

Running the Show? Helpful Leading Tips

By Rachel Ogden, Child Welfare Research and Training Project

Are you Running the Show? Do serve as a leader in meetings? Don't you wish there was a quick reference to help you lead meetings? Try these helpful leading tips to increase success in accomplishing meeting objectives:

- **Conversation starters**
- **No more crickets**
- **Deeper dive**
- **Redirecting rabbit holes**
- **Future thinking**

Let's start with Conversation Starters. Have you ever had an agenda full of items, but weren't sure how to start the conversation? At the beginning of the meeting, start by stating the topic objectives. Review the meeting agenda items and state what each objective is. Second, review current and new topic information. Ask the group to discuss what topic information and resources the organization currently has available and what new information and resources are underdevelopment or coming soon. Next, call on others' expertise to provide current topic information. As a meeting leader, call on participants with subject matter expertise to provide topic information, experience, and examples to guide conversations toward topic objectives.

As a meeting leader, have you ever asked a question only to be met with a long silence? **Here are some helpful tips to avoid no more crickets during discussions.** Avoid questions with yes-or-no responses. Instead, ask open-ended questions. For example, instead of, "Should all staff be required to use a checklist as part of the process?" try, "What issues do you foresee if staff are required to use the checklist in the process?"

Here is another example: Instead of, "Should topic 'A' be included in the information covered in the training?" try, "How often does topic 'A' occur in staff's daily work?" or, "How often do staff ask questions on topic 'A'?"

Need more information on a topic than the conversation is providing? **How can the conversation be directed towards a deeper dive on the topic?** Start by reiterating the topic objective(s). Ask the participants to share experiences, related subtopics, examples, references, etc. Call on specific subject matter experts to provide insights and opinions, opening the door for a deeper dive on the topic discussion.

For example, during a meeting, the leader asks attendees, "Karl and Suzanne, as staff members performing daily work, what issues do you experience in this process?" Suzanne responds "I can't find the resource examples I need when special circumstances are present. More examples would be helpful." Karl responds, "I get confused at step 3 in the process. Can we create a desk aid to quickly reference the steps?"

Another example directed towards leadership attendees: The leader asks, "Laura and John, as supervisors reviewing daily work, what issues do staff experience in this process? What questions do staff receive from staff?" Laura responds, "Staff frequently have confusion on topic 'B' and occasionally enter the wrong code. More clarification and examples would help." John responds, "Staff have questions about the calculations in step 3 when information is missing or incomplete."

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The information gathered from both staff and supervisor responses points to a need for further clarification of step 3 and supporting training resources for staff. This information can guide the group to successfully meeting the topic objective(s). If the discussion is still not able to gather further information to meet the topic objective(s), advise the group you will reach out to experts outside of the meeting attendees, (subject matter experts, policy, leadership, and attorneys) and revisit the topic when additional information is available.

What if the conversation veers off topic? **Many of us have experienced conversations in meetings that quickly shift into a rabbit hole.** How can leaders redirect conversations when it turns into chasing a rabbit hole, and your original topic is no longer on the table? Get the conversation back on track using these helpful tips:

For example, the meeting is discussing topic 'A,' and after a few minutes the discussion has shifted to several subtopics. How do you get the discussion back on track? First, identify; is the information being discussed related to the topic objective? If no, redirect the conversation by advising the group the subtopic will be revisited. Discuss with your attendees what "revisiting" the subtopic means. For example, it can be discussed in the next meeting or once a particular objective has been met, after additional information is gathered, etc. Whatever fits the group best is when the subtopic should be revisited.

What if the group has agreed to revisit the topic at another time, but someone continues to press the topic? As a leader, ask the group if the topic is experienced by staff at least 80% of the time. If yes, then continue to discuss the topic as it is relevant to your original topic objective. If no, staff experience this 20% of the time or less, reserve the topic to be discussed at a later time as previously agreed upon. Still stuck for one reason or another in the rabbit hole conversation? Advise the group you will reach out to subject matter experts, policy, leadership, attorneys, etc. to gain further clarification and guidance on the topic and how it relates the original topic objective.

How do you keep everyone engaged in future project objectives? **Future thinking is often overlooked, but when utilized it can propel the project's overall success.** Try these Future Thinking tips to incorporate in topic discussions:

- As the leader, ask the group the following questions to consider while topic discussions are underway: "What's done? What was most recently completed in relation to this topic?"
- Second, ask about current tasks. "What's currently underway?"
- Third ask, "What supporting information and resources are needed?"
- Next, ask participants, "Is review or approval needed for current work?"
- Lastly, "What's next? How can we prepare and organize for what's next?"

Asking these questions will help keep the big picture in mind while discussing and meeting project objectives. Gathering this information throughout discussions will help the meeting leader organize and plan future meetings and project initiatives successfully.

Ready to run the show? Whether the meeting agenda is short and simple or lengthy and complex, incorporate these five helpful leading tips to successfully guide meetings and achieve project objectives.