

**Getting Out-of-Control Meetings Back on Track**

*By Kerry Patterson*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  


Kerry Patterson is coauthor of four *New York Times* bestsellers, *Change Anything*, *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Confrontations*, and *Influencer*.

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Q  Dear Crucial Skills,

I’m tired of attending meetings where there’s no agenda, the wrong people are in attendance, and people carry on side conversations and otherwise violate good meeting etiquette. How can we use our Crucial Conversations skills to get our meetings back on track?

Miffed by Meetings

A Dear Miffed,

One of the first training sessions we designed was aimed at just this problem. We gathered people and taught them about the importance of developing and following an agenda, the need to avoid being critical when brainstorming, and other such standard meeting fare. We thought we were done.

Then trainees went back into their meetings, saw things go wrong, and said things such as, “Hey bozo, we’re trying to brainstorm here and you’re being critical. That’s not allowed!” Or, “Wait a second, you don’t have an agenda. What were you thinking?”

“What have we created?” we wondered as we watched people “fix” problems they observed in their meetings by verbally attacking anyone who strayed from strict meeting protocol. The cure they were administering to the flailing meetings was often worse than the original ailment. From this, we learned that you can’t merely teach what should happen in meetings, you also have to teach what to do should the meeting turn south.

This all took place before we had learned the ins and outs of crucial conversations, so we got no help from that research. But it wasn’t before we had learned the technique of watching effective people in action and learning to see what can actually work with real people in real organizations.

So, we watched all kinds of people in all kinds of meetings. Most individuals sat quietly as the meeting staggered from topic to topic like a mad dog on its last walk. An angry few, after they could take it no longer, made harsh comments to the “loud mouth who carried on a side conversation.” Others directed ugly stares at the offending party—followed by the ever-popular eye-roll. These were some of our first glimpses into [silence and violence](http://www.crucialskills.com/glossary/?elq=%7E%7Eeloqua..type--emailfield..syntax--recipientid%7E%7E&elqCampaignId=%7E%7Eeloqua..type--campaign..campaignid--0..fieldname--id%7E%7E#q22).

But then there were a few people who spoke up in a way that wasn’t offensive. They said and did things that helped get the meeting on track without looking like they wanted to take over or blast people who didn’t stick to the right agenda. And best of all, they followed a pattern that worked for most meeting problems—from dozing off to arriving late to straying from the agenda. You didn’t have to apply ten different techniques to ten different problems.

The most notable part of every effective response was that they all reflected the same philosophy and feeling. They noticed something that wasn’t working very well (at least for them), realized it was probably best to talk about it rather than simply let it continue, and decided to check with the group to see if it made sense to change what was currently happening. In summary, the pattern looks like this: (1) here’s what I see; (2) here’s what I think we might want to do instead; (3) what do others think?

This three-part response was always delivered tentatively (after all, not all deviations are mistakes), respectfully (there’s no reason to assume others are purposely causing problems), and inclusively (asking others for input turns the solution into a shared plan rather than *your* plan).

At the scripting level, here’s what the three steps sound like. A group moves through an agenda and nears the end of their meeting, but one of the people present keeps referring to a previously put-to-bed agenda item. The person is mostly ignored until eventually someone hints that the group is now talking about another issue so please get on board.

Finally, someone deals with the deviation by stating, “Tim, I notice that you keep returning to the budget discussion we had earlier. We’ve moved on, thinking it was a closed issue and now I’m wondering if you want to return to it and re-open the discussion. Is that what you want, and if so, what do others think about the idea?”

It turns out that the person did want to return—feeling that the topic wasn’t fully discussed—and, given time constraints, the team agrees to schedule the item for further discussion in the next meeting.

Now, most people are uncomfortable intervening in any way for fear that they might be the only one who is concerned. Plus they want to avoid the appearance of hijacking the meeting. Notice how the three steps indicated above solve both problems. You check with the group to see if the problem is not merely yours and you also involve others in the potential solution.

For instance, someone has violated the primary tenet of brainstorming by criticizing suggestions that cost money, and someone else in the meeting remarks, “Kim, it looks like you’re concerned about solutions that cost money. Do we want to put cost in as a constraint right now so we don’t spend time recommending financial solutions, or should we continue coming up with any solution that might work? What do others think?”

Another example: a meeting rolls along with lots of ideas flowing and nobody takes notes. It’s not your meeting but you’re worried about forgetting ideas, so you say, “A lot of ideas are being recommended here and I’m worried we might lose some of the ideas unless we record them. What do others think?”

One more example: a couple of people are talking on their cell phones and someone says, “It looks like others have some urgent issues they need to deal with. Should we take a break to handle the calls that are coming in?”

Notice that the person bringing up the issue isn’t criticizing others for taking calls. It could well be that they are handling an emergency and do need to break. If they aren’t, they’re likely to get right back to the meeting. Either way, you’re simply describing what you’re observing, passing no judgment, offering no criticism, and then checking with the group.

Again, the process of stating what you see, what you think the group might want to do instead, and asking what others think can be applied to almost any problem, in almost any meeting, and from anywhere in the room. Try it in your next derailed meeting and let me know how it goes.

Kerry

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[**Wasting Time in Meetings**](http://www.crucialskills.com/2004/09/wasting-time-in-meetings/)

In "Crucial Conversations"

[](http://www.crucialskills.com/2006/06/using-skills-to-manipulate/)

[**Using Skills to Manipulate**](http://www.crucialskills.com/2006/06/using-skills-to-manipulate/)

In "Crucial Accountability"

[](http://www.crucialskills.com/2014/06/qa-distracted-meetings/)

[**Q&A: Distracted Meetings?**](http://www.crucialskills.com/2014/06/qa-distracted-meetings/)

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