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Meetings Going in Circles? Say These 5 Lines Instead

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 336 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: why leading a meeting comes down to structure, the 5 lines to use from the opening to the close, the research behind them, and what to say when someone hijacks the meeting.



01 The core idea

When a meeting gets stuck, pay attention to who gets it moving again. Very often that person has said less than anyone else in the room, and what they did say was a question about what the conversation was for.

WHAT LEADING A MEETING MEANS HERE

Structure: deciding what the conversation is for, who needs to be heard, and how it ends. A typical meeting has plenty of ideas in it. What it's usually missing is someone to give those ideas a shape.

85 to 90%

of the time, the boost you'd expect from putting capable people in a room together fails to show up

10 min

early: how the meeting in the example below ended, once someone asked what it was for

Source: Steven Rogelberg, UNC Charlotte, author of *The Surprising Science of Meetings*, as reported in *strategy+business*, "Bad meetings no more."

What it looks like

A leader is 25 minutes into a 45-minute meeting about a new reporting tool. Two people on her team are going back and forth about features. Someone else has started a side conversation about budget. Nobody has said what the meeting is supposed to produce. Her instinct is to jump in with her own view on the tool, which would turn it into a longer argument. Instead, she says:

SAY THIS

"Can I pause us for a second? What are we actually trying to decide today?"

After a beat of silence, someone says, "Well, whether we pilot it next quarter." Half the debate stops mattering right there, since nobody needs to settle every feature to decide on a pilot. They agree to move ahead with the pilot, and the meeting ends 10 minutes early.

It looks obvious when you hear it described, because you're observing and deciding what someone else should do. When you're in the meeting, you're caught up in a side topic that feels important and has nothing to do with what the group is trying to achieve. Sometimes people in the room also have different ideas of what that is.

"It'd be really helpful if you clarified in the beginning of a meeting if we're brainstorming or if you're aiming to make a decision today."

Feedback Ramona once received

Set the frame at the start

A decision

"We're here to decide whether to pilot this next quarter."

A brainstorm

"I have a problem and want to brainstorm how we go about it. We won't decide today."

An update

"We're here to get an update on this." If nobody can name a purpose, ask whether the meeting needs to happen.



02 Expert or leader: know which role you're playing

The number 1 behavior that undercuts your authority in meetings is trying to prove your value by adding content: another data point, another update, another opinion on the detail everyone is already arguing about. Your expertise is what got you promoted, so the habit makes sense. In a meeting, it makes you the expert, and the meeting still needs someone to lead it.

	PLAYING THE EXPERT	PLAYING THE LEADER
What you add	Content: the analysis, the data point, the answer	Structure for everyone else's content and contributions
When you speak	Early and often, on the detail being debated	At the start to set the frame, at the end to land it, and when asked
Where influence comes from	Having the best point in the conversation	Shaping the conversation itself

Sometimes you do have the deepest expertise in the room, and sharing it is fine. You're playing 2 different roles, and it helps to know which one you're in at any given moment.

03 The 5 lines, in the order you use them

- 1 The opening**
"What are we here to decide or to brainstorm?"
- 2 The discussion**
"Before I share where I am, I want to hear from people who haven't spoken yet."
- 3 The debate**
"What would have to be true for this to work?"
- 4 The decision**
"Here's where I'm landing, and here's what would change my mind."
- 5 The close**
"So we've decided X. Who owns it and by when?"

Line 1: The opening

Say it in the first 2 minutes. It turns a discussion into a decision and gives everyone a test for whether what they're about to say is relevant: does this help us decide whether to run the pilot, or is it a detail that can wait until after we've decided?

SAY THIS

"What are we here to decide or to brainstorm?"

IF NOBODY CAN ANSWER, PROPOSE ONE

"I think we're deciding whether to pilot this next quarter. Is that right?"

If you didn't set up the meeting, ask rather than declare what kind of meeting it is. If the honest answer is that the meeting isn't deciding anything, say so, name what it's for (an update, a brainstorm), or ask whether it needs to happen at all.



04 Lines 2 to 5

Line 2: The discussion

Once the senior person in the room says what they think, the conversation bends toward it. People who disagree stop talking, and people who were undecided start agreeing with the leader. Hold your view back, speak last, and use the time to bring in the people who haven't said anything. Be specific about what you're asking. The person who hasn't spoken often has a piece of information nobody else in the room has.

SAY THIS

"Before I share where I am, I want to hear from people who haven't spoken yet."

THEN CALL ON SOMEONE

"Sabrina, you've worked with this vendor before, what are we missing?"

Line 3: The debate

From strategy professor Roger Martin, who wrote *Playing to Win* with A.G. Lafley. When 2 people are dug into opposite positions, arguing harder doesn't move either of them. This question moves the conversation from positions to conditions, and conditions are something you can check. Then ask which condition the group feels shakiest about. That's where the real conversation is, and it works in a negotiation too.

SAY THIS

"Let's set aside whether it's a good idea for a minute. What would have to be true for this to work?"

Line 4: The decision

At some point you need to say what you think as the senior person in the room. This lets you take a clear position without closing the door completely. People know you've made a call, and they know exactly what kind of argument would move you, which is far more useful than a general "Any thoughts on this?"

SAY THIS

"Here's where I'm landing: we pilot with one team. If the integration cost comes in over our budget, I will change my mind on this."

Line 5: The close

Say it in the last 5 minutes, out loud, with a bit of a pause after, even when it feels obvious. A meeting that ends with everyone nodding and "we're good to go" sends people out with different memories of what was agreed. The test: could everyone repeat the decision the same way on their way out?

SAY THIS

"Okay, so we're piloting with the design team, Markus owns the setup, and we'll review results on the 15th. Did I get that right?"

In a meeting you don't run

Lines 1, 3 and 5 work from any seat, including your boss's meetings.

AT THE START

"Can I check what we're aiming to land today?"

AT THE END

"Before we wrap, can I play back what I think we decided?"



05 What the research says

Three findings explain why these lines work.

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people in groups of 2 to 5. Even turn-taking and reading each other predicted group performance. Average IQ did not.

Who talks matters (line 2)

Anita Williams Woolley at Carnegie Mellon, with colleagues at MIT and Union College, gave groups tasks from puzzles to negotiations to brainstorming. The group's average IQ and the IQ of its smartest member didn't significantly predict how well it did. How evenly people took turns talking, and how well they read each other, did. Groups where one person dominated did worse.

Woolley et al., Science, 2010

Hidden

profile: groups spent their time on what everyone already knew and missed the better option

Unique information gets missed (line 2)

Garold Stasser and William Titus set up group decisions where each person held some information only they knew. The better option only became clear if people pooled those pieces. Instead, groups discussed what everyone already knew. That's why the person who hasn't spoken matters so much.

Stasser and Titus, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1985

Real

dissent produced more original thinking than an assigned devil's advocate

Real dissent beats role-play (line 4)

Charlan Nemeth at UC Berkeley and colleagues compared groups that heard a genuine dissenter with groups that heard someone assigned to play devil's advocate. Real dissent produced more original thinking and more consideration of the other side. The devil's advocate mostly made people dig in on their first position.

Nemeth, Brown and Rogers, European Journal of Social Psychology, 2001

When you state a clear position and the condition attached to it, people can see what's settled and where there's room to disagree. Playing devil's advocate is still a useful tool, but it's less specific, and it often takes longer to get to the core because people push back on everything that was up for discussion.

06 When someone hijacks the meeting

You don't need to confront them in the room. You do need to bring the meeting back to its purpose.

WHAT'S HAPPENING	SAY THIS	WHY IT WORKS
Someone dominates or takes the meeting on a tangent	"Let's hold that for a second. First, what are we deciding today?"	You're asking them to pause and pointing everyone back to the purpose, without telling anyone to stop talking.
Someone reopens a decision that's already been made	"We decided that on the 4th. If something's changed, tell me what, and we'll look at it after this meeting."	It protects the decision and leaves a real door open for new information. The same information argued again isn't a reason to change it.
It keeps happening	Raise it in a one-on-one, not in front of the group.	You address the pattern of questioning decisions that have already been made.



07 Landing gear: a phrase for your team

Give your team a phrase anyone can use when a meeting drifts, and set it up in a calm moment, not in the heat of it. If you come across as assertive, or some people feel a bit intimidated by you, give them the mandate explicitly. It takes the awkwardness out of interrupting: nobody has to tell a colleague they're wasting everyone's time or make a sarcastic joke.

SET IT UP

"New rule. If anyone feels like we're circling, say 'landing gear' or 'let's land the plane.' Whoever's running the meeting has to either name the decision that has been made or wrap up the meeting."

WHEN SOMEONE CALLS IT

"Okay, fair. We're deciding whether the launch moves to March. Can we do that in the next 5 minutes?"

08 Your meeting plan

My next meeting _____

This meeting is for: ☐ A decision ☐ A brainstorm ☐ An update ☐ It may not need to happen

My opening line _____

Who I'll bring in, and what I'll ask them _____

My closing line: decision, owner, date _____

09 Try this week

- 1 **Say 2 lines and little else**
Say the opening line at the start and the closing line at the end, and say as little as possible in between unless someone asks you directly. Watch how the meeting goes and how people treat you in it.
- 2 **Review last week**
How many of your meetings ended with a decision, an owner and a date? Who on your team has information you keep missing because nobody is asking them? Bring that up with them one-on-one.

Keep going

The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 12-week program for new and early-stage managers. Running meetings that end in real decisions is part of it, along with influencing individual people, motivating and developing them through coaching and feedback, and building authority and respect with your peers and the people above you. Cohorts are small, so the experience stays personal.

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