

This excerpt is from Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter, by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Copyright 2007 by the authors, published by Berrett-Koehler, June 2007. For comments or permission to quote contact sjanoff@futuresearch.net. Future Search Network members can obtain an autographed copy by contacting Jennifer Neumer, fsn@futuresearch. Cost is \$19.95, no charge for shipping.

Preface

This is no ordinary meeting book. Our purpose is to help you improve your leadership skills one meeting at a time. We intend to do that by turning upside down much of the popular wisdom about meeting management. We aim to help you free yourself from the burden of having all the answers to the mysteries of human interaction.

We will introduce you to a philosophy, a theory, and a practice that is at once radical and simple. To apply our ideas you will not need to worry about anybody's behavior but your own. We will illustrate our principles with examples and provide practice tips you can use starting the next time you lead a meeting. We will back up our advice with experiences from colleagues around the world.

Meetings are as common as dirt and about as popular. This presents you with a delicious paradox. You can practice almost any day of the week an art few people trust, letting low expectations work in your favor. Every meeting you run gives you a chance to surprise people with a gratifying experience. Why not take it?

Well, you have your reasons. You hate meetings, right? You consider them time wasting, boring, and unproductive, unavoidable rituals to be repeated endlessly in agencies, communities, corporations, and schools. That's just the way things are. Hold on a minute. You may be kidding yourself. While writing this book we came across research showing no connection between meetings and peoples' job satisfaction. "It may be socially unacceptable to publicly claim that meetings are desirable," wrote the researchers. "Instead, a social norm to complain about meetings may exist" (Rogelberg & Leach, 2006).

Whatever your reality, everybody hates certain meetings for their own reasons. So do we, and we should know. We have been leading meetings separately and together since the 1960's. We have been in more meetings than we can count and taught meeting methods worldwide to thousands of people. We have been burned in meetings that promised much

and delivered little; and, alas, we know the guilt of promising more than we have to give. Not any more, but that is getting ahead of our story.

Let us say at the outset that we are not writing about all meetings, certainly not those that rely on speakers, panel discussions, slide shows, and one-way information. Nor do we deal explicitly with conference calls and on-line forums, though you may find some of our ideas applicable. While people use distance media for good reasons, few find them a substitute for the gatherings that everybody loves to hate.

Our focus in this book is purposeful, face-to-face meetings. We present a new way of thinking about and leading gatherings where diverse people need each other to solve problems, make decisions, and implement plans that none can do alone. We are writing about meetings where people expect to participate, be heard, and make a difference--in short, meetings that matter. When they are badly led, the main output is cynicism and apathy.

So we write for you if you run meetings. Our book will be of professional interest if you are an executive, manager, consultant, facilitator or meeting planner. You may also find it useful if you lead work teams, teach school or college, coordinate work in hospitals, chair civic boards, or manage non-profits.

Our theme is this: you can make every meeting count. You do not have to knock yourself out memorizing checklists to run a good meeting. You can work less hard and get better results. Anytime we “just stand there,” we are in no way practicing passivity or indifference. Calm we may be to the naked eye, but a lot is going on inside of us. We stay continuously alert to a few matters, very few, it turns out, that we believe make or break a meeting. Those are the ones we will describe.

In that regard, too, this is no ordinary meeting book. We will not tell you how to interview people or how to diagnose a group’s needs, before, during or after a meeting. We will not advise you on how to reduce boredom and apathy, overcome resistance, surface hidden agendas, deal with people who talk too much or too little, or get people’s deepest feelings on the table.

To the contrary, we take the position that if you want to accomplish important tasks under trying conditions you need to work with people exactly the way they are, not as you wish them to be. You can do this if you learn to manage structure, not behavior. You focus on

matching participants to goals, who gets to do what, and how to keep the group on task. Control a meeting's structure, we will show, and participants will take care of the rest. Nor is this all. Starting in the 1980's we noted two global trends that made meetings harder to lead. First, we were living in a world changing so fast nobody could keep up. That's not news if you go to work every day. However, a sickness of our time includes seeking to reduce complexity by ducking it—the “shorter, faster, cheaper” meeting syndrome—and/or compensating for lack of depth with more entertaining techniques. Second, our meetings grew increasingly multicultural. As business went global, non-profits expanded their reach in health care, education, and sustainability, our participants differed markedly by age, culture, education, jobs, gender, sexual orientation, language, race, ethnicity, and social class. Moving in and out of cultures not our own, we soon learned caution in applying what we took for granted at home. We came upon unspoken cultural norms about which we knew nothing and probably never would. No matter how many theories, strategies and models we acquired we had a hard time making our ways of learning fit all the people we sought to lead.

We realized that our best methods were no longer producing the desired results. In the late-1980's we set out to redo from scratch the way we organize, use, and manage meetings. First, we vowed to stop wasting people's time. We would no longer attend or lead meetings when we thought the goals were not attainable. Next, we began experimenting with ways to make every meeting matter, even in unfamiliar cultures. We defined our quest as finding methods anybody could use whether trained or not, whether systems thinkers or not, whether blessed with new technology or not. We set our sights on enabling any group, regardless of culture, to go right to work without having to learn new concepts. We began to structure meetings so that people could cooperate relying only on their own experience.

To make ourselves both more peripheral and more effective, we found we had to make big internal shifts. We had to manage the anxiety we felt as waited for people to connect across boundaries that no one can simplify. We had to let go of leadership demands on ourselves that we knew to be unrealistic. Rather than worry about outcomes, we taught ourselves to tolerate multiple realities and stay focused on goals.

Ten Principles That Matter

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to ten principles for making every meeting matter. They reflect a good bit of refining that we have done on our methods. More to the point, they reflect persistent work on us. Despite recurrent bouts of self-doubt, we have let go many theories and techniques we once relied on. How, for example, would you diagnose “group needs” when every person needs something different? We could no longer work successfully with increasingly diverse groups in a world of non-stop change using methods favoring homogeneity in more stable times.

In this regard, too, we depart from mainstream meeting guides. To deal with diversity and uncertainty we offer a single theory that you can use whether looking at organizations, groups or yourself. It is a theory that we have tested in many cultures. We describe it in the introduction. If you hate theory, skip that part. Stay aware though, that we ground our practical tips and techniques in research and theory going back decades.

In bringing each principle to life we have chosen to limit ourselves to a few practices that you can use all the time. We run meetings the same way with teens and senior citizens, students and teachers, artists and engineers, tribal chiefs and captains of industry, making only small adjustments that help people preserve norms central to their identity. We have learned to help people cooperate regardless of their differences by discovering capabilities they did not know they had.

From this book you will learn to—

help groups achieve shared goals in a timely way;

manage differences without flying apart;

solve problems and make tough decisions without delegating the task back to you; and, structure meetings to greatly increase the probability that people will share responsibility.

While we believe that the action steps we propose are simple to execute, they take self-discipline to learn. You may have to exercise uncommon restraint to “just stand there” when a group falls into chaos and blames it on you, or when somebody says something divisive and everybody looks to you to fix it, or when people split over goals, question your authority, or stereotype each other to the point where work halts. You can, however, learn to deal skillfully with the unexpected if you are willing to persist in working on yourself.

Ours surely are not the only principles and methods for leading meetings that matter. We ask you to consider each one because so many others have adopted them. In writing this book we compiled stories from colleagues around the world. Hundreds have applied the practices described here in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, India, and North and South America. They have integrated our principles into their work regardless of the size, length and goals of their meetings. You can do the same.

As a fringe benefit, you may lift from your shoulders the yoke of worries about people's attitudes, motives, hidden agendas, status and styles. Instead, you will learn to use structural practices that keep groups whole, open, and task-focused. As you discern when to act and when to just stand there, you will find yourself adding your own positive ripples to the stream of life. In other words, you will learn how to make every meeting matter.

The stone landmark that appears on the cover symbolizes our title. The Inuit of the high Arctic call it an Inuksuk. For centuries they have used it for guidance in navigating the barren tundra. Signifying safety, hope and friendship, the Inuksuk stands immobile. Yet people rely on it to find their way.

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Wynnewood, PA, USA

January 2007