

You Have to Start Meeting Like This!

We work -- therefore we meet. But why do so few of our meetings meet our expectations? Michael Begeman may be the world's foremost expert on the business world's most universal ritual. Here's his short course on running meetings that will work for you.

From: [Issue 23](#) | April 1999 | Page 204 **By:** Gina Imperato **Illustrations by:** Greg Clarke

Michael Begeman is a leading authority on one of the business world's most universal rituals: the meeting. An anthropologist and computer scientist by training, he serves as manager of the 3M Meeting Network, a loose-knit collection of meeting experts that's been assembled by 3M, the innovation-obsessed manufacturing giant headquartered in Minneapolis.

But Begeman, 41, is much more than a meeting planner and facilitator. He spent four years as a member of the technical staff at Intel. He spent six years as a research manager at MCC, a high-tech research consortium based in Austin, Texas. He has run his own consulting firm. In short, he knows as much about how business works as he does about how meetings work.

So what's the most effective meeting that Begeman has seen lately? He says that it didn't take place in a high-rise office building or at a cutting-edge chip factory. In fact, it took place in a tepee -- in a scene from *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the Oscar-winning film featuring Kevin Costner. The scene takes place after a group of Native Americans discover Costner not far from their camp. Between 20 and 30 members of the tribe gather around for a meeting. There's one big question on their agenda: What should they do with this mysterious white man -- kill him to send a message to others who might follow, or leave him alone to signal their willingness to reason with such newcomers?

What follows, claims Begeman, is a clinic in good meeting behavior. "People actually listen to one another," he marvels. "There are some genuine disagreements, but everyone recognizes merit in everyone else's position and tries to incorporate it into his thinking. The chief spends most of his time listening. When the time comes to make a decision, he says something like 'It's hard to know what to do. We should talk about this some more. That's all I have to say.' And the meeting ends! He is honest enough to admit that he's not ready to make a decision."

How does Begeman compare that powwow with what takes place inside most conference rooms today? "Do you want to know the truth?" he asks. "Here's my mental image of

what happens at most business meetings: You could take the people out and replace them with radios blaring at each other, and you would not have changed very much. That's what most meetings are like. People wait for the person who's speaking to take a breath, so they can jump into the empty space and talk. The quality of communication in most meetings is roughly comparable to the quality of the arguments that you used to have with your 10-year-old brother."

Begeman's mission is to change all that. The monthly email newsletter published by the 3M Meeting Network goes out to thousands of subscribers. The group's Web site offers a collection of useful tools and techniques, of valuable hardware and software. "There is a 'science' of meetings that's available to people now," he says. "We have the knowledge we need to make meetings better. But most people haven't learned it or don't bother to use it. And then they wonder why their meetings just stumble along."

In an interview with Fast Company, Begeman offers a short course on how to make your meetings work.

Meetings Are Work -- And Great Meetings Take Lots of Work

Great meetings don't just happen -- they're designed. Producing a great meeting is a lot like producing a great product. You don't just build it. You think about it, plan it, and design it: What people and processes do you need to make it successful? But first you have to create agreement among people that meetings are work -- they are not an empty ritual to be suffered through before getting "back to the office." Meetings are events in which real work takes place.

That's a big mind flip. All primates -- monkeys, apes, humans -- are social creatures. When you're out in the wild, studying nonhuman primates, one of the things you appreciate is just how social they are. They hang out together, they play together, they groom each other. You very rarely see solitary behavior. But if you walk into a typical company, what you see are rows and rows of cubicles. We've taken these wonderfully social creatures -- human primates -- and we've isolated them. And then we've asked them to be productive in that environment.

Now, as more and more of what people do takes place in teams, meetings become the setting in which most of the really important work gets done. I see this everyday in my own work and life. I do almost all of my work with a team of people -- some from inside 3M, some from outside the company. If I spend most of the day sitting in my office, instead of interacting with people, a warning bell goes off in my head: I'm not getting my job done.

So many people complain to me, "I wish I didn't spend so much time in meetings." To which I say, "Resistance is futile!" The simple fact is, some of our peak experiences as people take place in work groups. Most people have attended at least a few meetings in which there's been a real breakthrough: People are facing a problem, banging heads, not making very much headway -- and then a kind of magic overtakes them. A wind comes

along, it blows away the clouds, and you can just feel the energy in the room. It's possible to have more experiences like that -- if you design your meetings with the same care that you use to design your products.

Different Meetings Need Different Conversations

One of my main roles is to create useful linguistic distinctions for people. Organizations call meetings for lots of different reasons. And it turns out that different kinds of meetings require different kinds of conversations. If you're not clear about the kind of conversation that you should be having, then your meeting probably won't achieve a clear outcome.

For example, some meetings are built around a "conversation for possibility." The group acknowledges that it has come together to generate ideas, not to make decisions. The goal is to maximize creativity. Other meetings are built around a "conversation for opportunity." The goal is not to reach a final decision but to narrow down a field of ideas or options. You gather lots of information; you do some analysis; people take positions. Finally, there are meetings that are built around a "conversation for action." The goal is to decide, to commit: "We want to leave this room with our three investment priorities for 2000."

Unless everyone understands these distinctions, you run into certain familiar problems. You convene a brainstorming session (a "conversation for possibility"), and people are afraid to speak up because someone might shoot down their idea -- or worse, someone might say, "Let's do it." Or you convene a budgeting session (a "conversation for action"), and someone loops back to an idea that was rejected earlier -- which drives everyone else crazy. If you call a meeting, make it clear to people what kind of conversation they're going to have, and then impose a certain amount of discipline on them. Remember: Meetings don't go off topic. People do.

Always Play by the Rules (of Engagement)

Most participants come to a meeting with clear expectations about how other people should act. And if the meeting lives up to such expectations, the participants will feel like they've had a really good experience. If the meeting violates those expectations, then people will become upset or withdrawn. So the key is to translate implicit expectations into explicit agreements -- into what I call "rules of engagement." Do people feel strongly about starting and ending on time? Then make an explicit commitment to doing that. Are people concerned that a meeting doesn't have a clear enough objective? Then make an explicit promise: "If we can't agree on a clear objective within the first 10 minutes, then the meeting is over. We'll schedule another meeting when the objective becomes clear."

You can even create rules of engagement about individual behavior. For example: Before anyone makes a point, that person has to find merit in the point made by the previous speaker. Or, the senior people in the meeting can speak only after the junior people have had a chance to express themselves.

It's a pretty simple idea, really. All you are trying to do is to make the invisible visible, to make the automatic deliberate. These rules of engagement take the bad behaviors that groups stumble into, shine a light on those behaviors, and then address basic questions: How can we change all of this? How do we want to act? Such rules of engagement give people a chance to design how they treat one another in meetings.

One last point about rules of engagement: You should be clear that not all successful meetings end with a decision -- which goes back to why I love that scene in *Dances with Wolves*. Decisions are the Valium of meetings. They offer relief from the tension of what lies ahead, from the uncertainty of the world. They tend to create an illusion of progress: "We've finally made a decision. Now we don't have to worry about that issue anymore." Often it takes courage for a group to end a meeting without making a decision.

Small Talk is a Big Deal

There is a legitimate social component to meetings. Sure, we'd all rather be efficient than sloppy in our work. Sure, we'd all rather spend our time on "real work" than on "idle chitchat." But you should never overlook the social side of work rituals -- even in meetings that are "all business." In many of the meetings that I run -- especially in meetings that take place early in the day -- I schedule 5 or 10 minutes of open time, just to encourage people to relate to one another. If you plan for such time, if you put it on your agenda, then you won't feel as if you're not doing what you ought to be doing. Instead, you can enjoy going around the room and asking people what they did last night, or over the weekend.

For some meetings, I book a certain amount of time at the beginning to ask, "Is there anything that people need to say in order to be 'present' at this meeting?" Remember, just because people walk into a conference room doesn't mean that their mind is on your meeting. They may be thinking about an argument that they just had with a colleague, or about a computer glitch that they've been struggling with all day. If you let people express their frustrations before you get down to business, you allow them to clear their mind and to focus on your meeting.

Want Serious Meetings? Hand Out Toys!

There is much more to people -- even serious businesspeople -- than what's above the neck. We are not just intellects that come together to interact with other intellects. The more you involve the whole person in your meetings, the more people will learn, and the more of that learning they will retain. If you want people to work together effectively, let them play together.

That's why I think there is so much value in having kinetic stuff in meeting rooms: squeeze balls, Slinkies, little gizmos that you turn over and play with. Every so often, just go into a toy store, blow \$20 on junk, and put all of it in your conference room. Toys are a great stress reliever -- and a great creativity enhancer. I've found that when people have

something to play with, when they can get more of their body involved in what they're doing, they become more creative.

I'm famous around here for my bag of meeting toys. It comes in handy. Last summer, for example, I was working with a group of senior executives. The first thing I did when I started off the meeting was to give everybody two toys: a Meeting Network mouse pad and a Meeting Network squeeze ball. The executives played with this stuff throughout the meeting. It was great: One person would say something that another person didn't like, and the second person would throw a ball across the table. Everyone at the meeting had lots of fun.

And these were senior executives, by the way -- people who are not given to playing at work. A week later, I was in the same room, sitting in as an observer for someone who was presenting to the same group. The executives came in and sat around their table, and as the meeting was about to start, one guy said, "Wait a minute. We can't start yet." Then he ran out -- and came back a few minutes later with his squeeze ball!

Even Good Meetings Can Get Better

If you're serious about improving the quality of your meetings, then you should borrow an idea from the quality people: continuous improvement. Set aside five minutes at the end of every meeting you hold -- make it a discipline for your team or your company -- and ask some simple questions: What did we do in this meeting that really worked well? What happened that we never want to repeat? Are there bad habits that we seem to keep falling into?

Write down people's answers, keep a running record of their comments, and then see how well the entire group improves over time. A written record can also be a great source of ideas for future rules of engagement. It can tell you not just how to behave, but why people believe it's important to behave that way.

But don't overdo this. The best medicine in the world can make you sick if you take too much of it. If you become too intent on improving meetings, you're likely to become the most dreaded person in your department: "Oh no, Joe's in this meeting. What's he gonna come up with this time?" So, please, use these ideas and practices, but use them wisely.

Meeting Minutes

- One classic meeting dilemma is deciding how much to record. Michael Begeman's proposal: Don't worry too much about taking detailed minutes -- that is, exhaustive notes about who said what. Focus instead on three categories of information: decisions reached, action items that people need to follow up on, and open issues. "The record of all this becomes input for future meetings," says Begeman. "Plus, encouraging people to use these categories will sharpen the quality of their participation."

- Actions speak louder than rules. Leaders send nonverbal as well as verbal messages. So it's quite possible, says Michael Begeman, for your words to abide by the "rules of engagement" for a meeting, while your informal actions don't. If you're leading a meeting and people expect you to move the group toward a decision, then act accordingly. Sit at the head of the table to signal, "I'm in charge." Stand while others are sitting to signal, "I have the floor." If participants expect a collaborative meeting, ask one of your team members to run the meeting -- to signal, "I want to share leadership." Or to signal, "I'm with you," sit on one side of the table. All of this may sound obvious, but it's amazing how small, nonverbal behaviors can undermine -- or promote -- what you are trying to accomplish.

Associate Editor Gina Imperato (gimperato@fastcompany.com) has learned to love meetings. You can contact Michael Begeman by email (mlbegeman@mmm.com) or learn more about the 3M Meeting Network on the Web (www.3m.com/meetingnetwork).



Copyright © 2005 Mansueto Ventures LLC. All rights reserved.
Fast Company, 375 Lexington Avenue., New York , NY 10017