

The Thinking Meeting

The Reason for a Thinking Meeting

We use meetings as a way of getting a group of people together to share knowledge, information and ideas and to make decisions. However, meetings are often criticised (especially by participants) as a waste of time and a barrier to getting work done. You often hear complaints about the effectiveness of meetings, things like:

- It's only the most talkative people who are heard
- I need more time to think
- I'm not sure why I'm here
- I'm not sure why we are having this meeting

A *thinking meeting* is a technique for overcoming some of these barriers to making a meeting effective. The thinking meeting uses techniques that ensure that everyone is heard and that all the participants are engaged in the meeting. Here is how you can run a thinking meeting.

Roles in the meeting

First, assign people to play the needed roles in the meeting:

- The *Facilitator* needs to be clear about the thinking meeting model, and should be assertive and relaxed.
- The *Scribe* will capture thoughts from participants during the thinking rounds.
- The *Participants* will be invited to listen deeply, and be made aware that they will all get a turn to speak.

The Question

The question is the focus of the thinking meeting. That is, the participants will explore the question with a view to coming up with ideas to address the question of the meeting. The question will be used by everyone at the meeting to focus their thinking.

For example, a thinking meeting was run by Suzanne Robertson and James Archer at the 2015 BA conference in London. The question used to focus the meeting was this:

How do you think the presence or absence of thinking skills can impact on business analysis, and how can thinking skills be embedded in business analysis?

Introducing the Meeting

The facilitator welcomes everyone to the meeting and thanks them for being there.

The facilitator explains to the participants that his/her responsibility is to ensure that:

- Everyone has an equal say
- Everyone is asked, “What do you think?”
- Everyone is listened to
- Everyone is appreciated

The facilitator:

- Introduces the scribe
- Introduces the question to be considered, and makes it visible on a whiteboard or flip chart
- Explains that the meeting will be run in an iterative fashion using a number of rounds
- Explains it is fine to pass during a round
- Explains that he or she will run the meeting to time

Procedure for Running the Meeting

Once the meeting has been introduced then the facilitator will run the meeting in six rounds:

Round 1 What’s going well? (5 minutes)

Facilitator explains that we start with this round because we think better when we are in a positive frame of mind.

The facilitator asks the group to think about:

One thing that is going well in your life right now

When enough participants are ready to start, go round to the left or right until everyone has spoken.

Round 2 – First thoughts on the question (5 minutes)

Facilitator states the question:

How do you think the presence or absence of thinking skills can impact on business analysis and how can thinking skills be embedded in business analysis?

When enough people are ready, go round the whole group, preferably in sequence, and ensure that everyone speaks.

The scribe captures all the thoughts and ideas. The facilitator makes sure that everyone in the group is heard.

It's important that the facilitator is comfortable with timing the round and understands the importance of sticking to the times. If you are not strict about timekeeping you lose the participants' involvement and commitment to the meeting.

Round 3 – Pairs thinking (10 minutes – 2 minutes set up by facilitator, 3 minutes for each participant to speak, 2 minutes for appreciations and reconvening)

Participants working in pairs take turns to play the roles of speaker and listener.

The facilitator gives each partner three minutes each, and makes it clear that the listener must give his undivided attention and not interrupt or start a conversation. Explain that if the speaker runs out of thoughts, then the listener should offer an encouraging question such as, “what else?”, or restate the question.

After each speaker has been listened to for three minutes, they tell the listener what they appreciate about him/her, and the attention they have received.

Round 4 – New Thoughts (5-10 minutes depending on number of participants)

The facilitator asks:

What are your thoughts now about the question?

This time it's an unstructured round – anyone can talk out of sequence – and the facilitator ensures that everyone has spoken once before anyone speaks twice.

The facilitator can be flexible with how long an unstructured round lasts. If several people dominate then revert to a formal round where everyone is given the opportunity to speak in sequence.

The scribe records all the thoughts and ideas.

Round 5 – What matters most? (5-10 minutes depending on number of participants)

Facilitator asks:

What would you most like to see happen to embed thinking skills in business analysis?

Facilitator tells the group that each of them is about to lose the power of speech. As the answer to this question is the last thing that he or she will say, it has to be succinct, clear and brief.

Each person speaks and the scribe records the sentences.

Round 6 – Appreciation (5 minutes)

Facilitator asks each participant to say one thing they have appreciated about the meeting, and one thing they appreciate about the person they partnered with in Round 3 – Pairs Thinking.

After the Meeting

After the meeting, the scribe's records are, with the assistance of the facilitator, organised so that:

- The ideas for answering the question (this is the focus question posed at the meeting) are summarised
- The record demonstrates that everyone has indeed been heard
- Any needed clarification questions are raised

In addition, participants are requested to provide additional comments and input.

Our experience shows that once people have experienced what it is like to be listened to, they are keen to incorporate the thinking meeting techniques into their way of working.

More Information

We often run Thinking Meetings with our clients, especially at the start of a project. Apart from early identification of ideas and questions, a benefit is that the participants get to know each other early in the project.

It is most important to keep in mind that the best results come from sticking to the framework. This relies on having a sympathetic facilitator, a scribe who accurately records the discussion, and participants who are willing to keep the thinking meeting rules, and apply themselves to the art of deep listening.

For more about Thinking Meetings refer to Nancy Kline's book, *Time To Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, Hachette, 2010.

For questions and discussions on Thinking Meetings and other aspects of Business Analysis and Requirement, go to the the **Volere** LinkedIn group: <http://goo.gl/NHGwT>

If you would like us to facilitate and scribe a Thinking Meeting for you then contact Suzanne Robertson at The Atlantic Systems Guild Ltd. suzanne@systemsguild.net