



Bad timing.	Meetings – a necessary evil?	Meetings, meetings...and more bloody meetings.
You can make a difference. Ground rules for meetings.	Public speaking – as ye sow so shall ye reap.	Public speaking – free sex.
Public speaking – very interesting.	Don't use a picture when a thousand words will do.	



Bad timing

“The first rule of style is to have something to say. The second rule of style is to control yourself when, by chance, you have two things to say; say first one, then the other, not both at the same time.”

George Polya, Hungarian mathematician, *How to Solve It* (General Eisenhower) and I didn't discuss politics or the campaign. Mostly we talked about painting and fishing. But what I remember most about the hour and a half I spent with him was the way he gave me all his attention. He was listening to me and talking to me, just as if he hadn't a care in the world, hadn't been through the trials of a political convention, wasn't on the brink of a presidential campaign.”

Norman Rockwell, American artist, *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 2, 1960

Communication is the lifeblood of an organisation. And while there is no doubt that success in life is determined by things like talent, determination and persistence, timing plays its part, too. Would Bill Gates be the mega rich bloke that he is if he had been born say just 5 years before or after he was born? Who knows? Not even Bill probably and he obviously knows a lot. Right place, right time. Very important.

Back to communication. When I was in my mid-twenties, I was an earnest, idealistic and inexperienced trainer for a large, public sector organisation. (What a painful combination, huh?) It was then I first heard the term, 'communication breakdown'. And it's a term I have probably heard every year since. That's over a period of about 35 years, if you were wondering. I have heard many a manager cite 'communication breakdown' as the reason for a wide variety of organisation problems. And often they're right.

Back to timing. There are times when you are wasting your time trying to communicate with somebody because their mind is on other things.

Bad times to communicate

- When the sender doesn't have enough time to get the meaning across properly and get necessary feedback from the receiver.
- When the receiver is preoccupied and too distracted to take it in.
- When the receiver is in a hurry and is anxious to go somewhere or do something and therefore is not focussed or doesn't try to understand.
- When a phone call or another visitor might interrupt the sender or receiver.
- When the receiver has physical problems – fatigue, headache, etc.
- When the receiver has mental or emotional problems – fear, anxiety, personal problems, insecurity, disgruntlement, rage, etc.
- When the receiver is in a bad mood – resentful, angry, frustrated, etc.
- When there is ill feeling between the sender and the receiver.
- When there are visual or aural distractions going on in the background.
- When the sender hasn't got all the facts pertaining to the situation.



- When the receiver is interrupting
- When the sender or receiver is highly emotional about an issue.
- While the receiver is reading something or working at their keyboard.
- When the sender is unclear or confused about his or her stance on a particular issue.

Guidelines for picking better times

- When the sender and receiver both have **time** to accomplish the objective of the communication.
- When the **attitude** and **mood** of both of them are positive.
- When the receiver is **able** and **eager** to understand.
- When the communication will **not be interrupted**.

No wonder communication breaks down continuously. You might be waiting forever before the conditions are right. The point is that if the conditions aren't right, make that the focus of your communication – to get the right conditions – before you waste time communicating 'when the lights are on, but there's nobody home.'



Meetings - a necessary evil?

common complaint from managers and staff is the number of meetings they have to attend which consume valuable time. Meetings are necessary, but they don't have to be perceived as a waste of time. No one will complain if a manager sets out to reduce the quantity and improve the quality of meetings.

A good place to start is to compare the meetings you conduct against this list of reasons why meetings attract such bad press, checking items that may have occurred in relation to your meetings. This analysis of your own meetings will highlight ways that you can improve the quality of your meetings.

Here are some of the more common reasons why meetings are too often seen to be ineffective:

- Poor or no preparation by the meeting leader and the participants.
- No clear agenda established with priorities and time allocations for each agenda item.
- No circulation of an agenda with clear identification of how participants will be expected to contribute to the purpose of the meeting.
- Non-attendance of key people so that decisions have to be put on hold.
- Lack of control by the leader so that the conversation wanders into areas that do not add value to the purpose of the meeting.
- The most senior person waffles on and meanders into areas outside the purpose of the meeting and no one wants to appear disrespectful by challenging the connection to the purpose of the meeting.
- One person dominating discussion and decisions so other people present don't bother contributing their ideas.
- The meeting leader has a pre-determined outcome - no consensus.
- The reason for the meeting or the purpose of the meeting is not established or is unclear.
- People are not committed to the reason for the meeting.
- There is a lack of emphasis on fact - more focus on opinion, assumption and inference.
- People don't feel safe to say what they really think and feel.
- People of lower rank feel intimidated by those of higher rank.
- Contributions or opinions are not sought and obtained from all participants.
- Lack of stability of the meeting participants, i.e. key people being replaced while on leave or other business by people who have no background knowledge of a particular agenda item.



- The counter-productive or negative attitudes of some participants are not confronted or brought out into the open.
- Insufficient notice about the meeting.
- No one has the authority to make the decision.
- The outcome or the decision is not really agreed - people appear to go along with the decision, but with no real conviction. No check of the level of commitment of participants to a decision. Commitment is not agreed, documented and followed up. Decisions made at the meeting are not followed through to implementation.
- No action plan with a monitoring process agreed in relation to decisions made.
- Meeting starts late and finishes late.
- Too many items/activities planned for the time available.
- No, illegible or poor quality visual aids.
- 'Hidden agendas' - people have other issues usually related to self-interest which are not related to the purpose of the meeting.
- No evaluation of how effectively we conduct our meetings.





Meetings, meetings...and more bloody meetings.

any meetings are a waste of time. I'm sure we don't need to remind you of that. If the best decisions are not made in a time frame-which is reasonable, it is due to one of these things:

- poor meeting structure
- poor leadership or
- poor participation

As much as they are maligned, meetings still represent the best available communication and consultative process for maximising effectiveness, exchanging information and perceptions, confirming engagement and commitment and improving productivity.

The meeting leader and the participants have responsibilities before, during and after the meeting. Use this checklist with your people to see what needs improving. Be prepared to receive accept feedback.

Before the meeting

- Inform participants in written form of meeting details, such as time, venue and agenda.
- Request agenda items from all staff. The act of requesting contributions is nearly as important as any contributions you might receive.
- Select the best time of the day to hold the meeting that allows participants to give their undivided attention.
- Identify and circulate the objectives of the meeting and the input required from each participant.
- Estimate the amount of time needed to discuss each objective. Set a time limit on the duration of the meeting and stick to it.
- Limit the number of objectives to those that can be achieved within the time available.
- Ensure you are prepared in the areas your input is required by thinking through the issues likely to be raised and plan your contribution.
- Appoint someone to record the key points and decisions reached during the meeting and who will initiate the action, with whom and by when
- Rotate the leadership role so that other people develop the confidence and competence to conduct effective meetings.
- Prepare an 'action plan' sheet for each person's use.
- Plan ways of making the meeting interesting by visual using aids, charts, transparencies, activities, etc.



- Check that aids such as overhead and data projectors and electronic whiteboards are working.
- Prepare a summary of what actions or tasks were completed from the previous meeting.
- If appropriate, arrange water or other refreshments.

During the meeting

- Establish and agree the ground rules.
- Start the meeting on time, even if some people aren't present.
- Manage the discussion by nominating who is to talk, and when.
- Open the meeting by clarifying objectives, format and expectations.
- Encourage participation by ensuring that every person's contribution is heard.
- Ask questions of non-contributors.
- Make 'hidden agendas' the subject of a separate meeting.
- Ensure that all discussion is relevant to the stated objectives.
- Ask talkative members to clarify how their comments relate to the objectives.
- Frequently ask these questions when discussion has concluded on an agenda item, "As a result of that discussion, what action is required? Who will initiate the action? Who will provide support? What is the timeframe?"
- Record on the action plans who does what, with whom and by when, etc.
- Separate facts from opinions and assumptions.
- Explore all key perspectives when making decisions but make a decision if deadlocked.
- Summarise the key points of a discussion to ensure clarity of issue and decision. Check the level of commitment to the decision.
- End the meeting on time, regardless of whether objectives are achieved.

After the meeting

- Counsel disruptive or non-contributing participants, pointing out the consequences of their actions on the meeting.
- Prepare and distribute a summary of actions agreed to at the meeting identifying the actions, the initiator, the supporters and the timeframe.
- Follow up on agreed actions with staff responsible for completing that action.
- Review with staff the amount of time needed to conduct future meetings.
- Every 4 months or so, ask how can we make our meetings more productive.



You can make a difference – ground rules for meetings

It is not just the meeting leader who can make or break the success of a meeting. Sure, the leader has prime responsibility, but the participants have a key role to play in making meetings effective.

It is a good idea for a manager to establish some ground rules to govern the way all participants conduct themselves at meetings. In fact, if you want to improve the quality of your meetings, call a meeting to review the effectiveness of your meetings. The establishment of agreed ground rules during this meeting will be one big step toward successful meetings.

It is important that you establish your own ground rules with your team and that everyone is committed to following them.

Here are some suggestions for ground rules for participation to get the ball rolling.

- Pay attention and respond to other people's ideas and feelings.
- Allow others to finish what they are saying - don't interrupt.
- Make open ended enquiries - ask who, what, why, how, where and when.
- Accept other points of view as legitimate for them - don't judge people.
- Use active listening techniques such as paraphrasing or summarising to reflect back others' ideas and feelings.
- Encourage free expression - no manipulating or controlling of other people's ideas and feelings.
- Recognise that we will all see the issue differently.
- Speak in friendly terms - avoid sarcasm and put downs.
- Evaluate the ideas not the person.
- Create opportunities for other thoughts and feelings to be expressed which may be different from the norm.
- Accept that everybody has perceptions which might not be grounded on fact but are nonetheless important to them.
- Separate fact from opinion, assumption and inference.
- Build on the ideas of others – acknowledge and extend them further.
- Encourage and allow different points of view.
- One person speaks at a time – no interrupting.
- Focus all conversation on the problem-solving process. Talk solutions as well as causes to problems.
- Question your own and other people's assumptions or perspectives in a non-threatening way.
- Declare assumptions about an issue as assumptions.
- Ask people to give verifiable and specific examples of generalisations.



- Ask people to openly state their level of commitment to a decision or a particular course of action.
- Review every meeting for success and effectiveness.
- Invoke the rule of 'respectful challenge' on the grounds of relevance, substance or time when people are rambling.
- Differing opinions are encouraged and acceptable.
- Ground all discussion in action.
- Once you have agreed the ground rules for participating in meetings, print them on one page and display it prominently in the meeting room. When necessary, refer to the relevant ground rule that is being ignored.





Public speaking - as ye sow so shall ye reap

Unfortunately, if you are looking for shortcuts, when it comes to communicating through presentations or public speaking, there is no substitute for preparation. Prepare well - present well. Prepare poorly - present poorly.

Most honest managers admit to a degree of nerves or anxiety at the thought of public speaking. Just a quick thought here - it is not 'public speaking' itself that makes you nervous. It is the images you have created in your mind – your beliefs and meanings about yourself and public speaking that produces your anxiety. And anyway, a degree of anxiety is necessary as it is the signal that you are gearing up to perform as best you can.

A simple technique for dealing with your nervousness right at the start is to faint on the podium. The concern and sympathy you will get will be quite uplifting. The embarrassment you will feel later is another matter. If you are not up for that, try quickly changing the focus of the audience from you to something else (see 'Very Interesting'). Don't use the bottom of your shirt protruding from your zipper.

Preparation

Back to preparation. Here are some things to consider when preparing for public speaking.

- Clarify what the subject is. Break it up into its key parts or aspects.
- Think about how the subject relates to the audience. What is it that the audience will be expected to do with the information? What is the audience likely to know about the subject? What does the audience need to know about the subject? What are the most interesting aspects of the subject?
- How long you will be speaking? Practice and time your presentation.
- Check out the venue to determine how to make best use of the room layout, seating plan and existing aids and equipment.
- Decide how to address the group - standing or sitting in front, using a lectern or public address system, or sitting in as part of the group.
- Develop a plan (see below) which includes how to introduce the subject, what topics of the subject will be covered and key points to be made about each topic. Also include points to be summarised and emphasised at the end of the presentation.
- Don't forget that a picture is worth a thousand words. Use visual aids – diagrams, key words and phrases.



Some pointers about delivering your speech or presentation:

- Arrive early to ensure the layout is right and all the resources are available and working.
- Check your personal appearance. Be aware of the impact your clothes will have on the audience.
- Speak with conviction and confidence about the subject matter - gained through your thorough preparation. Never make apologies for the subject matter.



- Use a natural delivery and speak at the right volume, pace and tone to suit the situation. Remember to vary your tone. Tape yourself (yeah, it's embarrassing) to hear how others see and hear you.
- Speak to all in the group. Look at all people at various times during your speech. Avoid the temptation to address only one or two. Don't gaze at the roof or the back wall or through a window. Avoid the temptation to lock on to the 'automatic head nodder'. There's one or two in every group. They're great because they nod their head at things you say which is great for your confidence. But you can find yourself always looking at them for reassurance that somebody agrees with your views. Also, more so if you are a male, beware of 'cleavage magnets'. And if you need that explained then you don't have a problem.
- Be alive - use appropriate emotion, energy and movement, but avoid pacing back and forth continuously.
- Anticipate questions that may arise. If unable to answer a question at the time, make a note of it and get back to the person later.
- If reading from prepared material, look up frequently at the audience.
- At the end, summarise the main points of the speech. The key things that you want the audience to take away.

Use a presentation preparation plan:

Subject:	
Introduction:	
Key topic:	Key points:



Public speaking – free sex

To communicate, put your thoughts in order; give them a purpose; use them to persuade, to instruct, to discover, to seduce.

William Safire, Columnist, The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Dec 1987

Now that I have the undivided attention of some of you, I'll get to the point of this article – communicating through presentations or public speaking. This is one activity that strikes fear into the heart of most managers. To reduce your anxiety and to ensure a successful presentation, focus on one thought - preparation, preparation, and more preparation.

The first few moments of a presentation can make it or break it. It will help you set up your presentation or speech if you can kick it off with a powerful introduction. How you perform in the first few minutes is very important because it is then when your audience is forming their impressions of you and what you are about to present. Get them on side at the beginning and you are half way home. Knowing that you have a powerful introduction will also help reduce anxiety and boost your confidence.

Use this acronym **INTRO** to help put your introduction together.



I INTEREST

How do you intend to capture the audience's attention with something that is relevant to the subject? The solution may be a joke, anecdote, question, compliment, shock, startling fact, a provocative or controversial comment or a curiosity.

N NEED

Your introduction should explain why the audience needs to listen. In what way will the audience gain or benefit from the information you're about to give them? What will be different for them as a result of listening to your presentation? If you are struggling to explain why people need to listen to your presentation - forget it.

T TITLE

What are you going to call your presentation? For example, would you title your presentation 'Public Speaking' or 'How to overcome nerves and enjoy public speaking'? The latter is likely to gain more attention.

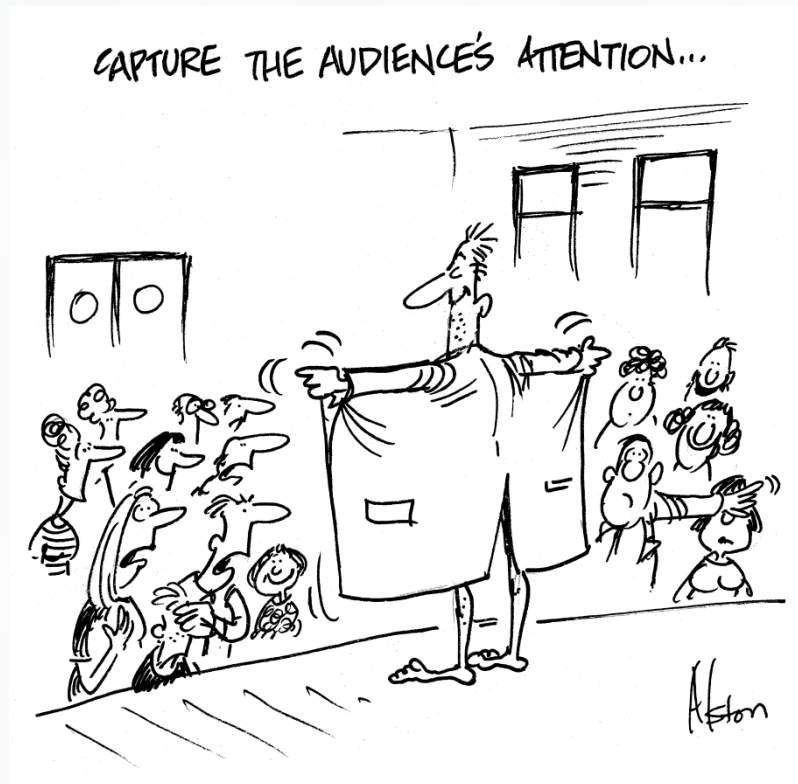
R RANGE

This has two elements - the range of topics you intend to cover in the time allotted and how long you intend to take to cover the range from beginning to end. Remember that as you announce a time frame, the audience sets its mental alarm which may bring on a mental walkout if the timeframe is exceeded.

O OBJECTIVE

What is it that you want the audience to do as a result of listening to your presentation? What is the specific action you would like them to take after your presentation? What results do you wish to accomplish?

Now all you need is an equally powerful body of content and an equally powerful ending.





Public speaking - very interesting...

o you have to make a public presentation? How do you kick it off in a high energy way which immediately focuses the audience's attention? (And possibly takes their focus off you while you ease yourself into the presentation and calm your nerves.)

Try some of these ideas for opening a speech or presentation:

- Show a bright, colourful visual. For example, a gory picture of an eye operation makes an enormous impact at the start of a safety talk.
- Distribute a handout which has the key question (related to the purpose of the presentation) written on it with lined space for them to write a response. Ask them to reflect for a moment and write a brief response to the question. You could then ask for a range of responses and say that you will attempt to cover most of these issues. Or after they have reflected and written their response, say that if your presentation does not answer their question to ask it at the end.
- Create curiosity. Ever wondered how...? Ever wondered when ... ? Ever wondered what...? Ever wondered why...?
- Pay a sincere compliment to the group or to an individual. Make sure the compliment is genuine and relevant. Describe why it is worthy of mention.
- State a significant consequence of an upcoming event or state a fact of interest to the group. For example, "Ignorance of this particular law in the future makes you liable to a fine of \$25,000 and / or imprisonment for a term of 6 months."
- Ask a question. This will gain immediate audience response and hence their immediate attention. "We are here today to find out more about _____. Does anyone know why _____ is of vital interest to this group?"
- Ask a series of questions around Rudyard Kipling's six wise men - who, what, where, how, why and when.
- State a benefit for the audience. Tell the audience what's in it for them, how they will benefit by listening to your presentation. It might be more profit, reduced costs, time saving, more leisure time, increased efficiency, less stress, better safety, etc.
- Display a model directly related to your subject - an ingenious cutaway model or transparent Perspex dummy can be shown to reveal parts related to your subject.
- Start with a 'straw poll' of the audience. Ask the audience to put up their hand if they are for proposition X or Y or Z.



- In advance of the presentation, conduct a mini survey on the topic and then present the findings.
 - Promise things to come - some interesting development or result or reward without disclosing exactly what it is.
 - Quote a recommendation or referral which has come from someone well known and respected by the audience - mention that person's name and why they have recommended you.
 - Start with a personalised statement connecting you immediately with the topic. "For years I have avoided dealing with problem people because I wasn't confident that I could deal with the other person's reaction. Then I learnt a simple process that made it easier for me."
 - Show the end result first. This is what you will know or be able to do as a result of this presentation.
 - Tell a joke or cite an humorous incident about the topic. Check with others first that it is funny and that you can tell it humorously.
 - Use a startling statistic. Relate it to something which occurs in everyday life to sheet it home.
-
- Ask the audience to tell you the burning questions or issues of most interest to them relating to the topic. Write a sample on a whiteboard and refer to them during your presentation.



Don't Use a Picture When a Thousand Words Will Do

Speak properly, and in as few Words as you can, but always plainly; for the End of Speech is not Ostentation, but to be understood.

William Penn, 1644-1718, Founder of Pennsylvania, Fruits of Solitude in Reflections and Maxims

It is not the quantity, but the pertinence (of your words) that does the business.

Seneca, 4 BC-AD 65, Roman writer and theoretician, Epistles to Lucilius

Talk too much and you talk about yourself.
Yiddish proverb.

Just in case you get the wrong idea, the above title is stated very much 'tongue in cheek'. We all know the adage, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Yet that wisdom seems to fly out the window all too often when we present information or attempt to influence thinking in a discussion.



We rely on talk, talk and more talk to get our point accepted. In a twenty minute discussion, two people might exchange around 5,000 words. How many of those words are not absorbed by the listener and just disappear into the ether lost forever?

We place too much emphasis on words alone and not enough on visuals to support our key points. In case you still need convincing, consider this evidence from the Wharton School of Business in the U. S. of A. They tested presenting information with visuals and presenting information with talk alone. (Source: *Communication Briefings*, Volume 17, No IV, www.combriefings.com).

- Audience members perceived presenters who used visuals as more effective than those who did not. Some audience comments – clearer, more concise, better prepared, more professional, credible and interesting.
- 79% of the audience that saw the visual presentation reached consensus compared to 58% of people in the non-visuals group.
- 67% of the visuals group found the presenter convincing, versus 50% in the other group.
- 64% of the visuals group were able to make decisions right after the presentation, those in the non-visuals group lagged in decision making.
- The study also concluded that using visuals can cut meeting time by 24%.

To influence other people's thinking, you don't need sophisticated technology – a whiteboard or a flipchart will do. If you are using a data projector, walking away from the screen and writing something important on a whiteboard or flipchart captures the audience's attention.

- Use a whiteboard while you are talking to constantly illustrate key points, erasing as you go.
- If presenting ideas one-on-one, sit alongside the other party and use a pad or tablet to demonstrate key points. Draw diagrams or write key words.
- Use lines to link connected concepts to help make the link in other people's minds.
- Write the 'crunch issues' or the key questions to be answered or the key decisions to be made.
- List the solutions or options so that people can clear their mind.
- List the key objectives and obstacles and cross them out as you address them.
- Use pens of various colours to add impact.
- Write up a couple of key words related to the topic, the desired outcome or the decision to be made and point to it when a speaker starts to wander off the



topic. Say something like, “Mike, what’s the connection?” while pointing to the key words.

- Use a sheet of chart paper as a ‘parking lot’ and as good ideas or issues to be resolved come up in discussion, ‘park’ the ideas or issues on the sheet of chart paper. This allows people to clear their mind and be ready to digest the next bit of information.

