of Communication



## Choosing the right communication style

Every communication style has its place. Think carefully about which style is best suited to each meeting, and consciously set up the meeting according to that style.

### Education (1-way, collaborative)

This style would be used for primarily training or disseminating information, keeping in mind that it is intended to be a friendly, collaborative approach.

Set expectations and get buy in from all attending.

**How will you set expectations and get buy in from all attending?**

### Conversation (2-way, collaborative)

You would choose this style when you want input from many people.

Help them prepare by letting them know you expect their input. Make sure people know what you expect and how can they contribute.

Craft some thought-provoking questions that will stimulate a great conversation.

If some people habitually operate from 1-way style, encourage them to listen as well as speak.

**What do you expect and how can they contribute?**

### Debate (2-way, competitive)

A debate can be used to hear different positions on a topic or to negotiate.

Be sure to create emotional safety for debates.

If you expect someone to show up to a meeting and defend their position against others, you need to let them know this is going to be the style of the meeting.

This style can induce people to become stuck in their position. If you want something different, you may need to help them loosen up and try on different ideas.

**How can you avoid people becoming stuck in their position? Could they try on different ideas?**

### Assertion (1-way, competitive)

This style would be used to assert a position in a contentious environment.

If people are not expecting this approach, they may need to be forewarned. How do you let people know that there are no questions being entertained. This is your opinion or this is what you are telling them to do.

In a contentious space, it is more likely that limbic threats will arise - make a plan for handling these, if you wish to win people over.

**How will you handle limbic threats if they arise?**

Think about a meeting that you regularly attend or lead.

- Which communication style is the best fit for that meeting?
- What can you put in place to make the meeting positive and productive, given that style?