



The Energy of Conversation

Dedicated to Learning & Improvement

Join the Conversation

As a qualified coach and quality auditor it is my job to ask my clients the right questions. Often it's the simplest questions that are the most powerful. An example of a coaching question is "what is the worst thing that can happen and what would you do if it did" which helps the person being coached to face their fear and to produce a strategy for dealing with it should that scenario occur. An example of an auditing question is "how do you know your customers are happy" which can come as a surprise to even the most experienced of business leaders.

Working days are made up of a series of tasks punctuated by conversations; over the years these conversations have become known as 'meetings', a term which collected some rather adverse and stuffy connotations during quarter four of the last century. For some, the thought of having a 'meeting' conjures up negativity as they are often perceived as a waste of time and a distraction from work. Handled correctly, a meeting can turn out to be the most important event of the day.

Team meetings are of course just 'group conversations' and conversations can resolve disputes, create opportunities and produce new ideas. They can also generate very positive and therapeutic energy and hence have the potential to motivate staff. My favourite definition of a meeting is this one: 'The social act of assembling for some common purpose' www.thefreedictionary.com

And it is the social aspects that sometimes get overlooked when having a group discussion at work. Meetings are a great opportunity to ask incisive questions and in fact asking yourself some simple questions before the discussion can really help to focus attention. Here are four that come to mind:

- Why I am arranging this meeting? (RATIONALE)
- What exactly do I want to achieve at the meeting? (OBJECTIVE)
- Who will make sure that the assigned tasks will be completed? (ACTION)
- How will we know that the meeting and resulting action has been a success? (REVIEW)

"Often the difference between a successful meeting and an unsuccessful meeting is whether the preparation was done or not" (*Mark Fritz, reproduced with kind permission*).

It is as important to justify the need for a meeting as it is to fine-tune its objective. Having chaired many meetings during my career, I have produced a checklist that you can use. The aim of the checklist is to focus attention and thoroughly prepare for a meeting. Preparation is everything; it means having a structured approach; in some cases, planning a beginning, middle and an end is useful, especially for meetings where only two parties are involved.

I would also recommend being open as to the different directions a discussion can take. This creates an interesting tension between preparation and flexibility generated by the half of you that wants to control the meeting (having prepared for it) and the other half of you that needs to remain open to possibilities. So in effect your preparation also includes being 'prepared' to be flexible.

The Chair is sometimes seen as the font of all knowledge, the provider of all answers and the decision-maker. This is not necessarily the case. The role of The Chair is to facilitate discussion and control the dynamics of the group. If The Chair also happens to know the way forward or be the one who makes the decisions, then this is incidental. And so to the checklist which is in two sections; the items in section A are relevant for both The Chair and The Attendees, while Section B contains items specifically for The Chair to think about.

SECTION A – Items for all attendees, including The Chair

- Anticipate *curve balls* (issues that might be raised or any difficult questions that might be asked)
- Enter the conversation in a positive, creative, flexible and open frame of mind that is sustained
- Listen very carefully to the other parties with a view to gaining appreciation & understanding
- Encourage/allow other parties to express views and be open to the influence of those views
- Humanise the interaction – e.g. sharing experiences or lightening the mood as appropriate
- Be mindful of personal power - e.g. being over-bearing, chasing too much before/after
- Be alert to unforeseen opportunities that may occur during the conversation
- Be sensitive as to the emotional and practical needs of the other parties
- Adjust the pace of the conversation to suit the other parties
- Check understanding after conveying any information
- Leave any 'personal baggage' outside the door
- Behave with integrity and with dignity
- Leave other parties in 'a good place'

PART B – Items specific to The Chair

- Manage practicalities i.e. timing, equipment, materials, location, refreshments (if applicable)
- Determine the rationale
- Establish a clear objective
- Choose/invite the appropriate people
- Set out a clear agenda with a structure
- Send the agenda round for the invited parties to check
- Prepare for the discussion by researching the subject
- Structure the contents of the discussion
- Include introductions and / or scene-setting as appropriate to the discussion
- Be inclusive in your facilitation and ensure everyone gets a chance to speak
- Give special attention to remote attendees who are not in the room
- Ensure the objective of the conversation is achieved
- Ensure that action points are agreed and recorded
- Ensure that someone takes responsibility for action being completed

I hope you find the checklist useful and I wish you luck in your future meetings and group conversations. If The Chair starts with a warm welcome, a statement of intent and a declaration of the key objectives, this can create the right energy in the room which can be then followed by an invitation for the group to 'join the conversation' as they say on [Twitter](#).

David Finney is managing director of The Energy of Conversation, an organization dedicated to learning and improvement. Prior to running his own business, David spent 20 years in the market research industry in various people management and staff development roles. Prior to this, David was a musician and guitar tutor.

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