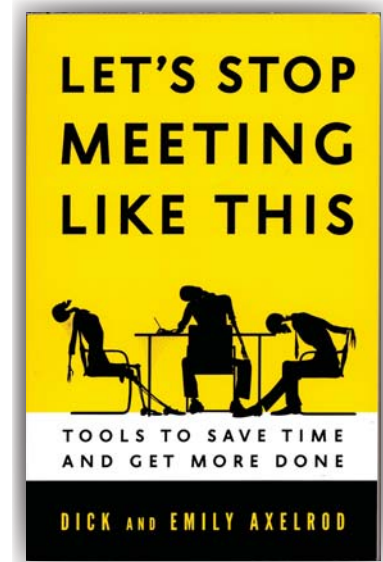


Let's Stop Meeting Like This

Tools to Save Time and Get More Done

Dick and Emily Axelrod

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KEY CONCEPTS

- *Learn how to get work done in meetings.* By rethinking and changing the culture of meetings, they can move from being energy-sapping to energizing environments.
- *Utilize the Meeting Canoe.* The *Meeting Canoe* is a systemic way to give order and shape to meetings, while giving each attendee a sense of ownership.
- *Always welcome people.* This technique lowers meeting attendees' defenses and puts them at ease, which allows them to be innovative and creative.
- *Connect people to one another and the tasks at hand.* Helping attendees establish meaningful and emotional connections with one another increases their level of involvement.
- *Discover the way things are.* Leaders should not assume that they have all the answers; instead, they must allow other attendees to describe their own truths and realities.
- *Elicit people's dreams.* Leaders must find out what is important to meeting attendees—in relation to their organizations—and determine how to bridge the gap between the present and future.
- *Make a decision.* By clearly stating who is responsible for making decisions, attendees will know the level of responsibility that is required of them. Leaders must also explain what is being decided, why, and how.
- *Attend to the end.* Leaders must evaluate the effectiveness of every meeting—including what worked and what did not—and discuss ways to make future meetings even more effective.
- *Administer first aid.* If meetings are not going well, leaders must quickly step in to make the necessary adjustments.

- *Do not forget the meeting basics.* These include the purpose of the meeting, the inclusion of the right people, the design of the meeting, and the meeting's length and location.
- *Understand the role of leaders.* Since they operate in an official capacity, leaders must use their power to positively shape meetings and empower attendees.
- *Understand the role of contributors.* Contributors must be open and honest, and they must be willing to hear and weigh the opinions of others.
- *Understand the role of facilitators.* Facilitators should help design meetings and then serve as guides to ensure everyone's voices are heard.

INTRODUCTION

Most employees—and many leaders—view meetings as an enemy to productivity and a complete waste of time. They are usually boring, repetitive, and many times attendees have no idea why their presence is required. People are often unable to achieve consensus, and attendees leave with no clear action plan or next steps. To add insult to injury, meeting attendees often endure grueling and time-consuming decision-making processes, only to discover later that all decisions were predetermined before the meeting. In **Let's Stop Meeting Like This**, Dick and Emily Axelrod present a new way of planning and conducting meetings that clearly defines meeting objectives, engages attendees, and results in accomplished tasks and completed projects. Their *Meeting Canoe* approach is a simple meeting model that includes all of the steps required to make meetings more productive.

HOW TO GET WORK DONE IN MEETINGS

There are various types of meetings, including:

- *Informal chats*, which usually include 2 to 10 people and can range from 5 to 20 minutes.
- *Huddles*, which are typically the same size and length as informal chats.
- *Weekly meetings* also average 2 to 10 attendees, but normally last 1 to 2 hours.
- *Town hall meetings* usually have over 20 attendees and last 1 to 2 hours.
- *Work sessions* typically have over 50 attendees and can last for several hours.

While it is important to speak your truth, it is also important to put yourself in other people's shoes. Your truth may not be the truth.

Regardless of the type of meeting, making it creative requires a radical change.

Eric Lindblad, the vice president and general manager of Boeing's 747 program, hates to spend hours in crowded, cramped conference rooms filled with people who are bored or have no idea why they are included in the meeting to begin with. He multiplied the number of employees in his meetings by their average hourly rate and concluded that the company was spending too much money using meetings as a form of communication. He began to rethink how he conducted meetings.

Lindblad started using the following criteria when deciding whether to hold a meeting:

- Is there a need to share information?
- Does the shared information require dialogue?

He also decided to only include employees who had information or knowledge to share, had decision-making authority, or were vital to the issue at hand. He also made the meetings voluntary. Employees could decide if they wanted to attend or not, and would not be penalized if they chose not to attend. The authors use Lindblad

as an example of the type of shift in thinking that needs to occur to make meetings more productive and beneficial to everyone involved.

THE MEETING CANOE

The *Meeting Canoe* is a system developed by the authors that rethinks the design, execution, and follow-up of meetings. In the Meeting Canoe system, the parts influence one another, and the attendees—or *crew members*—have to work together and adapt to changing conditions. If one part does not work well, it affects the rest of the crew and the canoe. The authors contrast a canoe with a wooden raft. Those on a wooden raft just drift along at a leisurely pace and do not particularly care about where they are going. In other words, they are just enjoying the ride. However, the members on a canoe have a specific direction that is controlled by the crew members, and time does indeed matter. Following this system will add structure and flow to meetings.

The Meeting Canoe consists of six parts:

1. Welcome people.
2. Connect to one another and the task at hand.
3. Discover the way things are.
4. Elicit people's dreams.
5. Decide on next steps.
6. Attend to the end.

How welcome people feel determines how they participate in meetings. When people don't feel safe, they can't bring their best selves to a meeting.

WELCOME PEOPLE

The first part of the Meeting Canoe and the first step in constructing effective meetings is to create a safe environment for attendees. When people perceive that they are in danger, their first response is to flee, causing the innovative part of the brain malfunction. These perceived dangers might take the form of attendees feeling that they are not welcome at the meeting, thinking that the meeting is a waste of time, or opposing the meeting's purpose.

Although attendees may not be able to physically flee a meeting, they can check out mentally, or they may find ways to disrupt the meeting by asking questions or making comments that are unrelated and unproductive. However, welcoming attendees minimizes perceived threats and helps them relax. Welcoming people can take the following forms:

- Offering a personal invitation to new members of the group and explaining the meeting's purpose.
- Engaging in small talk before the meeting starts.
- Preparing the room by making sure it has natural light, round tables, and tools such as whiteboards and flip charts.
- Starting the meeting with a meal.
- Providing materials in advance, including the agenda, list of attendees, and any background information.

CONNECT PEOPLE TO ONE ANOTHER AND THE TASK

When people establish personal connections, they are able to build trust and unleash the type of energy needed to accomplish tasks. As they connect with one another, the team members begin to learn about the abilities, talents, and integrity of others on the team.

Knowing that others are committed to the task at hand allows team members to work as hard as they can because they know that others are also working equally as diligently. Everyone is rowing the canoe in the same direction and pulling their own weight.

Some people use *ice-breakers*, such as the game Two Truths and a Lie, to try to make connections. In this game, everybody makes three statements about themselves—two truthful statements and one lie—and the team must decide which statement is a lie. While this game may be useful in helping the team determine who lies very well, it also reinforces the belief that people cannot be trusted. Other activities, such as having members state their names, jobs, and where they are from, are also ineffective because no one remembers this type of information apart from any emotional connections.

Effective connection questions include:

- Why did you agree to attend this meeting?
- What strength or gift do you bring to this meeting?
- What are your hopes or fears about this meeting?
- What questions or concerns do you bring to the meeting that need to be addressed?

Our brains are always scanning the environment for threats and rewards. We are seeking to avoid danger and move toward rewards.

DISCOVER THE WAY THINGS ARE

The space shuttle *Columbia* disaster in 2003 reveals the importance of discovering “the way things are.” After takeoff, it was discovered that foam dislodged from the external tank. Some of the scientists and engineers thought this could cause catastrophic consequences; however, others felt that this was no problem and shut down the investigatory process. Unfortunately, since the scientists and engineers did not have a shared view of reality and no further research was conducted, the *Columbia* exploded upon re-entry, killing all of the astronauts on board.

Using reports and PowerPoint presentations can help share information, but this method results in the presenter simply *telling* instead of *teaching*. It is better to provide opportunities for members to ask questions, discover how a process/product/idea works, and voice objections. Keeping the discovery process open allows team members to make sense of the reality and involves three components:

1. *The facts*: Objective, verifiable data.
2. *The team's thoughts*: How team members interpret the facts.
3. *The team's feelings*: How team members feel about the facts.

ELICIT PEOPLE'S DREAMS

Effective dreams are about the future, but they must be grounded in reality. For example, top athletes dream of being the best, but they are also committed to working hard and putting in the long hours of practice required to achieve their dreams.

Facing reality and creating a clear vision for the type of future they want allows team members to use creativity and innovativeness to bridge the gap between the present and the future. Author Robert Fritz refers to the tension between reality and vision as “structural tension.” Leaders can start these types of conversations in meetings by asking team members what they care about at work, why they care, and how they can bring more of it into the work environment.

DECIDE

There must be clarity regarding three key elements of the decision-making process:

1. Who is making the decision?
2. How will they make the decision?
3. What are they deciding?

Decisions can be made in three ways:

1. The leader can make the decision.
2. The leader can seek advice from the team, but still retain the final decision-making authority.
3. The leader can delegate responsibility for the decision to the team. However, he or she must not mislead team members into thinking that they have the ability to make the decision if they do not.

When trying to make a decision, individuals must consider six crucial questions:

1. What are the facts that surround the proposal?
2. What are their gut reactions to the proposal?
3. What are their pessimistic thoughts about the proposal? Why will it not work?
4. What are their optimistic thoughts about this proposal? Why do they think it will work?
5. How could they build on this proposal and make it even better?
6. What conclusions can they draw from this discussion?

ATTEND TO THE END

Building a solid foundation for your meeting allows the meeting to carry a heavy load.

Once the decision has been made, attendees must resist the decision to jump up and leave the meeting. A good ending has three components:

1. A summary of the discussion and review of the decisions that were reached.
2. A road map of next steps.
3. Time to reflect on the meeting experience.

The leader may be tired, need to attend other meetings, or be rushed to work on other projects; however, he or she should not allow attendees to leave the meeting without clearly knowing what has been decided and who is responsible for what. Next steps provide clarity and eliminate feelings that the attendees may have wasted their time in the meeting.

Reflection is also necessary for continuously improving meetings, and should include the following five questions:

1. Did they do the work that needed to get done?
2. Was the time well spent? If not, why?
3. What should they do to ensure the next meeting is more efficient?
4. Who should be recognized for their contributions during the meeting?
5. What accomplishments would they like to celebrate?

FIRST AID FOR MEETINGS

If the meeting is in trouble, first aid should be administered as soon as possible—if not, the Meeting Canoe is in danger of sinking. When troublesome or disruptive behavior is observed, it must be addressed. Some examples include:

- *One person constantly talks.* The solution to this is to paraphrase what the person said and then ask, "Is this what you are saying?" If the answer is "no," keep paraphrasing and asking the same questions. If the answer is "yes," then say, "I would like to hear what others have to say on this subject." This method also works when two people are locked in a conflict.
- *The group goes off on a tangent.* To fix this, ask, "Is this the work we are supposed to be doing here?" and ask everyone in the group for their opinion.
- *There is confusion regarding the decision.* To address this issue, say, "I am not clear what we just decided," or "I do not know what the next steps are," which stops the group from reaching unclear agreements.

Sometimes the crew members are the problem. They may try to sabotage the meeting because they do not agree with what the meeting is trying to accomplish or they may be engaging in office politics. This is not the same as people who may simply offer contrasting views. These are people who are trying to sink the canoe.

Other times, external factors, such as mergers, changes in the structure of the organization, or the departure of crew members, can adversely affect the meeting. When this occurs, it is important to determine the following:

- Is this meeting still necessary?
- Are the right people present?
- Is the purpose of the meeting still relevant?

It is also possible that the leader may be the problem. Perhaps he or she is unaware that he or she presents an obstacle to the meeting's success. If the leader is unwilling or unable to change, it may be necessary for the members to meet without the leader being present.

Making a behavior or pattern of behavior obvious to everyone in the group allows the group to do something about it.

MEETING BASICS

There are five meeting basics that are necessary for any meeting to be successful. Leaders must ask themselves:

1. *Why is the meeting taking place?* Regardless of the type of meeting, the answer will determine if the meeting is really important or not. The meeting may be used to share information, coordinate actions, make decisions, or develop plans and strategies.
2. *What is the goal of the meeting?* Having a clear purpose for the meeting will keep it from just floating along or getting lost. For example, if the purpose is to discuss people issues within the organization, the meeting could encompass everything from employee benefits to training programs. However, if the meeting's purpose is to create better customer service experiences, this is a narrower focus.
3. *Who should be invited?* Having the right people will help to ensure quality decisions. Leaders should look for people who have the following:
 - Information
 - Authority
 - Responsibility
 - Different thinking styles

- A likelihood of opposing
4. *How will leaders get attendees to take ownership of the meeting?* Allowing attendees to be included in the meeting's design increases the probability that they will take ownership. There are many ways to do this, such as suggesting agenda items or creating the actual flow and structure of the meeting.
 5. *Where will the meeting take place and how long will it be?* The shape of the room should be conducive to productivity, such as a room with round tables, natural lights, and white boards. If food will be included, make sure that it is healthy and recharges energy instead of draining it. The meeting's length should be determined by how long it would take to accomplish the goals.

LEADERS

Leaders, because of their formal role in their organizations, can set the tone for the meeting and influence the meeting's effectiveness. As a result, they should follow these three rules:

1. *Use their power wisely.* This may include entrusting members to make wise decisions and letting them determine the agenda items and meeting length.
2. *Invite criticism.* Welcome opposing views and sit quietly while crew members describe what they would do differently or why an idea will not work.
3. *Make sure the decision-making rules are clear.* Crew members should know in advance if they are just making suggestions or if they will be tasked with making any actual decisions.

CONTRIBUTORS

Contributors are valuable because their knowledge can help improve their organizations. On the other hand, if they do not want to do their fair share of paddling, the Meeting Canoe will not go in the right direction. Contributors have three essential roles:

1. *Take responsibility for the outcomes.* If someone needs to take notes, contributors should volunteer to do it. If the meeting's purpose seems vague, they should be courageous enough to speak up and say so.
2. *Speak their truths.* Contributors should describe what they are hearing and seeing, as well as their thoughts, feelings, and wants.
3. *Be open to others' viewpoints.* Contributors should realize that their truths may be different from others' truths. They must be open to seeing the world from different perspectives.

FACILITATORS

Facilitators ensure the Meeting Canoe flows smoothly. They help plan and guide the meeting. The following points can help to make them effective guides:

1. *Think like a designer.* This entails designing the meeting with the crew members in mind and figuring out what works best for them. The users should be involved in the design process.
2. *When meetings are stuck, facilitators should describe what they see and hear, and ask the group members what they want to do about it.* This technique puts responsibility for the group's progress on the group itself.
3. *Work to make sure everyone's voice counts.* This can be done by going around the table and asking everyone what they think, or asking those who are quiet for their input.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 3–4 hours, 192 pages

Let's Stop Meeting Like This provides innovative—yet practical—ways to improve the quality and efficiency of meetings. Dick and Emily Axelrod use principles that are easy to understand and implement in any meeting type or size. In addition to tables and charts, the book includes chapter summaries that emphasize key points and suggestions for executing the points. The final chapter contains a Meeting Experience Questionnaire and a Meeting Analysis Questionnaire. Whether it is a business meeting, town hall meeting, work session, or even a simple chat or huddle, the principles outlined in this book can improve the design, process, and outcome of any meeting.

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*A Pocket Guide to **Let's Stop Meeting Like This** and More*

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The Axelrod Group: The Story Behind the Story

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dick and Emily Axelrod are cofounders of the Axelrod Group, Inc., a coaching firm that pioneered the use of employee involvement to produce large-scale organizational changes. In the early 1990s, as a result of their dissatisfaction with the approach most consulting firms used to bring about organizational change, the Axelrods developed the Conference Model, a process for involving the “whole system” in creating organizational change. The Axelrods have worked with many diverse companies, including R.R. Donnelly & Sons, Boeing, British Airways, Chicago Public Schools, Calgary Health Authority, Coca-Cola, Harley-Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, Novartis, and the U.K.'s National Health Service. They have also published two other books: *Terms of Engagement* and *You Don't Have to Do It Alone*.

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