



Tip Sheet 4

Avoiding Chaotic, Adversarial & Aimless Meetings

Chaotic, adversarial and aimless meetings can demoralize your members, diminish their enthusiasm, lead to flawed decisions, and waste time and resources. This tip sheet provides ideas for handling contentious meetings. It includes:

1. A logical approach to problem solving
2. An opening script for a contentious meeting
3. Mini-scripts to deal with tough situations in meetings

1. A Logical Approach to Problem Solving

Discussions of contentious issues may get out of hand if people leap to solutions prematurely. For example, one member suggests an option and others immediately attack it, leading to adversity. As a meeting Chair, you need to anticipate controversies and structure a logical flow for discussions. Consider the following sequence:

- a) Start by asking the group to fully define the problems that need to be solved. If they leap to solution-mode too quickly, say something like this: *“Can we wait with solutions until we fully define the problem?”* or: *“I’ll put this idea on the flip chart as an option for us to discuss later. For now, can we please focus on defining the problems that we need to solve?”*
- b) Having defined the problem, establish the criteria by which to assess the solution. Relevant criteria may include: fairness, fiscal viability, maximizing benefits to stakeholders, etc.
- c) Next ask the group to brainstorm for solutions that will solve the problems and meet the assessment criteria. At this stage no solution – even silly ones - should be declined or evaluated. If members instinctively say: *“This will never work,”* you can say: *“Can we please hold our criticism until we finish brainstorming? Right now we’re only generating a list. Even silly or unrealistic ideas can be helpful.”*
- d) Next direct the group to objectively evaluate the solutions against the criteria identified under step b.
- e) Next lead the group in choosing the best solution, which may be one of the identified options or a combination thereof.
- f) Finally, work with the group to generate an implementation plan for the chosen solution.

The above sequence will provide the structure for a logical, objective, organized and measured approach to problem solving and consensus building. It will help your members slow down and look at the larger picture that must be considered. The likelihood of a chaotic, adversarial and aimless meeting will be reduced.

Podcast 4 demonstrates how a logical sequence can deliver superior solutions to tough problems and prevent a bad meeting.

2. An Opening Script for a Contentious Meeting

When confronting contentious issues, a well-written opening script can help you establish your expectations for a positive, efficient and effectively-run meeting. Such a script will encourage people to set the group’s needs ahead of their own and work as a team to achieve optimal decisions.

Here is a sample opening script:

“Before we proceed with this meeting, I would like to acknowledge that some of the issues we’re dealing with today are challenging and potentially divisive. I need your help in order to make our discussions as focused and as productive as possible. Here is what I propose:

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First, I suggest that we start our discussion by spending some time exploring the problem, before leaping to solution-mode. This way we'll be more likely to solve the right problem. I hope this approach makes sense to you.

Second, please help me by focusing your comments on the issues, without attacking people. We need to keep the discussions and the tone of this meeting civilized and respectful, and we should make it safe for people to express their views, regardless of how much we object to them. We should be tough on issues, but soft on people.

Third, please help me by waiting to be recognized to speak, by not interrupting your colleagues, by avoiding side conversations, by staying on track, by not dominating, and by keeping your comments reasonably brief and focused.

Finally, you can help all of us by making a genuine effort to listen and learn from your colleagues and always focus on our common purpose.

If you do all these things, we are likely to have a productive meeting, and the need for me to interrupt people and remind them of the meeting guidelines will be minimal.

How does all of this sound to you? Can I count on your support? Will you help me make this meeting as positive and as productive as possible? Thank you."

3. Mini-Scripts to Deal with Tough Situations in Meetings

IF THIS HAPPENS AT A MEETING:	YOU CAN SAY SOMETHING LIKE THIS:
People leap prematurely to solutions	<i>"Thank you Ruth for your suggestion. We'll make note of it for discussion later on. Can we please focus first on identifying the exact problem that we need to solve?"</i>
Several people speak at once	<i>"Can we have some order please? We need to have one person speaking at a time. I have three people waiting to speak: Tony, Peter and Tammy. Tony, go ahead."</i>
There are side conversations while Sara is speaking	<i>"Just a moment, Sara. Joe and Pam, is there a problem? (find out if there is a legitimate problem) Can we please focus on the meeting? Thank you. Sara, please continue."</i>
Jack is interrupted	<i>"Can we please let people finish? It seems to me that Jack was trying to make three points. Jack, what are the other two points?"</i>
A seemingly legitimate idea is instantly dismissed (by an angry reaction, frowning, or eye rolling)	<i>"Members, we need to hear people out before we dismiss or judge their ideas. Thank you."</i>
Members digress from the core issue	<i>"Rob, can we please get back on topic? The question we're dealing with is ____"</i>
A few members dominate	<i>"Thank you Jack and Joan. We need to hear from those who have not spoken, like Fay, who's been waiting for a while. Fay?"</i>
Members ramble and repeat themselves	<i>"Our time is running short. Does anyone have anything new to add, and – if not – shall we move on?"</i>
There are personal criticisms or speculations that a member has a hidden motive for what he or she says	<i>"Members, we agreed at the start of this meeting to focus on issues, not people. Can we please get back on track?" or "We need to keep the tone of the meeting civil and respectful and make it safe for people to speak, including those with dissenting views. Can we please do that?"</i>
Phil takes things personally and responds defensively to questions about his report	<i>"Phil, the questions are not about you, but about the report. We appreciate how much you worked on this report, but we need you to make it easy for other people to ask questions about it. Can you please help us out?"</i>
People give "soap box" speeches, suggesting they were poorly treated, and that they are 100% right and others are wrong	<i>"Can I make a suggestion? I have no doubt that each of you is right in one way or another, but that does not solve anything. What we need are ideas to resolve this impasse in a way that works for everyone. Can someone help us out?"</i>

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IF THIS HAPPENS AT A MEETING:	YOU CAN SAY SOMETHING LIKE THIS:
The group is polarized and no one is listening to the other side	<i>“I am not sure people are fully heard and understood. Can I suggest an exercise? Please team up with someone with an opposing view to yours and try repeating their position to them. He or she will then tell you whether you fully heard and understood them. Then reverse roles. Let’s take 15 minutes for this exercise.”</i>

In Closing

Contentious issues can divide a group and lead to chaotic, adversarial and aimless meetings. You can avoid such a meeting by using a logical approach to problem solving, by writing a tone-setting script, and by using principle-based scripts to deal with awkward situations. With these tools, you can turn the controversy from a problem into an opportunity, overcome the difficulties, and lead your group to resolve disputes in a calm and positive manner.