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### A studied effort to gain mastery over meetings

By Rick Brenner, 7/3/05

Like you, I've attended way too many meetings. After a while, you pretty much know where things are about to go. To keep myself from going bats, I became a student of human behavior at them, and that's how I learned how important it is to master meeting repartee.



Illustration/Elene Usdin

I remember one meeting that was especially intense. Two of the players - I'll call them Jack and Jill - had been involved in a long-standing tangle. They were always attacking each other - subtly, and with panache. In this meeting, Jill was getting a little steamed, but you had to know her pretty well to sense it. She was trying to get a straight answer out of Jack.

"So you're saying that June is possible, but not very likely," she began. "How far would we have to slip the schedule to get to 'very likely'?" Jack answered immediately. "With or without the euro?" The euro was a complication that had been layered onto the project only recently.

Jill answered: "Both."

That was when I realized why Jill had her particular job, title and responsibility. She was good. By answering "both" she constrained Jack to give her two different, objective, straight-up answers that were mutually consistent. If she had selected only one option, he could have slanted his answer to herd her in the direction he wanted her to go. Smart lady.

So I added this vignette to my growing collection of tactics for managing repartee at meetings. Here are six more:

#### Use interview mode

When you sense that your partner is making it up on the fly, don't engage in an argument - it probably won't be necessary. "Making it up" can be either lying or real-time argument development. In either case, the logic probably isn't very tight.

Elaboration is extremely risky for anyone who's making it up. So instead of arguing, encourage elaboration by switching to interview mode. Gently ask for more information, more detail, and more examples. Pull your partner along in the direction he or she is already running. As the story unfolds, watch closely for holes or inconsistencies. When you find one, make it visible. This is especially effective if you can traverse a full circle to contradict one of the initial, basic assertions. On the other hand, if your guess about fabrication is wrong, you've actually helped your partner develop a stronger story. If you can maintain a stance of neutral curiosity, this tactic has zero risk for you.

#### Find a neutral path out of the swamp

If you know of a way for your partner to save face, provide gentle guidance rather than confrontation. Usually very little guidance is needed, since your partner is searching madly for the exit. For instance, if you believe that you both agreed to have your contributions ready on the 14th, and your partner insists that the date was the 18th, you can suggest that the two of you work out a new date rather than trying to figure out which of you was right. Trying to prove that you were right is the least effective approach, and it doesn't achieve what you really need. And supplying a new answer to someone who feels wrong (or wronged) isn't much better. Find a way to grant your partner partial ownership of the new solution.

#### Use hypotheticals to get around obstacles

It's amazing how willing people are to address hypotheticals. Sometimes they don't even realize that they're doing it. If you hit a stone wall, pose a hypothetical question. Ask, "Well, if we could do that, how would we go about it?" If your partner addresses the hypothetical, then use that hypothetical in the real situation: "Oh, I see. So let's just do that!" Your partner then has to find a difference between the hypothetical and the real - a difference so compelling that the hypothetical doesn't apply to the real. If you were clever about how you constructed the hypothetical, finding that difference can be difficult, and you'll often reach agreement.

#### Never address hypotheticals

If someone tries the hypothetical tactic on you, identify it as such, and politely decline to address hypothetical scenarios. Require that the discussion focus only on real situations. Here's why. By definition, the hypothetical conditions don't exist now, and they might be outside your experience. Answering a question outside your experience is always risky. But even if you feel like you're in

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known territory, a carefully framed hypothetical question is just a sketch - it doesn't completely describe a real situation. Your answer is necessarily based on some unstated assumptions, which might differ from the questioner's unstated assumptions. Most important, contingencies rarely stick. People remember your answers much better than they remember contingencies of the question you answered. For instance, if someone asks you "If we gave you a million two and another seven months, could you do it?" and you answer "Yes," people remember the "Yes" better than they remember the "million two" or the "seven months."

#### **Be judicious about challenging contingent consent**

Let's say that Jack has opposed a solution that Jill has been advocating. One day, at a meeting, Jack says, "I think we can agree - I think that Jill's solution will work in this case." I call this tactic contingent consent. In effect, Jack is saying, "Jill's solution will work in this case, but I don't think it will work in any other case" or possibly "in every case". Most of us would react to contingent consent by wondering about the contingencies. Since those situations aren't on the table, it's doubtful that such an exploration would return anything useful. Still, many of us would pursue the issue. That's unfortunate, because the motivation for contingent consent is often simple face-saving. The consenter might not have any fully formed objections, and confrontation might elicit defensiveness, which could limit future flexibility. Better to just let it sit. You've got consent, and that's all you need for now.

#### **As chair, don't eat your seed corn**

If meetings were farms, fresh ideas would be their seed corn. When someone offers a new idea in a meeting, there's a good chance the chair will respond with "Great idea! Why don't you work that up and report back to us next week."

Bad choice. Responding to ideas by burdening their creators with responsibility for implementation teaches us all not to offer ideas in meetings. This tactic is as self-destructive as eating the seed corn during a tough winter. Come spring, there will be nothing to plant. Instead, work on signing up people to work the idea. If you have a problem finding volunteers, work that problem - eating the seed corn won't help.

I have dozens more of these items in my collection, but perhaps the most important is a variant of the stand-up comic's maxim, "leave 'em laughin'." After you've tied things up in a neat bundle, anything else you say undercuts your message. When you reach the point where your audience understands the main ideas and still wants more, it's always best to stop.

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