

A Simple Tool for Better Meetings

**A narrative version of this article was run by [Zocalo](#) and picked up by [TIME](#).*

Contrary to popular belief, meetings can be both productive and enjoyable. In my twenty years helping leaders learn to run such meetings, I've learned a lot of tricks. But by far the simplest, most powerful, and perhaps most surprising is this:

Start your meeting with a *check-in*.

From small NGOs and start-ups to Fortune 100 leadership teams and the UN, I start every meeting the same way: with a question. And I invite – ok, I force – every person in the room to answer.

The check-in question varies of course based on the group context. It can be as simple as “How are you feeling?” Or, “What is going on for you that people in the room might need to know?” Sometimes, I'll get more specific, by asking: “What question do you think is most critical that we discuss in today's meeting?” or “What are you excited about, and What are you worried about?” One of my favorite questions for leadership teams that meet on a weekly basis is, “What is a high from your week? A low? Where do you need help?”.

Many, maybe even you, reader, are skeptical at first. This can seem too touchy-feely, too personal, unprofessional, time-consuming, or just downright un-heard of. Many of my former clients have felt this way at first – it is indeed an uncommon business practice. And yet the data speaks for itself: most of those same clients have come to see the value of check-ins and have built them into their own standard meeting practice.

And here's why:

Check-ins model good meeting behavior. They provide a clear, clean, ritualized beginning to each meeting that invites everyone in the room to actually focus on the meeting at hand, and be present in the room with their colleagues. This may seem like a given, but unfortunately, in our distraction-filled world, it is not.

When you check in, you have to leave the world outside the room, at least for a little bit. Check-ins are a practice in focus. During check-ins, you're not looking at your email or phone. You're not interrupting each other. You are not commenting on each other's check in. These breaks in our normal meeting habits signal, "This meeting is going to be different. We are actually going to listen to each other. And we are going to be very thoughtful about what we say."

Check-ins get everyone talking. Effective meetings require everyone to take a turn at both speaking and listening. In the check-in, every single person speaks and everyone listens to every person speaking. And because everyone talks at the beginning, the check-in helps avoid the dreaded one-way, top-down, mind-numbing meeting. It also helps balance the voices heard during the meeting. For introverts, it's like a vocal warm-up that, I've found, helps them contribute more easily to the meeting there-after. And for your louder voices and leaders, it's a great listening and patience practice in making space for other useful but quieter perspectives.

Check-ins are part of (not barriers to) efficient meetings. Some people think that check-ins slow you down – not so. Check-ins are usually quite brief, and yet allow everyone to get a sense of the whole room much more quickly than could be done with one-on-one conversation. In check-ins, we all quickly learn where the other people in the room are coming from, how they are feeling, and what is going on for them on that particular day/in that particular moment. This brings me to the next benefit:

Check-ins build relationships.



Research clearly shows that understanding where a person is coming from builds a sense of personal relationship and *trust*. So when the inevitable bumps and miscommunications arise in our work environments, we are less likely to jump to negative conclusions about our colleagues, less likely to fight (or flee), and less likely to go complain to someone else about a seemingly errant colleague. Instead, we are more likely to talk with that colleague directly. Problems get resolved more quickly and organizations are able to adapt more effectively.

Check-ins surface useful information. They provide a rare space for surfacing valuable ideas, thoughts and feelings in groups and organizations that you might have otherwise missed. Some topics may come up that need more attention, and can either be added to a meeting agenda or flagged for addressing at another more appropriate time. Many clients have continued using check-ins because they have come to see them as invaluable tool for quickly finding out what is *really* going on in their system.

Believe it or not, how people are feeling can actually be *essential* information for conducting a good meeting. If someone is feeling tired, sick or overwhelmed, I encourage people to mention it during check-ins. Here's a story that emphasizes this point:

*Recently on the second day of two-day-long leadership team meeting I was facilitating, an executive chose **not** to say in the check-in that he had been up since 3 am with a toothache. So his clinched jaw, contorted facial muscles, and sharp speech were interpreted by many of his peers as, "He's not happy with where this conversation is going. He's angry." Obviously those interpretations had an impact on the meeting, and not a good one. Had he mentioned in the check-in that he was exhausted and in pain, his peers and boss could have*

interpreted his non-verbal behavior more accurately. Though such vulnerable shares can be hard for more private people, and especially leaders, they can be essential to truly productive meetings. In this case, a private conversation with me during the break helped him shift his state to engage more constructively in the last half of the morning.

For added benefit, try check-outs too. With all my clients, I also do check-outs. I pose a closing question or questions at the end of meetings for everyone to briefly answer in front of the group. The technique works for all the reasons that check-ins do – and a few others. Groups are intelligent, and even in an open-ended check-out, people naturally surface key insights, missed points, unanswered questions, and next steps. Check-outs are also a great way to gather quick data about people's moods and the effectiveness of your meeting so you can do even better next time.

It is by pausing to connect with the people we live and work with every day that we can most effectively come together as a group to achieve our shared goals. *That* is the true power of check-ins. It's really just a collective way to say "Hello", "I'm here", and "I care" before you go about your business.

So next time you are at dinner with a group of friends or family, or in a meeting with clients and colleagues, give it a try. Start with a simple round of "How are you?", and see for yourself. If you feel bold, try asking this question instead, "What's on your mind and in your heart?" Insist, with a smile, that people don't just talk about what they are thinking about, but that they also share a feeling. Let me know how it goes!