

Meetings - Workshops

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Workshop #1 - Getting down to business

? Is it better to get straight down to business or is it important to allow *small talk*?

Reading: Text 1

Let's stop wasting time and get on with it!

Did you know you can download a clock from the internet to calculate the cost of your meetings? All you need to do is type in the number of attendees at the meeting and their average hourly wage, and start the clock. As the seconds tick away and you see how much those seconds are costing your company, you'll start to appreciate what a terrible waste of time – and money – most meetings are.

So what can you do? Firstly, make sure everyone arrives on time. No excuses. If five people at a meeting are sitting around waiting for a sixth person to turn up, just think how much money you are throwing away.

Secondly, get most of the work done before the meeting. That means sending round detailed agendas, with clear instructions for all participants telling them what they need to do to prepare for the meeting. Again, accept no excuses if someone fails to prepare properly. That means the meeting itself can focus on problem-solving and decision-making rather than wasting time explaining the problem that needs to be solved or the decision that needs to be made.

Thirdly, stick to the agenda. Don't let anyone hijack the meeting by chatting about something irrelevant. If they want to talk about those things, let them call their own meeting. Don't let them take over yours.

Fourthly, set a time limit and stick to it. There's nothing worse than a meeting that goes round and round in circles with no decisions ever being finalised. A time limit can be a great way to focus everyone's minds on the purpose of the meeting and the need to achieve something concrete ... and then to go back to work and start implementing the decisions.

Of course small talk has its place, but that place is not a meeting.

Reading: Text 2

Small talk is the cement that holds businesses together

Did you know that 50% of business communication is actually small talk? Small talk is a vital part of working with other people: finding out what they're doing, what they're having problems with, and what they think they should be doing differently. Perhaps even more importantly, it's about getting to know your colleagues and business partners as people, not just as business machines. Business is very largely based on trusting people, helping and being helped by people and persuading people to do things. How can you achieve any of those things if you don't spend time getting to know each other?

When is this relationship-building supposed to happen? Outside of working hours? No, that's not right if we accept that relationship building is real work. When we're sitting at our computers or in our offices? No, that's when we might need to avoid interruptions and stay focused. So when, then? A lot of the best small talk happens accidentally: the classic situations are the queue for the photocopier, the coffee machine or the water cooler. But a much more systematic and effective way to build good relationships between people from different departments is to allow small talk to flourish in meetings.

Let's get a few things straight about meetings: the whole point of bringing people together for meetings is to generate discussion, to resolve misunderstandings, and to find solutions to problems that people couldn't find if they were working alone. If everything is carefully planned in advance, and the chair of the meeting sticks rigidly to the agenda, none of those things can take place. Of course, there's a time when it's appropriate for one person to talk and everyone else to listen and learn, but that's a presentation, not a meeting.

If you're serious about making your meetings more effective, you need to give the participants plenty of time to ask questions, take the conversation in new directions, say things which may or may not be relevant, and above all, get to know each other. Of course, you need to make sure things don't get out of control, but that means finding a sensible balance between small talk and getting down to business.

A company which does not tolerate small talk may get things done more quickly, but that doesn't mean it'll do things the best way, making full use of the skills and ideas of its employees ... and it may well find that it loses its best employees and its customers just as quickly.

1. Complete these small talk questions by choosing the best form for each verb in brackets.

Asking about current projects:

1. What ____ you ____ on at the moment? **are you working**
2. How ____ it ____ (go) with your new assistant? **is it going**
3. ____ you ____ (make) any progress with your big project? **Have you made**

Asking about recent events:

4. How ____ your presentation ____ (go) last week? **Did ... go**
5. How ____ (be) your business trip? When ____ you ____ (get) back? **was ... did ... get**

Asking about news:

6. What's new? **did you hear / have you heard**
7. ____ you ____ (hear) back from that potential big customer yet?
8. What ____ you ____ (be) up to in your department? **have you been**

Asking about plans and predictions

9. When do you think they ____ finally ____ (sign) the contract? **will finally sign**
10. ____ you ____ (go) to the conference this weekend? **are you going**

2. Now match the questions (1–10) above with the answers (a–j) below.

- a. A little, but it's very slow. We're still tied up with the financing side of things, so it doesn't feel like we're getting anywhere.
- b. Absolutely! I'm giving a presentation! I'm really nervous about it, actually.
- c. Ah, nothing, really. Nothing ever changes! Busy as usual.
- d. It was useful, but really exhausting. I just got back on Tuesday, so I'm still trying to get back on top of my inbox. But I'm glad I went. I made a few potentially useful contacts.
- e. Next week, hopefully, but they're still not happy with our service charges, so it might still all fall through.
- f. Not bad, actually. He's on a steep learning curve, but he's trying hard, and he's got a lot of potential.
- g. Really well. We had a good turn-out, and some people said nice things about it. Whether anyone actually buys the product as a result is another question!
- h. We're about to start working on the new marketing plan. It's not due to be launched for another two months, but it takes a really long time to get ready.
- i. We've been really busy preparing for next week's quality inspection. We're nearly ready, but there are still a few big jobs to finish.
- j. Yes, they emailed us this morning with an order for 500 units, so it looks like it's all going ahead. Very exciting.

Getting the meeting started

1. Look at this introduction to a meeting. What does the chairwoman mean by the phrases in bold?

1. Right ... I think we should start now. Robert, Alice ... could you ...? Robert ...? Thanks.
2. OK, so, is everybody here? Who are we waiting for? Hmm ... well, I think we'll have to **make a start without them**. We've got a lot to get through this afternoon.
3. Right, well, as you know, the purpose of today's meeting is to **see where we are** with the marketing plan, and to **work out what we still need to do** before the launch, which is now just six weeks away.
4. By the end of the meeting, we need to have a list of firm action points for the next month. Hopefully we'll then need only one more meeting next month to tie up any **remaining loose ends**.
5. Did everyone get a copy of the agenda I sent round? OK, good.
6. As I say, we've got a lot to get through, so please let's **stick to the agenda**. I've **set aside** two hours for this meeting, and we really can't afford to run over. Ideally, we can **cover everything** in an hour and a half. Does that sound reasonable?
7. Ah, Helena, come and take a seat. We started without you.
8. So perhaps we can **get the ball rolling** by going through the list of **action points** from the last meeting.
9. Borys, you were going to **look into** the costs of the various options that **came up** last time. Could you tell us what you **found out**?

2. Now match the nine steps in the meeting introduction (1–9) to the descriptions (a–i). Can you think of other phrases for the nine steps?
- a. Stating the desired outcome.
 - b. Introducing the first point on the agenda.
 - c. Getting people's attention, interrupting small talk
 - d. Handing over to the first speaker.
 - e. Dealing with non-attendees.
 - f. Dealing with a late arrival.
 - g. Explaining time limits and procedures.
 - h. Stating the purpose
 - i. Checking people have seen the agenda.

3. Discuss these questions with a partner.
1. What body language do you think the chairwoman used to interrupt the small talk? Why didn't she finish her request?
 2. Why do you think the chairwoman decided not to criticise people for being late? Do you agree with her decision?
 3. The chairwoman referred to action points for the next month and a meeting next month. What's the difference between *the next month* and *next month*?
 4. Why didn't the chairwoman go through the agenda step-by-step? Do you agree with her decision?
 5. Why did the chairwoman set both a maximum time limit and an ideal time limit?
 6. What verb form did the chairwoman use to refer to an action point from the last meeting?
 7. Do you think the chairwoman's language was too idiomatic at times?
4. Without looking back at the chairwoman's introduction, match the beginnings and endings to make useful phrases for getting a meeting started.

1 to make	a. aside X hours for sth
2 to have	b. the ball rolling by doing sth
3 to see	c. everything in X hours
4 to tie	d. into sth
5 to send	e. a lot to get through
6 to stick	f. over
7 to set	g. round a copy of the agenda
8 to run	h. a start without sb
9 to cover	i. sth out
10 to get	j. through a list of action points
11 to go	k. to the agenda
12 to look	l. up (at the last meeting)
13 to come	m. up any remaining loose ends
14 to find	n. where we are with sth

5. Using the list of nine steps from task 2 above and the useful phrases from 4 above, take turns to practise starting your own meeting. You could use one of the topics below or your own ideas.
- A new Health and Safety Procedure
 - How to deal with our recent Public Relations crisis
 - Finding new sources of income for our business

Workshop #2 - Getting involved in meetings

? How to *increase confidence and ability to participate* actively in meetings in English?

Complete this questionnaire about meetings in English and keep a record of your answers. Explain your answers to your partner, using examples where possible. Be honest!

1. You're at a brainstorming meeting in where everyone is speaking English. The other participants seem to speak much better at English than you. You have lots of ideas and opinions about others' ideas. What do you usually do?
 - a. I interrupt others frequently in order to express my opinions, even though I know I make lots of basic mistakes with my English.
 - b. I wait for my turn to present my opinions, and then try to express myself as clearly as I can.
 - c. I only speak if someone asks me for my opinion, and keep my answers short to avoid mistakes.
2. You're at a meeting in English where several participants are sitting silently and just listening. What do you do?
 - a. I ignore them – if they have nothing to say, they shouldn't be there.
 - b. I feel sorry for them – perhaps they are having problems with the language.
 - c. I do everything I can to involve them, by inviting them to speak and preventing others from interrupting them.
3. You're at a meeting where a junior colleague clearly can't speak English properly, and they keep making really basic mistakes like "it don't work". How do you feel?
 - a. Superior. My English is much better, and I'm glad I don't sound so stupid when I speak.
 - b. Irritated. If they can't speak English, they shouldn't be at this meeting.
 - c. Impressed. My colleague is demonstrating excellent self-confidence and determination to overcome a language barrier. And they're making lots of useful contributions to the meeting.

4. At your meeting, everyone is talking at the same time in English. You can follow their conversations, but you're a few seconds behind. By the time you've thought of something to say, and planned how to say it, the conversation has moved on. How often do you experience this feeling?
- All the time.
 - Quite often.
 - Rarely or never.
5. You are at a meeting in English where you understand about 60–80% of what you hear. What do you do?
- Keep interrupting to check what's going on. It's a bit embarrassing and frustrating for others, but it's important that I understand.
 - Participate actively in the meeting. From time to time I'll misunderstand the topic and my contributions will sound a bit stupid, but I'm prepared to take the risk.
 - Sit quietly and listen so as to avoid sounding stupid by talking about the wrong topic.
6. Who is responsible for overcoming your problems with English?
- Nobody. I make mistakes but it's not a problem. I'm paid for my professional skills, not for being an expert in English.
 - My employer. They should provide more English lessons and give me time to study. My teacher could also do more to improve my English. Also, the other people at meetings should try to help me more.
 - Me.

Analysis

Check your score and read the analysis. Discuss with a partner whether you agree. Try to come up with some good advice for the three types of person.

Score key:

q1: a: 10 b: 0 c: -10	q2: a: 10 b: 0 c: -10	q3: a: -5 b: -10 c: 10
q4: a: -10 b: -5 c: 10	q5: a: 5 b: 10 c: -10	q6: a: 10 b: -10 c: 0

If you scored between -60 and -30, you are too much of a **perfectionist** to participate actively in meetings in English. This is completely normal – most people hate making mistakes and looking stupid in front of their colleagues. But your colleagues may think even worse of you if you say nothing at all. You should ...

If you scored between -25 and 25, you are a fairly **typical user** of English, with some good strategies for getting involved. However, there's always room for improvement. You could ...

If you scored between 30 and 60, you are a **risk-taker**. You have a lot of self-confidence, which means you can function effectively in English at work despite your problems with the language. However, you may be rather dominant in group discussions. Also, some people may see your care-free attitude to English as a reflection of your care-free attitude to work. You should ...

Strategies

Now match these strategies with the type of person who needs them most, *perfectionists* or *risk-takers*. (*Typical users* would benefit from all of the strategies).

- a. Record yourself speaking at a meeting in English (e.g. using a Dictaphone). Later, listen to your 'performance' (e.g. while travelling home from work) and try to correct some of the mistakes you hear.
- b. Learn a few "interrupting phrases" like *Can I just say something?* or *Sorry to interrupt, but ...*. These phrases will give you time to plan what you're going to say. The best one-word interrupting phrase is *But ...*, or you could simply say the person's name.
- c. Learn hundreds of new words. Be systematic and organised – if you learn 10 new words per day for a year, you can increase your vocabulary by 3650 words! Think what that would do for your fluency and confidence.
- d. Actively try to involve less confident colleagues by asking their opinions frequently and listening patiently while they speak.
- e. Instead of simply presenting your opinions (*I think ...*), use questions (*What about if we ...?*; *Do you think ...?*) and question tags (*That would work, wouldn't it?*) to involve others.
- f. Go for it! Speaking English in public is like learning to ride a bike. If you analyse it too much, you'll convince yourself it's impossible. But once you've done it a few times, it'll feel more natural.
- g. Ask a colleague what bad habits you have with English grammar or pronunciation. Then try to correct yourself when you're speaking fluently. It'll slow you down a bit, but soon you'll notice it gets easier and faster to be accurate.
- h. Learn some phrases for checking understanding (e.g. *What exactly do you mean by X?*; *Sorry – I didn't catch that last word.*) and make sure you use them. Remember, there's no point in going to a meeting if you don't understand. It may feel embarrassing to keep asking for clarification, but it's worse to sit in silence, and worst of all if your misunderstanding leads to professional mistakes.
- i. If somebody interrupts you, give them a chance to speak, especially if you know that person isn't very confident about using English in meetings. If they hesitate, encourage them with phrases like *Go on* or *After you*.
- j. Don't let other people interrupt you too easily. Hold the floor with phrases like *Can I just finish my point?* or *I'll let you speak in a second.*

Useful language

ALLOWING OTHERS TO CONTINUE

CHECKING YOU'VE UNDERSTOOD / SPECIFYING THE PROBLEM

INTERRUPTING

INVITING OTHERS TO GET INVOLVED

PREVENTING AN INTERRUPTION

a. After you.	n. Sorry, but could you speak up a little. It's difficult to hear you.
b. But ...	o. Sorry – I didn't catch that last word.
c. Can I just check I've understood you correctly?	p. Sorry ... I interrupted you. You were saying ...
d. Can I just finish my point?	q. Sorry to interrupt, but ...
e. Can I just say something?	r. Sorry, but I'm really not sure I've understood you correctly.
f. Can I just stop you for a second?	s. Sorry, but you've lost me. What exactly are we talking about?
g. Do you think ...?	t. Sorry, was that <i>owe</i> or <i>own</i> ?
h. Go on.	u. Sorry, you were about to say something and I cut you off.
i. Hang on a second, can you let me finish?	v. That would work, wouldn't it?
j. I'll let you speak in a second.	w. What about if we ...?
k. I'm not familiar with the abbreviation <i>R</i> and <i>D</i> . Can someone help me?	x. What exactly do you mean by ...?
l. I'm sorry, but this is really important.	y. Why don't we ...?
m. OK, I understood almost everything, but not the last bit. What are we voting on now?	z. Would you mind speaking a bit more slowly, please? I'm having trouble keeping up.

Practice

Student A:

Well, **EHO** have asked for a complete breakdown of our **P** and **L** figures. They want our **inventory** figures to be based on **FIFO**. We need that by the end of **Q2**. Does that sound **feasible**?

- **EHO** = European Head Office
- a breakdown = an analysis of each part of something
- **P** and **L** = profit and loss, an important financial report
- **inventory** = the amount of goods we have in our factory
- **FIFO** accounting = first in, first out, i.e. in order to calculate costs and profits, accountants assume that the oldest stock is sold first
- **Q2** = the second quarter of the year, i.e. April–June.
- **feasible** = possible, realistic

Student B

We've decided to conduct a complete **overhaul** of our **QMS**. Basically, **VMA** and her team in **O** and **E** want to aim for **ISO 9001** accreditation, because they're convinced it'll help them clinch the **Madax** deal.

- **an overhaul** = a complete review and change to a whole system
- **QMS** = Quality Management System
- **VMA** = the head of the **O** and **E** department, Victor Mark Austin.
- **O** and **E** = Operations and Engineering, the name of a department
- **ISO 9001** = a QMS standard published by ISO, the International Organization for Standardization
- **accreditation** = a process of assessment that may lead to an official certificate or licence
- **to clinch a deal** = to finalise a deal (= agreement, negotiation), to get the other party to accept it
- **Madax** = the name of a key client

Role-play 1

Your company wants to organise a **Work–Life Balanceday**. The aim of the event is to get employees to see colleagues as people with real lives outside the workplace, and therefore to be more supportive, understanding and friendly towards each other. There is a very limited budget, and the event will take place on a normal working day, without dramatically reducing employees' productivity during that day. You and some other junior members of staff have been asked to plan the events for the day. Hold a brainstorming meeting to plan the event.

Workshop #3 – Managing a meeting

? Have you ever *planned, arranged or managed a meeting?*

Dear all

Thanks to everyone who sent me their availability. Based on the information I received, I'd like to invite you to our first meeting on Tuesday 21st February from 14.30 to 15.30 in the small conference room. Coffee and biscuits will be provided.

I'm attaching an agenda. Please make sure you have read the agenda carefully before the meeting, as well as the briefing documents that I sent on Monday (attached again for your reference).

Thanks a lot and see you on Tuesday.

Angela Fott, Project Co-ordinator

Agenda

Date: 21st February

Time: 14.30 – 15.30

Location: Small conference room

1. Presentation: Background to the project, aims, scope
2. Questions and answers
3. Brainstorming: ideas for the launch event
4. Action points
5. Schedule for next month's meeting
6. AOB

Dear all

Thanks to everyone who came to our first meeting yesterday. I think it was an incredibly productive meeting, and your contributions and ideas were extremely valuable.

As promised, I'm attaching the meeting minutes. Please check them carefully, especially the list of Action Points at the end, to make sure I have recorded everything correctly, and let me know if I need to correct anything. I'll email people individually about specific Action Points.

As we discussed, our next meeting will be on 20th March from 15.00 to 16.00. I'll be in touch closer to that date with an agenda for that meeting.

Thanks again for all your support. All the best.

Angela Fott, Project Co-ordinator

Dear all

As you may know, we are developing a major new project, Project Z. I am attaching a short summary of the project for your information.

In order for the project to be a success, we need to get input and support from as many departments as possible. With this in mind, I'd like to set up a Project Team, including at least one member from each department, to meet once a month to discuss the project.

I realise this is a busy time of year for many departments, but I'd like to stress that this project is of vital importance to the future growth of our organisation. There is no work involved for team members, apart from reading project documentation, attending the monthly team meetings, offering ideas and helping us to identify and solve potential problems.

I believe membership of the team will also be beneficial for individual members, as they will gain a better understanding of this project and, more generally, the way the organisation works as a whole. Members will also gain invaluable experience of project management. Also, as the meetings will be conducted in English, it will be a good chance for team members to develop their communication skills in English.

So could I ask each of you to nominate one or two suitable people from your department to be on the team? Please could you get back to me by the end of this week with your nominations?

Many thanks and best regards

Angela Fott, Project Co-ordinator

Dear all

First of all, welcome to the Project Z Team. I'm very excited about this project, and I'm convinced that with your support and ideas, we can make it a tremendous success. I'm attaching some background documents so you can familiarise yourself with the project aims and scope.

I'd like to organise the first meeting some time next week, as early as possible (preferably on Monday or Tuesday). Could I therefore ask you to let me know your availability for next week, so I can find a time that suits most people? The first meeting should last no more than one hour. Please email me with your availability, ideally today (Monday) or tomorrow morning at the latest.

Thanks a lot

Angela Fott, Project Co-ordinator

Analysis

1. Look at the first email. Discuss these questions.

- a. Why do you think Angela didn't start with a full explanation of the project?
- b. In the second paragraph, which two phrases does Angela use to show the reason for something?
- c. What is the purpose of the third paragraph? What two techniques does she use to achieve this purpose?
- d. What is the purpose of the fourth paragraph? What short word does Angela use twice to explain reasons?
- e. Do you think Angela is specific enough in her call to action in the final paragraph?

2. Look at the second email. Discuss these questions.

- a. How does Angela try to develop motivation and enthusiasm in her first paragraph?
- b. What techniques does Angela use in the second paragraph to be flexible but still guide the decision-making process?

3. Look at the third email and the agenda. Discuss these questions.

- a. What important information does Angela include in the first paragraph?
- b. Which of her two requests sounds stronger, the one in the first paragraph or the one in the second? Why do you think this is?
- c. Do you think the agenda contains too much or too little information?
- d. What does AOB mean at the end of the agenda?

4. Look at the fourth email. Discuss these questions.

- a. Why do you think Angela is so enthusiastic in her opening paragraph?
- b. Why does Angela stress the importance of checking and correcting the minutes?
- c. How does Angela refer to previous conversation in paragraphs 2 and 3?

5. Underline all the useful phrases and techniques that you could use in your own emails. Try to find at least one phrase for each of the following functions.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| a. Referring to previous knowledge or conversations | h. Explaining key benefits |
| b. Referring to attachments | i. Making requests |
| c. Explaining reasons | j. Setting deadlines |
| d. Explaining what you want to do | k. Expressing enthusiasm |
| e. Showing understanding | l. Making suggestions |
| f. Emphasising key information | m. Explaining practical details |
| g. Dealing with potential problems | n. Expressing thanks |
| | o. Explaining your plans |

Practice

In pairs, plan a large meeting involving people from several departments. First, decide what your meeting will be about. You can use these ideas to help you:

- What is your organisation? What do you make / do?
- What is your role in the organisation?
- Is the meeting about something that is going to happen (e.g. a new project or procedure) or something that has happened (e.g. an accident, a failure)? Be as specific as possible.
- Is it a one-off meeting or the first of a series?
- How long do you expect the meeting will last?
- Who are you going to invite? Why do you want them to come?
- How can you persuade people to come to your meeting?

When you have a strong idea about the purpose of your meeting, write one or more emails to set up the meeting and invite participants. You can use Angela's writing to give you ideas, copying as much as you like from her emails. You don't have to write three emails: just write as much or as little as you think necessary to set up your meeting.

	1	Angela:	OK, so let me start by welcoming you all to our first meeting. Thanks a lot for volunteering to join the team, and thanks also for coming. Your support is very much appreciated. I'm going to begin with a brief presentation now on the background to the project [...]
		Angela:	[...] Right ... so that brings me to the end of the presentation. Are there any questions?
		Bruno:	Er ... yes, I have a question. It all seems like a nice idea, but I'm really not sure it's going to work in practice.
		Christina:	Yeah, me too. Where's the money coming from, for example?
		Angela:	Well, that's really two questions. Christina, I'll come back to your question in a moment. Bruno, what exactly is it that you're worried about?
		Bruno:	I think you're being too ambitious about the number of customers who are going to be interested.
7		Diego:	No, I disagree. I think it's a really interesting project. I'd certainly be interested.
		Angela:	OK, that's great to hear, Diego, but I'm not sure that's what Bruno's worried about. Bruno, do you think the project isn't interesting enough, or that only a small number will be interested?
		Bruno:	Well, a bit of both, but mainly it's about reaching large numbers of people with our marketing campaign. If we can get the marketing right, then the numbers are fine.
		Angela:	So you're saying we need to give more thought to the marketing side of things, rather than changing the project itself?
		Bruno:	Well, both really.
12		Angela:	OK ... so let's take them one at a time. What would you say are the main issues related to marketing? [...]
13		Angela:	[...] OK, so we've identified a possible problem with the marketing, and there are concerns that the project itself might not be very interesting to large numbers of people.
		Diego:	Well, that's easy enough to fix. We could make the logo a bit simpler, for example.
		Bruno:	Simpler? No, I think it's too simple already.
		Angela:	Well, hang on a second. I don't think we should be going into this much detail at this stage. Remember, we've only got an hour today. Perhaps we can come back to identifying very specific recommendations at our next meeting. We can certainly talk about the logo then ... I'll just add it to my notes.

17	Angela:	But I want to come back to something Christina said earlier. Christina, you said you were worried about costs?
	Christina:	Yes, well ... I'm not sure ...
	Diego:	Christina's always worried about costs!
	Angela:	OK, Diego, can you let Christina finish, please?
	Christina:	No, it's OK. I've, er ... it's not important.
	Angela:	Are you sure? Do you think we'll have problems getting money from head office to launch this?
	Christina:	No, no, it's not that. I'm sure the money will come, but I'm worried that it means there'll be less money for other projects.
24	Angela:	OK, well, I think that's really a question for senior management. All I know is that the money for this project is guaranteed by head office, but I can't say anything about other projects. Diego, perhaps you could answer Christina's question, briefly? [...]
25	Angela:	[...] Great, well, we've had lots of good ideas already, and I've got pages of really useful notes. Erik, you've been very quiet. Do you have anything to add?
	Erik:	Er ... no, it all looks fine to me.
	Angela:	Really? I was hoping you might be able to say something about the logistics of bringing so many people onto our site for the launch. What would you say are the main issues?
	Erik:	Well, er, there are two main issues: evacuation procedure and security. But we have procedures for both of these on our intranet.
	Angela:	Great. Could you send round a link to those procedures? I just want to be extra sure we're not missing anything important. Like ... I don't know, if we need to pay for additional security guards for the launch event.
	Erik:	Well, yes, that's a good point. I'll have a look and get back to you at the next meeting.
	Angela:	That would be really useful, thanks. And I'll add it to the list of Action Points ... Erik to send round the links to two procedures, and report back on potential problems with our launch event. [...]
32	Angela:	[...] OK, so if nobody has any more questions at this stage ... no? ... I'd like to move on to the next point on the agenda, which is a brainstorming session on the launch event. ...

Analysis

Underline useful phrases that Angela uses which you could use to manage your own meeting. Try to find at least one phrase for each of the following functions.

- a. Welcoming and thanking
- b. Signalling different stages of the meeting
- c. Avoiding trying to deal with two or more points at once
- d. Asking somebody to be more specific
- e. Dealing with interruptions
- f. Checking whether you've understood
- g. Summarising
- h. Keeping the meeting focused on the agenda
- i. Recording notes and minutes
- j. Prompting people to get involved, especially people who don't want to speak
- k. Requesting specific action

Practice

Work in groups of four. Each of you will spend around five minutes managing the meeting you planned earlier.

First, explain the background to your meeting to the other people in your group. Make sure they know who they are and why they're there.

When you're ready, get the meeting started and try to manage the problems that arise.

The other students are attendees. Make sure the chairperson has a few problems to manage, such as:

- questions that are not really relevant to the meeting topic;
- interruptions before somebody has finished an important point;
- participants who don't want to get involved;
- too many ideas at the same time.

But don't make it too difficult for the chairperson, though. Remember, you'll have to chair a meeting yourself too!

Workshop #4 – Brainstorming and evaluating

? When and how is **brainstorming** most **effective**?

Reading

Look at the following phrases. Four of them are the rules of successful brainstorming and six of them are important criticisms. With a partner, discuss which phrases are rules and which are criticisms, and what each phrase might mean.

Then read the text. Write one phrase in each gap.

- blocking
- combine and improve ideas
- evaluation apprehension
- focus on quantity
- free riderproblem
- illusion of group productivity
- personal contribution
- social matching effect
- welcome unusual ideas
- withhold criticism

The problem with brainstorming

Brainstorming is one of the most popular techniques used in meetings to generate ideas for solving a specific problem. Alex Osborn, the inventor of the term 'Brainstorming', established four rules.

- Firstly, it's important to **focus on quantity**. Write everything down, the more ideas, the better.
- Secondly, participants need to **withhold criticism**. Never criticise another person's idea during the brainstorming session, as it will prevent people from being creative. There's plenty of time for criticism in the evaluation stage later.
- Thirdly, we should **welcome unusual ideas**. Try to challenge your assumptions and ask 'what if ...?' questions.
- Finally, try to **combine and improve ideas**. This is the real power of brainstorming: person A's crazy idea, which would never work in practice, may get person B thinking about a similar idea which might just work. Even better, person A's crazy idea and person C's crazy idea can be combined, taking the best parts of each. So instead of saying 'no' or 'yes, but ...' we need to train ourselves to say 'yes, and ...'.

A successful brainstorming session can be really useful, but is it always as effective as it could be? Researchers have identified many possible problems, all of which suggest that it is far from perfect.

First of all, there's the **free riderproblem**. This comes from the idea of travelling by bus without a ticket. Why should I bother to buy a ticket when the bus is going anyway? From a selfish point of view, it's in my interest to ride for free and let others pay for their tickets. The same goes for a brainstorming meeting: why should I make the effort to be creative when all the benefits, and the praise for good ideas, go to the group? From a selfish point of view, it's in my interest to let everyone else do all the work. Even if people don't think in such simple terms, it can be demotivating to keep generating ideas when you know you will not be praised or rewarded personally for them, especially if you don't have especially a strong sense of being part of a team.

A related problem is called the **social matching effect**. Observers have noted that we try to match our behaviour to the behaviour of other people in the room. So if everyone else is sitting silently, or focusing only on sensible ideas, we feel pressure to do the same. Of course, the social matching effect can have the opposite effect, by encouraging quieter or less creative people to contribute as freely as other participants, but this positive effect tends to be weaker than the negative effect, for the simple reason that it's easier to contribute less.

There's also evidence that people are bad at judging the level of their **personal contribution** to a brainstorming session. In one experiment, for example, a group of four participants each believed they had contributed around 36% of the ideas at a recent brainstorming session, even though that is mathematically impossible.

A fourth potential problem is **evaluation apprehension**, or being worried about what other people will think or say about your ideas. It's one thing to avoid openly criticising other people's ideas, but it's much more difficult to avoid all signs of judgement. People may express criticism with a simple facial expression, a slight laugh or even a pause between hearing an idea and responding. And even if nobody is negative in any way, it's still difficult to accept that nobody is thinking negative thoughts about your crazy idea.

A much more serious problem is called **blocking**. This happens when only one person at a time is allowed to talk. If that person talks for too long, you may forget your own idea, or decide not to express it when you finally get your chance. This problem probably happens all the time: ideas come and go every second, but it is terribly easy to get distracted, especially when we are listening politely to a colleague expressing his or her own idea.

Finally, there is a problem called the **illusion of group productivity**, where participants think the meeting is more effective than it really is. For example, it can be very difficult to judge when the meeting's objectives have been met: how many ideas should be on the board? How many of those ideas need to be serious proposals, as compared to lists of random words and thoughts? Without concrete criteria for assessing success, groups tend to believe they've achieved their goal far too soon.

In other words, instead of making people more creative, the act of listening to each other's ideas may actually make them try less hard, withhold their own ideas and give up too soon.

Useful phrases for making suggestions

A	B
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This might sound crazy, but ...• Just thinking aloud for a moment, but ...• I've just had an idea.• It probably wouldn't work in practice, but ...• I haven't thought this through yet, but ...• You've just reminded me of something.• Just to build on that idea, ...• I wonder if we could combine your idea with something that was said earlier.• In an ideal world, ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why don't we ...?• I suppose we could ...• How about ...?• I think we should ...• We could always ...• I don't suppose we could ...• Wouldn't it be nice if we ...• What if we ...?• I wonder if it would be possible to ...• It might be possible to ...• Could we ...?

1. Look at the phrases in column A for introducing ideas in a brainstorming session. Which phrases would you use to introduce very unusual ideas? Which phrases would you use to relate your idea to previous suggestions?
2. Look at the phrases in column B. Which verb form comes after each phrase: an infinitive (e.g. *try*), an –ing form (e.g. *trying*) or a past tense (e.g. *tried*)? Which phrases suggest the speaker more confident or less confident about their ideas?
3. Work alone. Make five suggestions about how to improve brainstorming, based on the criticisms in the text. Use one phrase from A and one from B in each sentence (e.g. *This might sound crazy, but I wonder if it might be possible to ...*).

- a. _____.
- b. _____.
- c. _____.
- d. _____.
- e. _____.

Practice

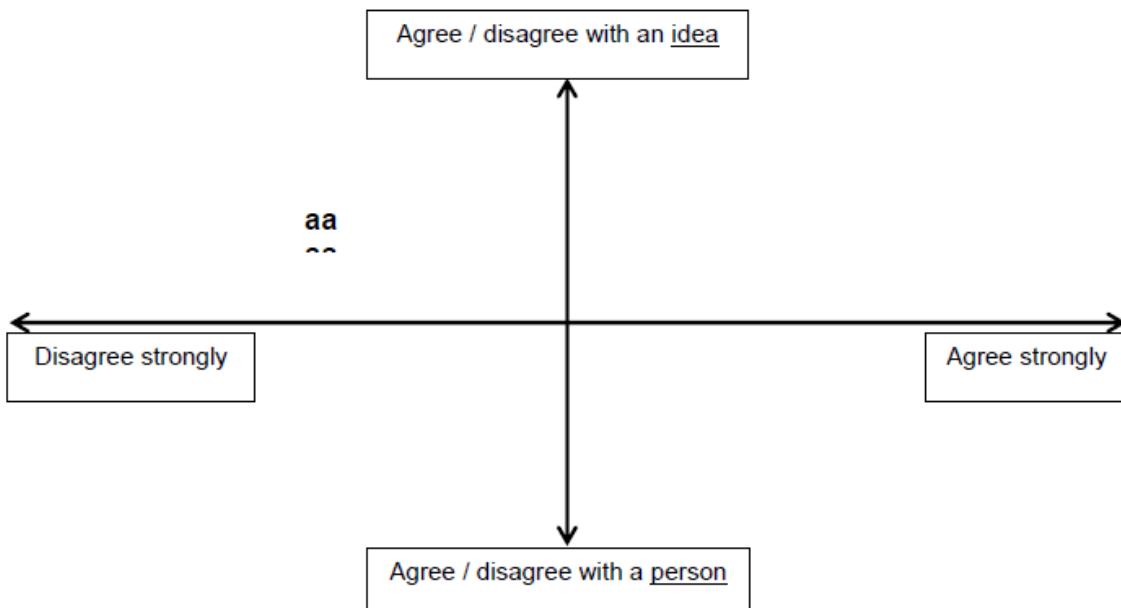
Role-play a brainstorming meeting on the subject of how to improve brainstorming meetings in your organisation. You can use your sentences from 5 to get you started, but hopefully you'll also get lots of new ideas during the meeting.

Useful phrases for evaluating ideas

Look at these phrases for evaluating ideas.

- | | |
|---|---|
| a. I don't think it would work. | j. That's not a bad idea. |
| b. That's a brilliant idea. | k. Yes, I think you're right. |
| c. It might just work. | l. Are you sure? |
| d. Absolutely. | m. I'm really not happy about it. |
| e. Maybe. I'm not sure. | n. Well, I agree up to a point. |
| f. No, I don't think so. | o. Well, yes and no. |
| g. I'm not keen at all. | p. This idea has potential, but it's not quite there yet. |
| h. I'm not really convinced. | q. I think this is just what we need. |
| i. I think it needs a lot more thought. | |

Decide on the best position on the graph for each phrase, as in the example.



Practice (1)

Now use the phrases to evaluate the ideas you generated in your brainstorming session. Use the 'ideas' phrases for expressing your opinions, and the 'people' phrases to respond to other people's opinions.

Practice (2)

Use the procedures you decided on in Practice (1) to role-play a brainstorming meeting to solve one of the following problems:

- What is the most effective way we can save £1 million from our costs?
- What is the quickest way we can make £1 million from a new website?
- What new product can we manufacture in order to make a fortune very quickly?

Workshop #5 – Action points

! **Action points** for *moving* things *forward*...

Read these extracts from a meeting about making the workplace more family-friendly. How many action points are there? Do the participants answer all of these key questions for each action point?

The Five Key Questions for Action Points

- What exactly does the action point involve?
- Who is responsible for performing the action point?
- Who will monitor that person's progress?
- What is the deadline?
- What will happen on that deadline? (How will it be checked and followed up?)

Lara:OK, so we've done really well today in terms of coming up with ideas. I think now it's time to firm things up a little and try to take some of these ideas forward as action points. Er ... we talked about setting up a crèche for employees' children, and I think we all agreed this would be something to investigate further. Arnie, you said there's a crèche in our Stockholm office. Can I task you with finding out as much as you can about it?

Arnie:Sure, no problem. I'll be seeing some of the reps from Stockholm in a couple of weeks, so I'll ask them about it when I see them.

Lara:Well, could you send them an email instead? I'd really prefer not to have to wait several weeks. I think we'd need an answer in good time for next month's meeting, where I'd like you to report back on your findings.

Arnie:OK ... that's fine. What exactly do you want me to ask in my email?

...

Lara:Great. Well, I suppose we'll also need to look into the legal aspects of having children in the building. I imagine there are all sorts of rules and procedures we need to know about. Would anyone like to volunteer?

Sabina: Yes, I can do that. I'll make a start today.

Lara:That's great. Roy, can you help Sabina out on that? It's quite a big job, I imagine.

Roy: Well, I could, but I'm really busy at the moment with my regular work. Don't forget, I don't have any hours allocated to this project.

Lara:OK, that's a good point. Would you like to be more involved? I mean, would you like me to speak to Niall about getting you some hours allocated to this project?

Roy: Well, perhaps at some stage in the future, but not for at least two months. I'm happy to attend these meetings and contribute ideas, but I've got to put my regular duties first.

Lara:OK, fair enough.

...

Lara: OK, and finally, we need to look into how popular this service would actually be. I suppose some sort of staff survey would be important here, you know, would you use the service, how much would you be willing to pay for it, that sort of thing ...

Arnie: So you want employees to pay for it? I thought it was supposed to be free ...

Lara: Well, someone's got to pay for it, whether it's the company, which effectively means all the employees, or only the employees that use it. But it's something we need to investigate.

Kelly: Would you like me to organise a staff survey?

Lara: Yes, that would be great.

Kelly: OK, so can I pick your brains at some stage on exactly how to word the survey?

Lara: Well, I think Rachel might be the best person for that. Rachel, can I delegate that job to you?

Rachel: Sure, no problem. We can have a quick meeting tomorrow morning, if you like.

Kelly: Great. That would be really useful.

Lara: Good. And Rachel, can I also ask you to oversee this survey, you know, in terms of making sure Kelly has all the tools she needs to get it done and reported in time for our next meeting?

Rachel: Yes, of course.

Useful phrases for volunteering and delegating

Starting a discussion on action points

- OK, so we've done really well today in terms of _____ up with ideas.
- I think now it's time to _____ things up a little and try to _____ some of these ideas forward as action points.

Delegating and asking for volunteers

- Can I _____ you with finding out as much as you can about it?
- Would anyone like to _____?
- Roy, can you _____ Sabina out on that?
- Would you like to be more _____?
- Well, I think Rachel _____ be the best person for that.
- Rachel, can I _____ that job to you?
- And Rachel, can I also _____ you to oversee this survey ...?

Accepting

- Sure, _____ problem.
- OK ... that's fine.
- OK, that's a good point.
- OK, _____ enough.
- Yes, that would be great.
- Great. That would be really _____.
- Yes, of course.

Volunteering to help

- I'll be _____ some of the reps ..., so I'll ask them about it when I see them.
- Yes, I can do that. I'll _____ a start today.
- I mean, _____ you like me to speak to Niall about ...?
- Would you like me to _____ a staff survey?
- We can have a quick meeting tomorrow morning, if you _____.

Instructing and setting deadlines

- Well, _____ you send them an email instead?
- I'd really _____ not to have to wait several weeks.
- I think we'd _____ an answer in good time for next month's meeting, where I'd like you to _____ back on your findings.

Asking for clarification and advice

- What _____ do you want me to ask in my email?
- OK, so can I _____ your brains at some stage on exactly how to word the survey?

Making an excuse

- Well, I _____, but I'm really busy at the moment with my regular work.
- Don't _____, I don't have any hours allocated to this project.

Analysis

1. Which modal verb is most useful for delegating?
2. Which of the accepting phrases are for accepting a duty, and which are for accepting an excuse? Which are for accepting an offer?
3. What two verb forms are most often used for volunteering?
4. What do you notice about the verb forms for instructing and setting deadlines?
5. What is the most useful word for asking for clarification and advice?

Role-play (1)

Work in groups of around five people. Choose one person to chair your meeting.

You all work for the same organisation. The managers from your head office have asked you to make your premises more suitable for disabled employees and visitors. Some of the ideas that you brainstormed included:

- installing a lift;
- adding a wheelchair ramp to the steps outside the front door;
- replacing the traditional heavy front door with sliding doors;
- training reception staff how to communicate with deaf people;
- making the whole building easier and safer for blind people to explore;
- ensuring all safety procedures, including fire evacuation procedures, are designed with disabled people in mind.

Use these and your own additional ideas to plan a list of action points. Make sure the five key questions have been answered for each action point. Try to use some of the Useful Phrases from this lesson.

Role-play (2)

Work in pairs. One of you should be the chair of the meeting you held earlier. The other person should take all the other roles. Use the six steps (a-f) and the useful language you underlined to bring the meeting to a close.

When you have finished, swap roles. The second time you role-play this situation, try not to look at the list of six steps.

Closing a meeting

1. In what order would you do the following at the end of a meeting?
 - a. AOB
 - b. Invite final questions
 - c. Plan the next meeting
 - d. Signal that people can leave
 - e. Summarise the Action Points
 - f. Thank people
2. Read the end of the meeting on making the building more family friendly. In what order does Lara go through the six steps (a-f)?
3. Underline the key phrases she uses for each step.
4. What do you notice about the verb forms for talking about Action Points? Why is this different from the earlier part of the meeting?

Lara: OK, great, so I think that's about all for the action points, unless there's something I've missed? No? OK, so the last point on the agenda is Any Other Business. Is there anything else we need to discuss at this stage?

Roy: Well, obviously we'll need to think about budgets at some point.

Lara: Yes, you're right. But I think that's something for our next meeting, once we've got a rough idea of what's feasible. Is there something specific you feel we need to discuss now, or can it wait til we've got more information?

Roy: No, it's fine to leave it til next time, but I'm just worried about wasting a lot of time planning, and then thinking about budgets only as an afterthought, six months into the project.

Lara: OK, that's a good point. I'll add it to next month's agenda. Is there anything else? No? OK, so I just want to go through the list of Action Points. Arnie's going to email Stockholm this week, to find out about their crèche ... and you're going to report back to us at our next meeting. Is that OK, Arnie?

Arnie: Yes, that's fine. I'm going to email them tomorrow, in fact.

Lara: Good. Sabina's going to investigate the legal aspects. Again, you're going to report back to us in a month, Sabina?

Sabina: Uh-huh. Unless I find something really important, in which case I'll email everyone straight away.

Lara: Good idea. And Kelly's going to have a meeting with Rachel tomorrow morning, to plan the staff survey ... is that right?

Kelly: Yes.

Lara: Good ... and you're also going to report back at our next meeting. Wow, it's going to be a busy meeting. We're also going to start thinking about our budget and costs at that meeting. Is there anything I've missed? No? OK, so I'll send round a list of action points tomorrow morning, and a provisional agenda for the next meeting. I suppose we could fix a time and date for that meeting now. How about making it exactly a month from now? That's Wednesday the 11th at 10 o'clock. Is that OK? Excellent.

Right, so are there any final questions?

OK, so thank-you all very much. I think we've had a really productive meeting. Loads of really good ideas, and it really feels as if we're moving forward with this project. Please do keep me informed if you have any problems with your action points. OK, so thanks again everybody, and have a nice day.