

Having Meetings With Value

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Dr. Sudip Bose gives a talk at a meeting.

No matter what you think about meetings – whether you love them or hate them, attend them or lead them – they are ingrained in modern business life in almost any organization, from the smallest independent businesses to the largest corporations in America and the world.

Everyone who goes to or who holds a business meeting has two points of anxiety related to attending: 1) that the meeting will be a waste of time, and 2) that you might embarrass yourself by appearing unprepared or uninformed about what is being discussed.

My motto, which applies to being a successful leader, can also apply to being a successful meeting leader or attendee, and that is to remember to “keep your inner army strong.” What do I mean by that, and how can that apply to business meetings? I’ll again reach back to a core principle I learned when I was a US Army officer and physician, and that is to always be training and preparing in “peacetime” – when things are going fine in the organization and all is well – so you are ready for what occurs during “wartime” – those moments of stress or significant change.

We want our meetings to mobilize others and build armies so that we can move ahead swiftly and accomplish the goals we set; we want to inspire attendees to move forward and lean into the mission.

As a meeting leader, I can think of at least a half-dozen action points that will increase the effectiveness of meetings. You can probably think of more, but I believe these are crucial:

1) **Agenda** – Be sure you get the meeting agenda items and any reading material or points of discussion expected to the meeting group a day or two ahead of the meeting. If you try to distribute relevant material at the meeting, guess what? Almost everyone will have their noses in the material and will only provide marginal participation in the session. That, and they won't have the time needed to consider and react to the material with any depth of thought.

2) **Efficiency** – Keep the meeting on point and don't allow tangential issues to take you off track. Start the meeting on time and end the meeting on time.

3) **Invite Right** – Make sure you have the right people at the meeting. Nothing will derail a meeting quicker than not having a key stakeholder there whose input is critical to moving the mission forward.

4) **Demand Accountability** – Now, I don't mean that you pound the conference table and transform yourself into a tyrant, but everyone at the meeting should know they have a responsibility to contribute and that there's an expectation to make sure tasks are done by the next meeting.

5) **Action Items** – Always be sure to end the meeting by setting and getting buy-in on the "next steps" that need to be taken to complete the task at hand. Also be sure to give praise to the others who attended the meeting. Make sure they know you appreciate their attendance and their contributions.

6) **Follow Up!** – Absolutely make sure you follow up with meeting attendees. Make sure you summarize key points of the meeting, memorialize decisions made, and outline responsibilities and timelines for action items discussed and agreed to at the meeting. Nothing, and I mean nothing, will ensure that the half-hour or hour you spent leading a meeting was worthless more than the absence of follow up.

As a meeting attendee, first, be sure you're the right person from your team to go to the meeting. In vertical organizations, sometimes the person organizing the meeting makes assumptions about who should attend from other departments but might miss a key person.

There's a great piece of advice about attending meetings that [Mindy Hall](#) told to Eric J. McNulty in an interview: Show up with two questions you want to ask and two things you want to contribute, [McNulty said Hall told him](#). Hall is the President & CEO of Peak Development Consulting and author of the book, "Leading With Intention." McNulty is the director of research at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative and writes frequently about leadership and resilience. According to McNulty, Hall went on to say that putting the two together requires considering who will be there, the context, and the power dynamics of the meeting. She said to know your objective in attending the meeting, and what the meeting

convener hopes to achieve; understand that preparing two questions activates a learning mind-set, whereas articulating two contributions ensures that you are prepared to add value.

That paragraph contains a couple of the best ideas regarding meetings that I've ever read or heard – particularly the point about coming to a meeting ready with questions. Someone once said, “You can tell a man is clever by his answers. You can tell a man is wise by his questions.” So be prepared to be both clever and wise.

Most people will remember 20 percent of what you do, usually at the beginning and end of the time you're together. That's especially important to consider regarding meetings. Be positive, be confident, bring energy to the table, be present. Don't be the person fiddling with your iPhone or iPad. Avoid the temptation. Remember the admonition about first impressions: You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Being an Army veteran, I was especially struck when I found this gem of advice as I was getting ready to speak to and lead a large group, which was written by [TIME magazine contributor Eric Barker](#): “The military makes soldiers stand up straight for a reason; there's an implicit connection between posture and power that has been demonstrated time and time again. Want to increase confidence? Make yourself tougher? Stand up straight.” Simple advice when you're looking to make an impression.

Be conscious of your body language throughout a meeting. Having closed body language with arms folded, legs crossed and a bit of a frown on your face will at a glance convey to the speaker your disagreement with what is being said, and you won't have said a word. That may be inappropriate or appropriate given the context of what's going on. I'm just making the point of being aware of the unspoken signals you're sending with your body language. Nuance matters.

To sum up the main points I made to be a good meeting contributor (and to add a few other quick points to round out to a half-dozen):

- 1) **The Right Invite** – Make sure you're the right person to be attending the scheduled meeting.
- 2) **Timeliness** – Get to the meeting on time. Don't be the person who straggles in 10-15 minutes late after key points already have been discussed and made.
- 3) **Questions** – Have a couple questions ready that hopefully will move the meeting in a positive direction and be of benefit to all attending.
- 4) **Contribute** – Ensure you come to the meeting armed with at least a couple of items you believe will contribute to the meeting. Come prepared and do your homework.
- 5) **Presence** – Be positive, be confident, bring energy to the table, be present.
- 6) **Stand Up Straight** – Remember the connection between posture and power. And remember the influence of body language. Your unspoken communication through body language matters a great deal.

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