Getting Unstuck:
Common Problems in Meetings and Some Solutions

Sometimes meetings bog down or don't go very well. Below are listed some of the most common problems in meetings and some techniques you might use to address them. These solutions may not work in your situation — use your own judgment.

Note that many of these solutions suggest appointing a facilitator to clarify, summarize, sort, and focus discussions; a note-taker to record the minutes of the meeting; a vibes-watcher to notice poor meeting process and interrupt it; and a timekeeper to ensure that items are discussed and decided in a timely fashion. Many also suggest having a pre-prepared agenda or establishing one at the outset, reviewing the agenda with everyone at the beginning, and setting aside a time at the end to evaluate the meeting process.

Common Problems	Examples	Possible Solutions
Poor Listening People don't hear each other clearly.	**Mary**: I think the evening program should have more female speakers. We could replace Ed with Laura. **Judith**: I don't think anyone could ever replace Ed — he is such a dear man and has done so much for us. **Richard**: Well, I agree with Mary — I don't like Ed either.	• Leave a silence between speakers so everyone can listen carefully to what was last said and ponder it. • Summarize, paraphrase, or clarify the ideas of the last few speakers. • Point out that people are not hearing each other clearly. • Have a check-in time at the beginning of meetings for everyone to say in turn what is on their minds, so they won't be distracted by it later during the meeting. • Try setting up some structured exercises to let people practice listening. • Use communication tools (empathy, active listening, I-messages, loving gestures, and so on) to minimize agitation that can hinder hearing.
Lack of Focus People talk about different issues or different aspects of an issue.	**Elena**: I think we should stage a concert to raise money. **Lucas**: Concerts take too long to organize. Let's have a bake sale. **Barbara**: My cousin is in a band called The Tweedles that might play for free. **Dorothy**: Our church raised a lot of money by doing a car wash. **Stephen**: If we have a bake sale, I want at least half the items to be free of dairy products. **Julia**: The Tweedles are great. They could draw a big crowd.	• List all of the things that everyone might discuss or all the important questions that must be considered. Sort them into reasonable categories and then choose one issue or aspect to talk about first. • Or break down into smaller groups and have each group talk about a specific issue or aspect.
Repetition People repeat themselves without seeming to get anywhere.	**Janet**: I don't like the idea. **Hernando**: I do. I think it would be fun. **Janet**: Well, it might be fun, but I still don't like it. **Hernando**: I think we should do it. It would be fun. **Janet**: But I don't like it…	• Acknowledge what others say by summarizing, paraphrasing, or clarifying so they won't feel the need to say it again. • Determine the areas of agreement and disagreement. Finalize agreements and then focus on the disagreements. • Point out the repetition and ask the repeaters for new ideas. Ask others for their opinions or ideas. • Suggest another new solution, perhaps even one that is unusual or silly to stimulate fresh thinking. • Brainstorm new ideas or perspectives. • Redirect the discussion to another issue.

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Competition for Best Idea People try to show their idea is best — usually by belittling others' ideas.	**Joan**: I think my idea is best — it doesn't cost very much. **Inge**: Well, I think my idea is even better — it would produce much higher quality. **Stuart**: Well I can see flaws in both of your ideas. My idea is better than either of yours.	• Try to de-personalize the discussion. Refer to the ideas by their main aspects, not by who introduced them. • List the pros and cons of each idea and point out that none is perfect and none completely flawed. • Decide together what criteria you will use to evaluate the ideas and then decide together how well each of the ideas meets each requirement. • Try to combine ideas to incorporate their best parts and avoid their pitfalls. • Build up each person's self-esteem by praising them for their hard work and good ideas.
Verbosity Some people talk too much or too long.	**Mitch**: … I know I've said quite a lot, but I would just like to add …	• Break down into very small groups of two or three so everyone can talk at length. • Gently interrupt windy speakers. If they cannot be interrupted gently, then be more forceful. Point out how long or often they speak and ask them to contain their remarks or speak less often. • Use talking limiters: limit remarks to a set time, restrict the number of times each person can talk (issue a limited number of talking tokens), go around the circle and let each person only talk during their turn, and so on.
Passivity or Shyness Some people say nothing and seem distant and resistant to be part of the group.	**Brenda**: It seems like we agree, but we haven't heard anything from you four people — what do you all think? (long pause) **Edgar**: Nothing much.	• Outside of the meeting, call up Edgar and the others and find out how they feel about the group — why are they distant, what would help make them feel connected to the group. • Encourage quiet people to make a presentation, tell a story, etc. to let others know what is important to them. Set aside enough time and serve as a welcoming and attentive audience for them. • Break into small groups so shy people can feel safer speaking. • Sing together or play games that gently draw in shy people.
Rambling People explore and debate minor points endlessly.	**Marilyn**: Since it might rain or snow, we should consider alternative locations for our event. **Frank**: I think it is unlikely to snow at this time of year, but we could get some sleet. It would have to be much colder to snow. **Hal**: I disagree with that. I think it could just as easily snow now.	• Encourage people to explore peripheral ideas outside of the meeting. • Remind people of the goal for the meeting topic and encourage everyone to focus on it. • See if people are avoiding the topic and determine why. Then address those reasons.
Lack of Information The group refuses to or feels constrained from making a decision until information is received from outside the group.	**Margaret**: I think we all agree we want to buy an answering machine for the office, but we should check our bank balance first. **Leslie**: Well, I guess we can't discuss it until our next meeting when Kim is here with the figures.	• Have one person phone for information while the group goes on. Return to the issue when the information arrives. • Make tentative or conditional decisions. • Discuss various possible scenarios and choose what to do in each case (make contingent decisions). • Take action to make sure the information gets to the next meeting.

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Deadlock People disagree and don't seem to change their points of view. Too much time is spent on one issue without getting anywhere. Only one or two alternatives are considered and they are not satisfying.	**Tracy**: So should we all take the train together or go in our separate cars? **Sandra**: I'd still like to save energy by taking the train. **Cameron**: I'd still rather not have to worry about trying to all leave at the same time. **Arlene**: And I still don't like either choice. **Max**: But we've been discussing this for an hour. Let's choose. **Cindy**: But if we come up with a poor decision then I think some people in this group will leave. **Doug**: Well, I'm really frustrated. If we don't decide soon, I'll drop out.	• Use problem solving tools (discover, define, and analyze the problem, generate alternatives, establish evaluation criteria, weight the alternatives, examine the consequences, choose a solution). • Use creativity tools (brainstorming, questioning, rearranging, combining, connecting, fantasizing, acting outrageous, and so on). • Agree to disagree and move on to something else. • Use counseling tools to ferret out and purge emotional hangups that prevent open and rational thinking. • Make a temporary or partial decision. • Take a break to just relax and pleasantly chat with each other. Then try again for a limited time. • Have everyone try to see the deeper disagreement and try to come up with a deeper solution. • Review why the group works together. Have each person remember how important the group's cooperation is to her/him.
Group Rut The group seems to have the same discussion over and over, regardless of the current agenda. The same issues or arguments come up no matter what is being discussed. The group doesn't seem to get anywhere.	**Sally**: We should allocate $20 for the newsletter. **Mary**: Didn't we just approve that? **Charlie**: No. I never agreed to spend $20. **Mary**: But we talked this out at our last meeting. **Sally**: I still think that a newsletter is our best outreach to the public. **Charlie**: And I still am still concerned about the article we printed last June…	• Point out these problems at the time they arise or during the meeting process evaluation time. • Make sure it is very clear when a decision has been reached. Restate the decision and make sure it is recorded in the minutes. • Make sure each decision has been thoroughly discussed and all concerns have been aired fully and worked through completely. Make sure whatever frustration is left over from previous meetings gets vented, either in the current meeting or outside of meetings. • Review the goals of the group. If there is agreement, encourage everyone to focus on those goals. • Try setting up some structured exercises designed to build community spirit.
Avoidance Difficult problems are avoided rather than dealt with and solved.	**Cathy**: Should we discuss what to do about Jessie's conduct last week? **Earl**: Can't we defer this until later? I really don't want to talk about it. **Shirley**: Yeah, let's talk about something pleasant instead.	• Set aside a special time to discuss difficult problems. • Note how avoiding the issue keeps the group from being effective in other areas. • Think of effective and empowering solutions to the problems (for example, you may need to ask someone to leave the group, but you can couch it in terms of a diverging of the ways and with heartfelt encouragement, support, and fond wishes for his/her future endeavors). • Go ahead and avoid the problems if it's possible to do so and nothing else works — there's no sense in being upset endlessly.
Recurrent Difficulty Making Decisions The group keeps discussing without ever making a decision. Whenever a decision seems imminent, someone objects.	**Andrea**: So it sounds like we've agreed to spend $1,500 to buy a computer for the office. **Marcus**: Well, I'm not so sure. Does it really make sense to spend so much?	• Be courageous and choose. Choose the most interesting option, the most challenging one, the most unusual one, or the one that is least like the last decision. • Point out that any decision is better than none at all or that all options must be reasonably good or equally bad since it is so difficult to decide. Then choose an option by lot. • Review the goals of the group. Perhaps people only gather for the social aspects of the group rather than to accomplish tasks. If so, then revise the charter to that of a social or support group.

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Trivial Issues A lot of time is spent on unimportant items.	**Karl**: Should Nina's article be on page 2 or 3 of the newsletter?	• Empower an individual or committee to decide. • If there appears to be agreement, ask the group to affirm the decision and quickly move on. • Empower the facilitator to eliminate unimportant agenda items or remove them during the agenda review time.
Rushed Atmosphere Decisions get made too quickly without adequate discussion. People feel rushed or under time pressure. People are fidgeting or nervous.	**Ramesh**: Should we print one or two thousand flyers? They're expensive. **Harriet**: I think we should get 2,000. **Eric**: That sounds good to me. **Harriet**: Then let's go on to choosing speakers. **Ursula**: Anyone is fine with me—I have another meeting to get to…	• Before going on, check to see if anyone else has any comments or concerns, if there are related issues that must be addressed, or if there are tasks that must be assigned. • Restate the decision that has been made and pause for a minute so people can object or raise more concerns. • Ask the group if it is comfortable with the pace. Insist that they say yes or no (or nod or shake their heads) rather than staring blankly. • Allocate more time to meetings. • Cut back the number of items covered in each meeting. You may need to choose one or two important topics to discuss in depth and defer everything else.
Groupthink The group isolates itself from reality, censors itself, and makes naive, impractical, or immoral decisions.	**Helene**: I talked to my sister about our plans and she thought what we want to do is really immoral, dumb, and unlikely to accomplish anything. **Evan**: Oh, not more fearful wailing. Don't listen to your timorous sister. She's just like everyone else — they all complain and say our plans won't work, but they also don't do anything to help us out. We've thought our plans through carefully. Don't be silly; you know we'll do a good job.	• Make sure the group considers a wide range of possibilities and doesn't zero in on any option too soon. • Encourage the group to have a problem solving outlook in which every idea is considered on its merits alone. Encourage everyone to voice doubts and objections and be critical evaluators of every option, even the ideas of those who are experienced or influential. Regularly question the morality and practicality of group plans. • Insist that criticisms only be directed at ideas, not at the people who voice them. Clearly and demonstrably value every member and their dissent. • Encourage everyone to talk with outsiders and listen carefully to their criticisms. • Be cautious when members of the group begin to think they know more, are more daring, or are more moral than outsiders. Remind them that we all have limitations. • When an important decision seems to have been reached, put it aside and reconsider it later from a different perspective.
Poor Follow-Through People forget or don't do what they agreed to do.	**Dirk**: I didn't know I was supposed to call him.	• When a decision is reached, make sure that all the necessary tasks have been considered and every task has been delegated to someone. • Before ending the meeting, review tasks to re-affirm and remind people of their responsibilities. (Each person can state her/his tasks or the notetaker can read them off.) • Keep minutes of the meeting and review who committed to do what.

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Stubbornness One or a few people are rigidly obstinate.	**Alan**: I insist that we have meetings on Monday nights. **Sarah**: But none of us can come on Monday night. **Alan**: I don't care. We must have the meetings on Monday.	• Find out what underlies their position. What are the fundamental concerns beneath their words? Are there options that would address these underlying concerns? • Ask them to stand aside and allow the group to make a decision. • Defer the discussion until another time and hope that whatever is causing the stubbornness will go away. • Talk to them outside of the meeting and attempt to loosen up their obstinacy by complimenting them or expressing your appreciation for their opinions, actions, or skills. Listen carefully and with empathy. • If their ideas are clearly irrational, insist that they stand aside or leave the meeting. Refuse to be intimidated by craziness. Offer to listen to their concerns outside of the meeting and encourage them to seek counseling therapy.
Polarization Two or more people insist on contradictory positions, or polarized factions develop.	**Jackie**: I cannot go along with any proposal that includes selling the house. **Yuhong**: Until we sell the house, I refuse to support any other action.	• Find out what underlies their positions and look for a deeper agreement. What are the fundamental concerns beneath their words? Is there a complimentary action or gesture that could ameliorate the concerns of one of the groups? • List the benefits and drawbacks of each proposal and point out that both are feasible and tolerable. • Get the two factions together outside the meeting to discuss the issue. Use mediation tools to resolve conflicts. • Recognize that no action can be taken on this issue until this concern is resolved and defer it until later. Sometimes concerns wane over time. • Divide into two groups. Separate amicably if possible.
Manipulation Some people try to manipulate others into accepting their ideas.	**Louise**: If you'll just hurry up and decide to appoint Jerry to be the spokesperson, then we can all eat cake and ice cream while we soak in the hot tub. If we don't decide soon, then I'm leaving with the sweets.	• Point out the manipulation and try to get everyone to evaluate the issues solely on merit. Have treats given out separately. • As a group, study and discuss manipulation and propaganda techniques. Learn to recognize and resist them.
Power Plays, Tricky Maneuvering Important decisions seem to be made by a few people outside of meetings or late in meetings after most people have left.	**Martha**: I think we should give half of our group funds to the Patriotic Workers Party. **Patrick**: That sounds like a great idea. **Janice**: Yeah, I think we can all go along with that. **Donald**: Well then, that's decided. Let's move on to ratify the main things we will do over the next year as we discussed last time. **Fran**: I don't remember discussing this last time. **Patrick**: You must have left early. We had a comprehensive discussion and came up with great ideas that everyone agreed on.	• Point out these poor processes and ask that changes be made. Insist that decisions be discussed fully with the whole group in regular meetings. If many people have left, insist that the decision be deferred until the next meeting. • Have a time to review the agenda early in meetings and make sure that all important decisions get made near the beginning when everyone is there. • If necessary, require a quorum be present for decisions to be made and insist that only decisions recorded in the meeting minutes be accepted as valid. • Insist that everyone work together honestly and cooperatively. Each person must be open to changing her/his mind during the course of the discussion based on her/his own honest assessment of the value of ideas presented and the merit of each solution. Ask those who cannot or will not agree to work this way to leave the group (and, perhaps, to form their own group).

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Domination One or a few people dominate— others are upset or withdraw. A facilitator or leader responds to every speaker with her/his own opinion.	Mary Jo founded the association so everyone expects her to lead the discussions, come up with the ideas, and decide what to do. She often stands facing everyone else who is seated. She is comfortable talking a lot, but the rest of the group is unhappy with the situation.	• Talk to Mary Jo outside the meeting. Share your perception and ask how she feels about the situation. • Have the group sit in a circle, so everyone can see and speak to everyone else. • Go around the circle and let each person talk in turn without interruption, rebuttal, or discussion. • Allow a time for silence — a chance for people to gather their thoughts. Leave a few seconds of silence between each speaker. • Break into small, supportive groups for discussion, so each person gets a chance to voice her/his own opinion without interruption or rebuttal. • Ask quiet people if they have something to add to the discussion. • Try setting up some structured exercises designed to allow quiet people a chance to practice speaking out and vocal people a chance to practice listening. • Insist that the facilitator allow everyone a chance to speak. Ask a dominant facilitator not to add her/his opinion or thoughts, but instead to focus on the needs of the group. If this doesn't work, change facilitators.
Ideas Tied to Individuals People like or dislike an idea because of who presents or supports it.	**Mike**: I think we should produce a newsletter. **Sheri**: I really like Mike's idea. **Mike**: On second thought, a newsletter might be too time-consuming. **Sheri**: I agree with Mike that a newsletter would take too much time.	• Point out this behavior and encourage people to evaluate issues based solely on merit. • Break into small, diverse groups of people who normally don't talk with each other for discussion. • Encourage everyone to seek a solution that best fits the whole group (not just one person or group). • Outside the meeting, resolve any conflicts between individuals that prevent them from accepting each other's ideas.
In-Group Discussions A social clique of people discusses things only they know about.	**Janet**: Let's ask Robert to do it. **Dolores**: No, we're mad at Robert. **Sharon**: Kim should do it instead. **Janet**: Why are you mad at Robert? **Sharon**: Oh, we can't say, but we don't really like him. **Dolores**: Yeah. Kim should do it.	• Insist members of a clique fully explain events they refer to that only a few know about. • Break into small, diverse groups of people who normally don't talk with each other for discussion. • Encourage members of a clique to get to know others in the group.
Personal Attacks, Malicious Gossip People insult, belittle, denounce, or threaten each other directly or behind their backs.	**Tom**: Let's have a party. **Lynn**: That's a dumb idea, you stupid jerk. Only idiots would want to have a party at this time of year. **Tom**: Oh, shut up, dog-face. You're just afraid no one would dance with you because you're so fat and ugly.	• Explain how you feel seeing these nasty attacks. • Discuss what it feels like to be attacked. • Insist that the attacks stop. • Praise and appreciate each person for their unique contributions and skills. • Rephrase important concerns as your own, without attacking. Separate the issues from the people who present them. • At a later time, talk individually with each person and let them discuss their anger towards and fear of the other. If possible, absorb the anger and allay the fears. • Use conflict resolution tools (mediation, etc.) to reduce antagonism and forge agreements.

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Uneasy Silences.	**Jenny**: **Nina**: **Lila**: (long pause) **Anne**: Uh, well…	• Enjoy them. Think, contemplate, plan, or choose just the right words to share. • Say you feel uncomfortable with the silence. Ask others how they feel. • Go on to another agenda item. • Adjourn the meeting until another time. • Figure out why you are meeting in the first place. Is it still valid? Brainstorm ideas of what you could do.
Boring Meetings	**Hans**: Are you going to the meeting? **Carol**: Sure, it's a good place to take a nap.	• Think about the parts of the meeting that drag (maybe as part of a process evaluation at the end of the meeting). How could they be made more easy, fun, interesting, or quick? Also notice what parts you liked. Why were they good? • Add creative breaks—a song, game, or backrubs. • Bring food or have a time for socializing. • Refer some decisions to committees. • Review why your meetings are valuable. • Meet less often or take a break from meeting for a while.
Low Energy Most people in the group are numb, tuned out, distracted, or asleep.	• During a long meeting, Steven began snoring. Nobody noticed. • Looking at the group while she spoke, it appeared to Melissa that everyone was interested in only the ceiling or the floor.	• Take a short break or defer the discussion until a later meeting. • Have everyone stand up and stretch. • Take a group nap. • Get in a circle and do something active — a game, cheer, song, etc. • Switch to short, easy to complete items. • Ask people why they are tired. • Display outrageous enthusiasm. • Start each meeting with a check-in so each person can talk about something exciting or new in her/his life.
Poor Attendance People don't come to meetings.	**Minutes of the meeting:** Time: 7 PM Place: Meeting Hall Attending: Shawn, Debra We waited for 20 minutes and then went home discouraged.	• Make meetings shorter and more to the point. Emphasize completion after each decision. Celebrate! • Make meeting topics more attractive or make reports and presentations more interesting. • Entice people with food, backrubs, singing, or socializing. • Call the people who don't attend and ask what keeps them away or explain exactly how it would help if they came. • Improve outreach. Let others know when and why you meet.