Enhanced Engagement Techniques: Tapping into the Knowledge Present in Your Meetings

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Getting oil out of the ground is much tougher than most people think. Appreciating that some of these misguided perceptions may have been shaped by watching Jed Clampett of *The Beverly Hillbillies* strike oil when his errant bullet hit the ground, the truth is that the process is not that simple. Historically, after the "easy" oil was pumped out, most fields were left with significant resources still in the ground. Producers regularly walked away from these fields to pump "easy" oil in other fields. However, after the low-hanging fruit became tougher to find, companies invested in enhanced oil recovery technologies, and producers returned to the "depleted" fields and extracted another 20% to 60% of the available oil. Imagine how much more efficient they could have been had they used the technology when the initial infrastructure was in place!

This same concept can be applied to uncovering knowledge during meetings. As decades of research demonstrate, attendees' knowledge, insights and ideas are only minimally accessed during meetings. For a 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, the author asked employees at a large global bank this question: "When you have a contribution to make in a meeting, how often are you able to do so?" Only 35% said they felt able to make a contribution all of the time. Another study found that 59% of those surveyed reported that meetings were the most wasteful part of their workday, largely due to the lack of inclusion. In my 20 years of teaching facilitation workshops to highly technical groups, the most frequent comment I've received is: "I often go to meetings where I never even get to speak!"

Like the old oil fields—despite the significant costs and time associated with bringing a group of people together to develop strategies, resolve issues and create innovative solutions—meeting leaders and team facilitators often walk away from meetings having only superficially tapped into the "knowledge field" that exists in their meeting rooms.

Why are so few people engaged? Why is there more talk outside in the halls than in the room? While some might say that the attendees simply do not care or are unmotivated, the attendees in the meeting room represent the available knowledge field. This is what you have to work with, so blaming participants or establishing ground rules that require everyone to participate are unlikely to change the yield. What we need, instead, is an understanding and appreciation of the typical individual and social factors that are present in any meeting room, and the tools and techniques that can, despite those factors, tap into the wealth of knowledge present. Let's take a look.

To begin, multiple studies have shown that work style is a contributing factor. For example, author Susan Cain in her best-selling book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking,* discusses how introverts, a group that includes many individuals in the science and engineering professions, can be overwhelmed by the more vocally dominant extroverts in the room. Faced with the chorus of voices, they simply remain quiet. This point was made abundantly clear to me when, upon completing a decision-making meeting, I walked up to a very bright (and introverted) petrophysicist and asked why she had not shared more about her perspective. She replied, "Walk into that hailstorm of debate? No way. That is just not something that I do." Oil left behind.

Cultural and gendered factors can play an important role as well. While the American individualist- and extrovert-dominated culture applauds those who readily speak up, other cultures place more value on group harmony and would never consider directly opposing a higher power or subject-matter expert in the room. I will never forget a cross-cultural meeting in which an American expat working in a Chinese cultural context strongly and repeatedly stated his assertions as a female participant quietly stared down at the table. When I intervened by commenting that I thought his point had been heard, he replied, "No, she hasn't said anything!" I replied, "Yes, she has. In her cultural code, she has said volumes."

The number of participants in a meeting is another contributing factor. While it is honorable to want to include as many people as possible in a meeting so that more ideas can be heard, there is a point of diminishing return. After a group exceeds 10 to 12 participants, the percentage of voluntarily voiced ideas begins to drop off. For example, think of how few speak up during a company town hall meeting.

Surprisingly, even commonly used meeting techniques result in leaving untapped knowledge behind. Despite the much shared but lacking-in-substance technique of brainstorming, people do not necessarily produce more ideas in free-wheeling groups. The strong pressures of social dynamics that emerge within groups can actually diminish the number of new ideas expressed. In fact, research has shown that, if you really are seeking divergent views, having people submit their ideas digitally outpaces face-to-face dialogues in the number of new ideas created.

A multitude of psychological biases also come into play and inhibit the expression of unique insights—for example, the desire for conformity. *People want to be liked by the group***.** They also believe that the group is better informed than they are (a bias that marketers feed on, for example, when they inform you that "65% of patients report feeling better after taking this drug") and so will adjust their thoughts to align with that of the majority. The famous Asch conformity experiments conducted in 1951 demonstrated the extent to which pressure—even unintended pressure—from others can affect one's perceptions. The disturbing outcome of this pressure, subsequently evaluated four decades later using MRIs, is that people truly believe that what they see is the truth. *They do not believe that they are responding to group pressure when they provide a response that aligns with that of the group.*

Another bias that significantly sways people's judgment is called the Anchoring Bias. This occurs when people's assessments are heavily influenced, unbeknownst to them, by initial information. To demonstrate, as part of a 2008 Project Management Institute conference presentation, I distributed a worksheet prior to my presentation and asked the 300 or so members of the audience to complete the questionnaire. The trick was, the questionnaires were a bit different. For the left half of the room, Question #1 read, "Is the number of muscles in an elephant's trunk greater than 50?" Question #2 read, "What is your best estimate of the number of muscles in an elephant's trunk?"

The right side of the room had a slightly different Question #1. Theirs read, "Is the number of muscles in an elephant's trunk greater than *1000*?" Question #2 was identical.

At the start of my presentation, I asked everyone to look at their answer to Question #2—the best estimate—and, if their answer was greater than 500, to please stand up. Confirming, yet again, the power of the anchoring bias, about 80% of the right side of the room stood up, with only a few from the left. What had happened?

Recall that the right side of the room had a much greater number in Question #1: 1000 versus 50 for the left. These numbers became a reference point that influenced their response to Question #2. With "1000" floating in their heads, the right side predictably answered Question #2 with a much higher estimate than those on the left who were thinking "50."

That's the power of the anchoring bias. It influences how we negotiate; how we make decisions; how we estimate costs, risk, probabilities, or production forecasts; and any other number of responses we are asked to provide in meetings. So instead of getting a variety of unique and divergent responses to a question raised in a meeting, you are likely hearing responses anchored in the information provided by the first speaker. More oil left behind.

Lastly, there is the issue of *how* we are meeting. To eliminate travel costs, virtual meetings have become the preferred way to get together. (Some might say that this also allows for multitasking and other efficiencies, but we shall save challenging these false claims for another chapter.) Anthropologists and social psychologists have found that although virtual meetings indeed maximize travel dollar savings, the level of inclusion is minimized. People are three times less likely to speak up in a teleconference than they are in a face-to-face meeting, and because team leaders run virtual meetings as they would face-to-face meetings, the percentage of wasted time (as reported by meeting attendees) skyrockets, which is why the attendees bring other things to work on.

Given these various influences, it is no surprise that participants leave meetings feeling like their ideas are never heard, or why leaders leave meetings frustrated that no new insights emerged. Like the old oil fields, valuable insights and ideas were left unknown, unacknowledged, and thus unavailable for use. So, how can we ensure that we are extracting all knowledge present in the room? What else can be done?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

We must use enhanced recovery techniques in the meeting room, just as oil companies used them in the oil fields. In the office context, we call these *enhanced engagement techniques.* Like the primary oil field techniques—which required only a good old-fashioned pump—natural group conversation can produce new insights and ideas, but so much is left behind.

Employing more sophisticated techniques can escalate engagement levels, thereby tapping into an otherwise untouched knowledge field. As an example, questions such as, "Are there any other thoughts on this topic?" tend to yield a few responses (though much fewer on a teleconference). However, a simple yet sophisticated restructuring of that question such as "What are the other thoughts present in the room?" combined with a roundtable collection of responses produces a much higher yield.

Here are a few of the most powerful tools for creating engagement:

TECHNIQUE #1

Ask "What do you want to have happen?"

I would be completely remiss if I did not begin this section with one of the most powerful ways to create engagement—by asking a simple yet incredibly revealing and stance-shifting question, *"What do you want to have happen in this meeting?"*

Think about how most meetings begin. A facilitator or leader stands up and spends the next 10 minutes (if you're lucky) talking about all of the things they want to cover, the process that will be used, why this meeting is important, why everybody needs to participate and on and on. No one else has said a word, no matter that it is written in the ground rules that "everyone's opinion matters." It is becoming increasingly clear to participants that this will not be the case! In some situations, it can be as long as 30 to 40 minutes before a participant is asked to engage, and by that time they have likely checked out. "Nope, nothing to add," is the usual response.

Now imagine another meeting that begins in the following way. "Good morning, everyone. I'm hoping that you all had a chance to review the questions that we are here to answer today. But, before I review the specific agenda, I'd like to understand what it is that you would like to have happen in today's meeting. I can appreciate that this is a significant use of your time today, so it's important that I understand this. Larry, let's start with you and work clockwise around the table."

Little request, *powerful* impact. "This simple question was unbelievable!" a student exclaimed when she came in late to the second day of class. "It completely changed the tone of the meeting!! So sorry I am late, but I had to hold my morning meeting with the union folks and I decided to try out this 'happen' question we discussed yesterday. You could just see the shock on everyone's face…and the whole conversation just went so much better! Thanks! This stuff is awesome!"

That's the power of this question. It does so many things. First, in answering the question "What do YOU want to have happen?" you are getting the participants to put their "psychological skin" in the game. Rather than them just sitting back with arms crossed, ready to critique when it fits, you essentially are saying, "Au contraire. This is YOUR meeting and what do you want out of it?" You're not saying it on a flip chart, you are *acting* like you want their input. And when they answer, they, too, now have a stake in the game.

Secondly, when participants go off-track (which inevitably happens), you can offer the following insight. "Olaf, it seems as though you have a lot of interest in piping, but I am concerned that if we continue to down this path, we will not be able to answer *your* issue that you wanted to initially explore. Thoughts?" An ever-so subtle way to get your conversation on track.

Thirdly—and this is critical for engagement—you get participants talking *early* in the meeting. This, as researchers have noted, increases the likelihood that they will talk later in the meeting. Atul Gawande, in his book, *The Checklist Manifesto: How To Get Things Right*, shares mind-blowing research conducted at John

Hopkins Hospital about how to improve surgical team communication and engagement.

Picture this. You are lying on an operating table, surrounded by a bunch of folks—nurses, anesthesiologists, residents, surgeons—all ready to operate on you. In studies conducted by the John Hopkin's staff psychologists, they found that the surgical team's communication ratings (as rated by the head surgeon) significantly increased with one little action prior to surgery: by learning one another's names.

Think about it. Hospitals, like in many of our corporations, have hundreds (even thousands) of personnel. People are moving around and changing shifts or departments. So when the team gathers to operate on you, they will likely not know everyone on the team. It's like a client of mine who held global virtual meetings for his project team. As he expressed, "Katherine, I never quite know who is going to show up, who has left the team, and who is knew to the team. It's like a new group every time we get together." So, as Gawande notes, these studies back up "what should have been self-evident—people who don't know one another's names don't work together nearly as well as those who do."

But here's the real kicker from these studies, and why it is vital to get people talking early in the meetings—as in the first five minutes of your meeting. "The investigators at John Hopkins and elsewhere had also observed that when nurses were given a chance to say their names and mention concerns at the beginning of a case, they were more likely to note problems and offer solutions. The researchers called it 'activation phenomenon.' They write, *"Giving people a chance to say something at the start seemed to activate their sense of participation and responsibility and their willingness to speak up."*

Want to get your group engaged? Cut out the long start-of-the-meeting speeches, forgo spending time going through a meaningless and often never-enacted list of ground rules, and ask the participants what *they* want to have happen (along with their names). Cover the agenda specifics *after* they are done sharing their desired outcomes for the meeting.

TECHNIQUE #2

Create process buy-in.

As stated by Peter Block in *Flawless Consulting*, "Almost every event and action carries with it a message about what this project and what this client is going to be like." I would add, "And what *you* (as the group facilitator) are going to be like." By this, I mean that facilitators should not *tell* team members how they intend to act during the meeting; they should act it. If you are seeking "buy-in" from everybody for a team decision, *begin building commitment during your very first interactions with the team.* The degree to which you involve team members in agenda planning, process considerations, and other aspects of the meeting determines their final commitment level. Commitment comes from the perception that one has a choice in the matter, so be aware of creating opportunities for members to express their choices.

Ask team members for their opinions.

- "What would you like to happen?"
- "What things happened before in meetings such as this that did not work for you? How might we avoid those situations?"

When you as the facilitator have opinions, try the following technique so that the team does

not feel like you are using the power of your role to drive your preferences forward. At the start of the meeting, define your role.

- "Today, I will be playing two roles: one of guiding the process and one of contributing my opinions. If you feel that I am driving the meeting with my opinions, please let me know as that is not my intention."

Offer your opinions middle-to-last when discussing ideas. Do not be the first to speak, and be clear about your role.

- "Right now, I'd like to wear my contributor hat."

Give team members plenty of opportunities to guide the conversation.

- "I'm not sure of the next best step. Jose, how do you think we might proceed?"

As a facilitator, it is your role to suggest a pathway for dialogue, but be sure to first check with the group.

- "I'd like to suggest that we discuss the budget next. Is that okay with everyone?"

TECHNIQUE #3

Guide the conversation.

Defend anyone who comes under attack. People are acutely aware of how others are treated. *Your handling of interactions between participants thus becomes critical.* The use of body language, such as holding up a hand or turning your back to an attacker, can be a very powerful tool in such interventions.

Intervene to defend participants who come under attack.

- "Hold on, Bill. (Holds up a hand.) She has a right to share her perspective, and we'll get to yours as soon as she's done. (Turns toward Sue.) Sue, what were you saying about...?"
- "Alison, that may well be true, but I thought we agreed not to evaluate until we completed this diagram. I'd like to get the rest of Kyle's thought on the matter."

Ensure input from everyone by stating an "order of go."

- "Let's start with you, Sam, and we'll go clockwise around the room. Give me just one of the ideas that you have written down."

Ensure balanced speaking.

- "Okay. We've heard a lot from this side of the room. (Turns toward the other side of the room.) I'm wondering what you are thinking over here."
- "Eva, I think I have a pretty good picture of your key issues. I'd like to hear from someone who might see it differently."
- "You know, I've heard a lot about why this won't work. Let's hear some thoughts on why it will."

Body language can provide important clues—but be careful to check your assumptions.

- "Ed, I've noticed that you're sitting a bit back from the table. Is something not quite fitting for you here?"
- "Shelly, your eyebrows shot up on that one! Do you have a different perspective?"

- Be careful about singling people out. Instead of saying, "Frank, tell me what you think," begin with, "How about this corner of the room (where Frank is sitting)? Any thoughts from you folks?"

TECHNIQUE #4

Change the way you facilitate virtual meetings.

Call people out by name—often.

- "I'm interested in hearing everyone's thoughts on Stephan's proposal. Let's start with Tim, and then I'll follow this list of names on the screen. What are each of you thinking as you listen to the proposal?"
- Additionally, you can ask participants to self-identify as they speak.

Create cone-heads—literal pieces of paper shaped into cones—with participants' names written on them.

- If you have some people in the room and others dialing in, write the callers' names on flip-charts or a whiteboard to remind others that they are present. For example, one clever team facilitator wrote the remote participants' names on cones and placed the cones by the speaker phones in the room. Another used empty chairs in the room to signify their presence.

Intentionally create social connections (and trust).

- If the team will be working together for some time, work to create small talk and find ways for the group to share personal information.
- Host a communication planning meeting and discuss what everyone considers good communication practices. Have the group share examples of these best practices and explain the values that underlie them. Establish group norms concerning communication.
- During the meeting, frequently validate the different perspectives.
- Take the time to clarify all contributions.

Pretend there is a blind person in the room.

- Fill in the visual voids for people who are not in the room. For instance, you could say, "When you said that, Paul, I looked around the room and noticed several concerned looks." Or you could say, "Betsy, I'm wondering how everyone reacted when Dana shared that feedback. Could you look around your room and tell us what you see?"

- Describe what is happening. "So, I've just listed the various ideas on a flip-chart hanging on the wall."

Remember that you are competing for their eyeballs.

- Instead of relying on attendees to use their imagination, use the laptop screen to give your participants something to look at—and, when you do, use colorful graphics and keep the pages moving. This often requires an additional person to control the presentation and capture notes. *Note that the act of facilitation should not be subjugated to capturing notes and working with graphics.*
- Because you are competing for those eyeballs, do not assume that you always have the callers' attention. Frequently summarize discussions. Help with possible lack of understanding by repeating what you have heard. For example, use phrases such as, "So, let me make sure that I have heard you correctly. Tatiana, you are suggesting that we ______________."

Shorten the speeches.

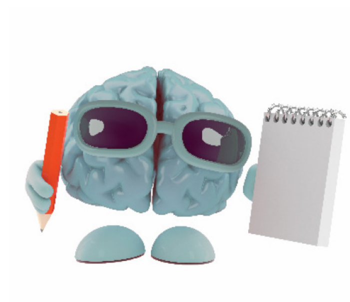
- Give the long-distance runners a break! It is very taxing for a remote participant to maintain focus. To address this, ask presenters to pause for questions in 3 to 5 minute intervals. As a facilitator, listen for natural breaks in the conversation to draw others in.

Change the questions to stop the crickets.

- Rather than asking, "Does anyone have any questions?" say, "Let's see what questions are out there. Joe, how about we start with you, and then I'll follow the call-in list shown on our screens." Or you could say, "Okay. As Ziyu has shared her suggestions, I am wondering if anyone has comments about her ideas. Andres, what were your thoughts as you heard this? Bjorg, what might you add to that?"

Adjust your goals.

- Given that you cannot rely on visual cues, a general rule of thumb is that it takes a teleconference approximately 1.5 times longer than a face-to-face meeting to accomplish the same level and quality of work.



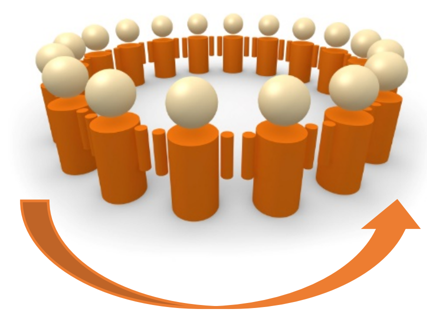
TECHNIQUE #5

Use brainwriting.

Brainwriting is a diverging tool used to draw out people's ideas, thoughts, concerns and questions—essentially, anything that is on their mind about a given topic or issue. However, unlike *brainstorming*, where people are asked to call out their ideas, brainwriting requires that participants first write down their ideas and then read off what they have written. These two aspects make brainwriting a wonderful tool for "drawing out" input from quieter members and ensuring that people do not change their minds because of something someone else in the room says before they have the chance to speak. Brainwriting is therefore a wonderful tool for mitigating the power of conformity and the anchoring bias we discussed earlier.

One of brainwriting's most valuable aspects is that it builds on a principle called cognitive dissonance: people are less likely to change their minds when they have written something down. All too often in meetings, if people simply bring a thought to mind, people will change that thought because of what another person in the room says—for example, something a higher-ranking team member says, or because their thought differs from the majority of the group's. They don't want to be seen as stupid or not a "team player," so that original thought is modified. Writing their thoughts down prior to verbal expression increases—but does not eliminate--the likelihood that attendees don't change those thoughts and, in my experience, they tend to be more candid than if those thoughts were simply spoken. If I have a sense that even writing ideas down might not overcome the social dynamics present in a room, I will gather up whatever they have written and read them off, thus completely disassociating the idea from the idea generator.

To use brainwriting in a meeting, first identify the topic or question. For example, ask the following questions: What criteria should we consider? What are all the ways we can reduce costs? What are the current perspectives on the problem? Then, have everyone take a scrap sheet of paper and write down as many ideas as possible during a 30-second to two-minute period. To capture these ideas, define an "order of go," rather than relying on volunteers to start. [More on this in the next section, Technique #6] You could say, "Let's start with you, Pam, and go clockwise around the room." When capturing these ideas, limit attendees to reading one thought at a time. This helps when strong personalities attempt to dominate the conversation and ensures much more balanced input. You could say, for example, "Read off one of the items that you have written, and then we will come back and see what was missed."



TECHNIQUE #6

Try the "Order of Go"

When you pose a question to the group, do not leave the response order to chance. Otherwise, your naysayer, your extrovert, or the person in the room who is otherwise most likely to speak up will do so, effectively silencing those who see things differently, those who exhibit more introverted tendencies, or those dialing in over the phone.

Once, while I was facilitating an important project review, a rather negative manager had the habit of jumping in at the end of each review, effectively shutting down further dialogue. Using the simple directive, "To make sure that we hear from everyone, let's do a clockwise lap around the room and start with….Bill (who was just to the left of the negative manager)," changed the entire tone and engagement level of the meeting.

TECHNIQUE #7

Ask different questions

One of the most unenlightening but frequently used questions asked in meetings is, "Does everyone understand this?" This question is usually met with a quiet nod from the person being questioned, which means that the person either does understand (in which case you as the facilitator have no idea what this understanding is), or the person wants to give the impression that he or she understands (because no one wants to look stupid). Another equally poorly structured question is, "Does anyone have any questions?" This query is sure to make participants aware of any crickets present in the room, particularly on teleconference calls.

While effective questioning techniques will be covered in a subsequent chapter, these simple tips can help increase engagement in meetings:

Ask open questions.

- While closed questions are useful for gathering information (for example, "Did you call Steve?" or "Was that implemented?"), they are limited in that they reflect the questioner's frame of the issue, potentially leaving out what the client might deem most important. Since this is the case, asking closed questions to obtain specific information is limited in its ability to surface the client's values, reactions, and insights regarding what they see as their options and constraints. Asking open questions can stimulate the conversation.

Ask non-interrogative questions.

- Negative questions—such as, "Isn't this what you meant?" or "Don't you think we should consider this option?" or "Shouldn't you just go ahead and try this?"—express a position, rather than seek information. Comments like these are actually pieces of advice masquerading as questions and tend to be met with resistance or silence.

Avoid *why* questions.

- When you ask a team member, "Why did you design it that way?" or "Why didn't you check in with us on that?" it suggests that you are telling the person that he or she is wrong. Additionally, the *why* question can be rather limiting. Linguists Bateson and Ruesch explained that asking *why* is rooted in causality, meaning that it searches for a cause, which could explain its existence. It also makes people defensive. For example, think of the typical physician's questioning process. In contrast, the *how* question (ex. "How did you come to that conclusion?") can uncover the broader system of events that led to a certain conclusion or action and therefore provide a much deeper understanding of the thought process.

Use presuppositions.

- Presuppositions are a powerful linguistic construction. Take, for instance, the following question: "What are your thoughts about how this can be improved?" This question provokes a very different kind of thinking in a client than the question: "Do you have any thoughts?" In the former, the questioner must answer the embedded command "you have thoughts," whereas the latter leads the questioner into a yes-no framework. Because presuppositions are often unnoticed, they can be powerful mechanisms for creating change. For example, the opening question, "So what kind of changes do you want to achieve today?" can propel the team naysayer into recognizing that he, too, wants things to be different.

Conclusion

Organizations are full of people with so much to contribute. People have ideas to solve the tough challenges, the insights that can spark innovative thinking, and the questions that need to be asked and answered. Using enhanced engagement techniques brings that knowledge to the surface, ensuring that you have fully tapped into the thinking power that exists within your meeting rooms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Rosback is an internationally recognized expert facilitator. She is known for assisting groups in navigating complex decisions or tackling technical problems that, through her skillful means of weaving together the various opinions and perspectives present, help the group discover and own their answer.

Her flagship workshop "**Leading to Resolution**" has been taught through the U.S. and abroad and scores consistently high reviews for her ability to engage the participants, its applicability to real work issues, and for the way Katherine grounds her teaching in scientific research. Her background as a Chemical Engineer enables her to work easily with technical groups seeking answers to complex issues while her graduate work in Organizational Communication and subsequent research in group dynamics, the decision sciences, and conversation analysis allows her to work within a variety of organizational processes but always within the context of how humans think and behave.