More Time to Meet

Meetings: a necessary evil, or the time of our lives?

> ➢ Can we make meetings effective, creative and enjoyable times to spend together?

> ➢ If it's a business meeting - is there a contradiction in terms here?

> ➢ Is it possible that *everyone* present enjoys the meeting?

Well – here's a big clue. The answers are Yes, No and Yes. You decide to which questions.

What follows is inspired by Nancy Kline's *"More Time to Think: The Power of Independent Thinking"* (Cassell, London, 2015). In particular by chapter 48, *"What does it take to save a life?"*

Nancy believes with great conviction that we are all creative beings. Given the right conditions, this creativity can emerge in our work lives, our home lives and our communities. We can solve problems, take new initiatives, get "unstuck", and make all kinds of positive contributions.

However, most of the time these conditions are only partially present – and much of our potential goes unrealised. Meetings are a good case in point. As often as not, they are frustrating experiences for most of us, seemingly achieving relatively little; and demanding a lot of time that we'd really prefer to spend doing something else. Perhaps the person chairing feels it has been a good meeting – but does anyone else?

Nancy has coached teams in businesses and communities in developing high quality meetings. The key ingredients are coming up in a minute. First, let's take a look at these conditions which encourage us to be creative. There are ten of them identified in Nancy's "Thinking Environment" [®1] work.

Conditions for Creativity

	Condition	How do we create it?
1	**Attention**	Listening with palpable respect and interest, and without interruption.
2	**Equality**	Treating each other as equal thinkers; keeping agreements and boundaries.
3	**Ease**	Offering freedom from internal rush and urgency.

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[1] US Patent Reg. No. 3094991. See http://www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment/

	Condition	How do we create it?
4	**Appreciation**	Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities, in a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism.
5	**Encouragement**	Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition.
6	**Feelings**	Allow sufficient emotional release to restore thinking.
7	**Information**	Supplying the facts; dismantling denial.
8	**Diversity**	Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities.
9	**Incisive Questions**	Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively.
10	**Place**	Creating a physical environment that says back to people, "You matter".

How can these conditions be encouraged in meetings? Here's one approach.

Meetings: making them work for everyone

The Agenda

Well before the meeting takes place, the Chairperson/Facilitator can ask:

➢ Does this item need to come to the meeting?

➢ Can it be handled in some other way?

This may cut down the agenda significantly – meaning a better quality of attention for the items that do need everybody's input.

Agenda Items

"The mind thinks best in the presence of questions."

Each agenda item can become a question – linked to the purpose of bringing it to the meeting.

To find the right question, the Chair can consider what needs to come out of the meeting – for example, a decision? Further ideas? A plan of action?

Once the desired outcome is known, *a Question* can drive the meeting.

So for example simply heading an item "Budget", or "Recruitment", or "Review of Roles", doesn't say anything to us. It's another thing to plough through, more talking but without clear purpose.

However, the **Question** says, to our minds, why we are meeting. We may well begin to think – even before the meeting.

Agenda Items: what Outcome(s) are needed?	
One or more of these will be **the reason** for considering the item.	A decision?
	New ideas?
	Discovering the implications of earlier decisions?
	Saying how we feel?
	Hearing and considering new information?
	Updating each other?
	Facing something dangerous?
	Connecting with one another?

Agendas therefore need to evolve in the open, before the meeting itself. This already increases the chances of good, productive outcomes.

See page 5 for an example of agenda structure.

The Chair needs to keep an eye on all this, of course – and it's the Chair's job to manage the agenda at the meeting itself. It's an important job – above all, a facilitating role.

Timing Each Item

Here is another vital role for the Chair. There are a couple of simple guidelines which seem to work:

➢ Allocate 40% of the item's time to the person presenting the item.

➢ One guarantee: the presenter will not be interrupted.

➢ The remaining 60% is for everyone "to think", as Nancy puts it – more below.

The Role of Attention

Let's suppose that the Chair has prepared a well-structured agenda, with these points in mind. Does this guarantee an enjoyable and productive meeting? The answer, of course, is no. There is another vital ingredient, which everyone present needs to contribute to.

Each of us needs to be willing to offer respectful attention to the person who's turn it is to speak. Are they junior to us in rank or age? Do we 'usually' disagree with them? No matter. The chances are, they will offer something valuable if we listen *as their peer* – with genuine interest in where they will go with their thinking.

The Meeting

	Meeting Element	Guidelines
1	**Beginning**	Focus on reality: the good part. Celebrate successes. Remember that ratio of 5:1 positive : negative. (Condition 4.) Mobiles to silent… all about a quality of attention.
2	**Purpose of the Meeting**	To access and share everyone's *best thinking.*
3	**Discussing an Item - *Rounds***	a) Everyone has a turn, systematically in an unbroken Round to generate best ideas in answer to the agenda question. b) Differences are vital to the quality of ideas. c) No interruptions. d) No discussion until the Round finishes. e) Give respectful attention to the person speaking. f) It's fine to "pass", if you don't want to speak. g) Sometimes one Round is enough – sometimes more are needed.
4	**Discussing an Item – *Open Discussion***	Anyone can talk anytime… … except when someone else is talking.
5	**Discussing an Item – *Work in Pairs***	Sometimes this can be Dialogue, back and forth. Sometimes taking turns, 3 minutes or so each. Always without interruption.
6	**Discussing an Item – *Pairs work moving into a Round***	The Round builds on the Pairs work – it doesn't repeat it. What's wanted is everyone's *freshest* thinking – not a rehash of what's just been said in pairs.
7	**Scribe**	Nothing is written until the person says, "The 5 words I want you to write are….." No paraphrasing; No interrupting; No writing while the person is still thinking.
8	**Recording Process**	Give attention *to the person thinking*; not to the flipchart. As Nancy points out, it can be amazing how many people focus on the flipchart, expecting it to come up with the creative idea the meeting needs. It's rare that flipcharts do this in practice.
9	**The Flow of the Meeting**	This is a skill which the Chair can build, with everyone's help. When to use a Round, Pairs, Open Discussion. (See Kline, 2015, p.226, 4th paragraph for a typical flow.)
10	**Concluding an Item**	Each item can end with Summary; Decision; Action Steps

	Meeting Element	Guidelines
11	**Ending the Meeting**	A Round focussed on reality – the good kind: ➢ *"What do you think has been a success in this meeting?"* ➢ Sometimes – *"What quality do you value in the colleague next to you?"*

The Agenda – an example of structure

Page 6 gives one example of how to structure and lay out an agenda, which can be used as a template.

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Updated in April 2018 following review by Nancy Kline and the 'Time to Think' team, with many thanks for the suggestions made – all of which have been included here.

Reference: Kline, Nancy (2015) *More Time to Think: The Power of Independent Thinking*, Cassell, London.

The Agenda – an example of structure

Title: name of organisation, committee, sub-group, etc.

Meeting date and time:

Venue:

Chair: **Secretary:**

Agenda Items

Heading	Presenter	Question for the Meeting (* see below)	Chair's Notes		
				Time	
			Item No	Item time	Run time
Standing Items:					
- **Opening Round**		Who are we? Perhaps how are we?	1		
- **Review of Agenda**		Happy with agenda?	2		
- **Date ONM**		When next?	3		
- **Matters Arising**		What's happened since last time?	4		
Items for this Meeting:					

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* A Question linked to **Purpose**,
   for example:

- Making a decision?
- Exploring ideas?
- Reviewing progress?
- Sharing feelings?
- Considering new information?
- Facing risks, dangers?