

**MONKHOUSE
& COMPANY**

The Ultimate Guide

HOW TO TURBOCHARGE YOUR MEETINGS

By Dominic Monkhouse



10 WAYS TO TURBOCHARGE YOUR MEETINGS

Are most of the meetings in your company a waste of time? When I'm working with a group of people or speaking in public, I often ask that question and get an emphatic "yes". We've all experienced frustration of some kind while in a meeting. You know the joke – meetings are the only paid alternative to working for a living! If this applies to your company, you need to sort this out. (If it does, get in touch and tell me how you did it. I would love to interview you on The Melting Pot podcast so we can share your story with others.)

Changing the nature of meetings requires you to learn new ways of doing things and also unlearn bad habits. This can be hard. It takes effort and time – a deliberate practice that you have prioritised as important.

If you can fix meetings, your company will take a massive leap forwards.



We bring you 10 suggestions to turbocharge your meetings

1. THE INVITATION

When an invitation is sent, let's make sure people know whether they should really be there or not. Give them a context. Tell them what the meeting is for, what will be covered and what you want to achieve. Then people can look at that and understand why it is they're invited.

Or, if they don't think they need to be there, they don't need to accept! I know people don't always feel they can do that, so I say to clients make it a social norm in your organisation that attendee attendance is optional.

What I find REALLY odd is when people invite me to a meeting as an 'optional attendee'. Optional? What does that mean? Does it mean I can come if I want to? That you want me to know you're having a meeting, but I don't need to attend?

Maybe there's some unwritten etiquette that I don't understand, but I always feel when I get sent a meeting request for which I am optional that somebody is asking me if I'd like to waste my time! And does that mean if it's optional then don't do the prep? It's just confusing.

“ A well-designed meeting flow for a leadership team looks like this:

- Managers know when they're going to decide on their strategy, they know when they're going to check progress and how they're going to make decisions.
- There's no guessing. It's structured and clear.

Teams that adopt this flow perform better. ”

[Elise Keith on The Melting Pot with Dominic Monkhouse](#)



2.THE RULE OF 7

Try to keep the number of people in the meeting to as few as possible to achieve the desired outcome. The book, *Decide & Deliver: 5 Steps to Breakthrough Performance in Your Organization*, says that once you've got seven people in a group, each additional member reduces decision effectiveness by 10%. If you run above 7 you're then into communication rather than decision making. So, let's try to keep meetings small.

3.START WITH GOOD NEWS

We want to create a safe place for people to speak out. They need to feel they can say what they want, and a way of doing that is by getting everyone to share some good news right at the start of the meeting. Get off to a good start with positive news. This helps create Psychological Safety which, according to Google's research (Project Aristotle), is the main component of effective teams. They write: "Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk-taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea."

4.SET RULES

Each organisation should have a clear definition of how it runs meetings. Are you allowed to do your shopping online and pay no attention to what's being said? If you're not in the meeting to catch up on emails or to write a shopping list, then the rule should be no tech allowed.

If you've got to run a conference call then try to use video conferencing. If you know people can see what you're up to it stops the attention wandering and drives better, shorter meetings.

Don't we all know that one person who, in every meeting, takes over? They love the sound of their own voice and don't give anyone else a chance to speak, so instead of letting that happen each time what about a rule giving everyone equal airtime. Another extract from Google's research (Project Aristotle) is that the best teams allow all participants to have their say. One of the roles of the chair or facilitator is to ensure that this unusual habit becomes the norm.



Sometimes you'll find people talking about things that aren't on the agenda. A way to stop that is to reaffirm what is to be covered within the time available. This can be done after giving the 'good news'. Get agreement on the context of the meeting and then ensure all items to be discussed are clearly on the agenda. No AOB (any other bollo***) at the end of the meeting anymore. If you have something you want to cover, put it on the agenda at the beginning. I know you've already set out what you want to accomplish in your original invitation, but let's go back over it because things may have changed since the invitation was sent. It might be that a different problem needs solving. Prioritise the items. Cover the most pressing first. Once that's all done get a commitment from everyone in the room that they are going to participate fully

5.SET THE ROLES

Facilitating a meeting successfully is a skill so don't automatically make the person who called the meeting the chair or facilitator (whatever your organisation calls that person). The person who called the meeting may be rubbish at taking the lead or might want to be an active participant (it's tough to facilitate and participate), so pick the best person or rotate to give everyone experience.

Find yourself a note-taker who can take notes for everyone. Someone who can update One Note, Google Docs (whatever shared system you use) live as the meeting progresses. This way people know where to find the information once it finishes, with no need to email out updates once the meeting is at an end. During the meeting, everyone can focus on the discussion.

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“Walk out of a meeting or drop off a call as soon as it is obvious you aren't adding value. It is not rude to leave, it is rude to make someone stay and waste their time”

- Elon Musk

6. RATE THE MEETING

Always leave time at the end of the meeting for people to give feedback. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate this meeting? What feedback would you give to participants? Is it thumbs up, or thumbs down—and why? This will help to improve meetings for next time. Did the facilitator do a great job or not? Give them some feedback.

7. RESPECT PEOPLE'S TIME

I've spent large tranches of my life in meetings I didn't need to be in. Or sometimes I would need to be there for a small part, and the rest was of no interest to me. So, maybe we need to make sure people know they can leave if they want to. If they've covered their part, and the rest is no longer relevant, they can go because we recognise they've got other stuff they could be doing. We respect their time. And if you're needed for agenda item number 6, but not before, ask for someone to message you when it's nearly time for that part of the meeting, and come back. There's no point sitting through 40 minutes of stuff you're not interested in!

Elon Musk is of the same opinion. He wrote a memo to all his staff at Tesla Motors and it included the advice: 'Walk out of a meeting or drop off a call as soon as it is obvious you aren't adding value. It is not rude to leave, it is rude to make someone stay and waste their time'.

8. BAN TECH

How many meetings have I been to where people are only half present? Why? Because they're checking their emails or instant messaging about something completely unrelated to the discussion around them.

My view is that all phones should be banned from meetings. This will minimise distractions and ensure that conversation is focused on what's important – the objectives of the meeting.

9. 50-MINUTE MEETINGS



Why do nearly all organisations usually set meetings for an hour? If I've got back to back meetings, how am I physically going to get from one to the other, when one finishes at midday and the other begins at midday? Unless they're in the same room. But even then, that extra ten minutes allows you time to check up on emails (remember we've got a rule for no tech so you haven't checked them in a while), or just go to the toilet!

10. THE PARKING LOT

Sometimes we just don't have enough time to get through everything on the agenda. In those cases, the leftovers can be moved to the 'Parking Lot'. That list of items that still need to be resolved and we can talk about next time or they become separate meetings in their own right.

I know many other people might add "follow up" onto the end of this list, but I won't. If the note taker is writing everything down as we go along, and saving it to a shared system, we can all look at that afterwards. And, if someone says they will do something by a certain time, it's their job to do it. Trust them.

HOW TO PERFECT YOUR MEETING AGENDA

The average employee wastes nearly 13 working days every year in unproductive meetings. That's a lot of valuable time and money down the drain. And the way your company runs its meetings speaks volumes about your culture.

Here are our tips for perfecting your agendas and meetings.

DO A MEETINGS AUDIT

A good place to start is by auditing your current meetings. Look at their **frequency, length** and **composition** as well as the way they run. Think about the value of the people in the room. No junior member of staff would be allowed to sign off an invoice for £100K but if they put the most senior staff in a room for an hour, that's often worth the equivalent.

If your meetings are generally an hour long, could they be 45 minutes?

Are they scheduled back to back, meaning it's impossible to attend the next one on time?

People need intervals between meetings to go to the loo or have a coffee. And yet so many times, there's this mindless management of people's diaries. **Defaults can be set in Gmail for meetings to be 25 or 50 minutes.**

This is good etiquette.

CREATE AGILE AGENDAS

How many times have you been to meetings where people are unprepared, no one seems to know why they're there, and the discussion goes off on more tangents than a complex trigonometry equation? This is always down to poor preparation and the main culprit is the agenda.

There are some ways to fix this...

Be specific in the meeting title. Instead of choosing something dull like, 'Budget Problems' or 'Overspend Issues', phrase it as a question, such as 'How can we save £250K by end of March 2020?'

Doing this gives the context and purpose of the meeting. You're actively inviting someone and preparing them. Rather than being a passive attendee, they'll have time to prepare and think about what they want to say. You can invite them to send in relevant agenda items.

Don't produce the agenda in advance with an endless list of topics. People should decide the agenda collectively at the start. After agreeing on the length of the meeting and the start and finish time, they should work out what's achievable in the timescale and prioritise the most important items.



Start every meeting with a discussion of the purpose and revisit this often as the meeting progresses, particularly if it's steering off course and may fail to deliver the desired outcomes.

AGREE ON STRUCTURE

Start with a check-in – a round of personal good news.

This gets everything off on a positive note and builds [psychological safety](#).

Google's 'Project Aristotle' identified this as essential to high-performing teams. It's important to reinforce the belief that everyone should share airtime equally.

Depending on the type of meeting, **scorecards can be really useful**. If you're having a weekly management meeting, for example, the scorecard could be based on the **functional accountability chart** with leading and lagging indicators. Or maybe it's based on the **key process flow map**. Are any of the metrics on red? If so, they should be added to the issues list.

Also important are the top five corporate objectives for the quarter. Again, review whether any of these are red and, if they are, add them to the list. Then share both the employee and customer feedback (I suggest executives get into the habit of speaking to at least **one customer and one employee not in their team every week**).

All of the above should take no more than five minutes each. As should the 'Who, What, When' from the previous week. Did everything get done? If not, what's the current status? Once you've whipped through these areas, you can focus on the main bulk of the meeting – the issues list. This is when you identify, discuss and solve problems. Prioritise together which of these you're going to tackle in the next 30 – 60 minutes. Don't try and do everything. Work out what can be parked or needs to be worked on separately by a subset of the team.

At the end, spend five minutes wrapping up. Recap on 'Who, What, When'. Then ask everyone to rate the meeting on a scale of 1 to 10. If below 10, discuss what you could have done differently to improve it.

This is how you get better – together.

DECIDE CLEAR ROLES

Facilitating a meeting is a skill so don't automatically make the person who called the meeting **the chair**. They may not be great at taking the lead or shutting up extroverts so the introverts have equal airtime. Similarly, if you're having a meeting about budget overspend, the CFO may want to take an active role and it's virtually impossible to do this if you're the chair.

Pick the best person or rotate to give everyone experience.

Decide on a **note-taker** who can capture what everyone agreed. My preferred system is Google Docs Live because it's shared instantly. You can see your commitments come up in real-time and agree on them in the moment. It also saves the need to write anything up later.

What needs to be noted?

- **Who:** what are the commitments you made?
- **What:** What did you say you would do?
- **When:** By when?

And what was the definition of completion that everyone agreed on?

It's not necessary to record everything as all the relevant people should be in the room. Then it's much less easy for people to weasel out.

It's a good habit to adopt and reference '**FAST**' goals at this point – goals that are **frequently discussed**, are **ambitious** in scope, measured by **specific** metrics and **transparent**, for everyone to see. Unless there is a reason not to share all meeting notes, then by default they are public to be viewed by anyone in the organisation.

Also vital is a **timekeeper**. It's important to start and finish on time. And also, to ensure that conversations don't run on too long. Something I've seen work well is an approach agreed upon by everyone in advance. Meeting participants give a thumbs up or thumbs down if a topic's rumbling on for too long.

Then it's the timekeeper's job to shut this down and move the discussion forward.



ALIGN YOUR MEETINGS WITH YOUR CORE VALUES

This can be really effective. Sometimes certain behaviours creep into meetings that you tolerate, even though they contravene this fundamental framework. Think about each value and how it translates into meeting behaviours and lay this out to staff. Get their input and decide together how you're going to stick to it.

Imagine if a Martian landed in your meetings. What sense would they get of your business?

What would be their impressions of your culture?

1:1 MEETINGS

How do you get the best out of every check-in with a team member? And how do you coach them to higher performance?

Here are 10 tips based on my experience leading fast-growing tech companies

1.MAKE 1:1S WEEKLY

To be effective, 1:1s should happen every week. Not every fortnight. Not every month. Every 7 days. Evidence backs it up.

In his book, 'Nine Lies About Work', Marcus Buckingham explores the frequency of check-ins and their effect on staff engagement. He describes how Cisco moved to a weekly rhythm of 1:1s with managers, but this was rolled out inconsistently. They got an amazing set of data tracking performance against the frequency of 1:1s. If these took place weekly, there was a massive uptick in productivity. This dropped dramatically when 1:1s were monthly and at six weeks or more, they had a negative impact, meaning you were better off not doing them at all.

Weekly 1:1s don't need to last long. 10 to 20 minutes max with maybe a 5-minute buffer. But they need to be prioritised as important. If this sounds onerous to you, just think about the massive uptick in productivity you'll get from this regular investment of time in your team.

2.DISCUSS KEY METRICS

Get everyone used to tracking the same numbers every week. If you're using OKRs and job scorecards, the person being coached will have a set of KPIs and one key metric that allows them to measure their effectiveness every day.

Whenever I think of scorecards, I'm reminded of something Mark Green said in his book 'Creating a Culture of Accountability'

"Scorecards are the metrics that justify to your organisation why they are investing in your role."
- Mark Green

It's the responsibility of the employee to turn up prepared. They should say whether they've hit their KPIs, whether their key results are on track, and whether they've delivered on the key task or issue that was highlighted the week before. If they haven't, they need to work out a plan to get back on track.

Guidance can be offered by the manager to unblock any stucks or issues.

3.SAY THANK YOU

Showing appreciation is massive for staff engagement. And yet we often forget. 1:1s will give you a regular opportunity to say thank you.

At Peer 1, we introduced a global tool that allowed staff to say thank you to each other. Each person could give a points-based award to someone they felt had gone above and beyond. Points could then be spent on top quality company swag (and I mean top quality – no cheap tat please!). This acted like internal currency, giving us a great handle on who the good managers and teams were. Some got loads of points, and some didn't. In general, you could see A-Players being rewarded more than B or Cs. This was a function of their high 'say:do' ratio. They'd been thanked because they said they'd do something and they followed through and did it. It still amazes me how rare this is.

So make sure every 1:1 is an opportunity to discuss whether they've received recognition either internally or from customers. It won't take long to realise [who your A-Players are](#) if you do this every week.

4. GET THE EMPLOYEE TO BOOK THEIR 1:1

The 1:1 is their meeting. So they need to make sure it happens. Put the onus on the team member to get it booked into their manager's diary. It's on them.

If you're a manager and one of your team forgets to book their 1:1s, it gives you a piece of data that you didn't have before. Lack of commitment can be an indicator of other issues with performance and this will help with any future [talent assessment](#).

5. ASK QUESTIONS RATHER THAN OFFERING SOLUTIONS

You want your 1:1s to be [more like coaching conversations](#). As a template, we use [Michael Bungay Stanier's 7 questions](#) – they're simple and straightforward. Introduce them to the whole team and get them well practised at using them. You'll start to build a coaching culture, developing skills that will serve people well when they're promoted to management.

Start with 'What's on your mind?' Don't stick to the first thing that comes up. Follow with 'And what else?', at least three times. The first three things they mention are unlikely to be the real challenge. You want to narrow down to one important focus that's likely to make the most difference to their performance over the next week.

Don't fall into the advice trap.

If you're giving advice, you're not coaching. By asking open questions, you can lead them to work out for themselves how to solve the problem. Sometimes managers can't help but give the answer. It makes them feel important. But this reinforces a pattern of behaviour that's unhelpful. It's a bit like feeding your dog from the table. It's your fault they're bothering you! You've trained them to expect titbits when you sit down for a meal.

6. FOCUS ON ONE THING

Keep it simple and focus on the one thing that's come up through your questioning. You don't want to overload the conversation by trying to fix too much at once. Get agreement on the one thing that you've identified as the main challenge. By applying consistency, you're building trust and providing a useful sounding board to work through issues.

Next, you need to ask them, 'What do you want?' It could be a shoulder to cry on, or they need some help with something they're finding tricky, or they just need to vent. Ask them, 'How can I help?' and 'If you're saying yes to this, what are you saying no to?' People are busy. It's not that they don't know the answer or what they should do. They've not done it because other habits have got in the way. It's your job to guide them so that they can see this for themselves.

7. LISTEN RATHER THAN TELL



Finally, ask them what was most useful for them in this discussion. All the way through this 1:1 you've been listening. As a manager, this will give you feedback on whether your coaching is helping or not.

Listening builds trust and it's one of the most important skills for good managers. At all times, you're listening to how they want to solve the problem rather than telling them yourself. If you're using tools like [Gallup's CliftonStrengths](#) or Patrick Lencioni's Working Genius, you'll see whether the solution they've arrived at plays to their strengths or weaknesses.

If it's skewed towards their weaknesses, they may need to find some other way. They're never going to be good at this so how can they approach it differently?

8. SET 1:1 MEETINGS IN STONE

1:1 meetings are the foundation of staff engagement in your business. So they must never be cancelled. **Ever.** If they're regularly being scrapped in your business, it's a sign of poor management.

If it's skewed towards their weaknesses, they may need to find some other way. They're never going to be good at this so how can they approach it differently?

And yet we see it all the time. Managers get busy and decide they haven't got time. Well – they shouldn't be managers. It's that simple. Coaching their team is their single most important task. 1:1s should never be axed because they're not the manager's meeting. They belong to the team member in question.

Remember, we're talking 10 to 20 minutes tops. If you have one of these a week, it's the same as an hour-long meeting once a month. But I promise you, weekly meetings will be far more effective. They work equally well face to face or on Zoom so there are no excuses.

“ *Whether the team is remote or not, feedback is like a muscle. It gets stronger when you work it.* ”

[Gustavo Razzetti on The Melting Pot with Dominic Monkhouse](#)



9. CONSEQUENCES FOR LACK OF PROGRESS

People just go through the motions because it's another thing they're told to do and the whole experience is valueless. Partly, this can be down to a lack of consequences for not meeting commitments. There has to be a sense of continuous improvement that runs through 1:1s. If people are hitting their KPIs at a particular level, a year from now they need to be adjusted upwards.

For every 1:1, the person being coached needs to turn up curious and willing to learn. They should come prepared with all the information they need for the meeting and an open, growth mindset. These are the types of people you need for a growing business. You can cultivate these A-Player strengths through regular 1:1s.

10. ZERO TRIANGULATION

Finally, **if there's venting going on, let it run its course but don't get involved.**

It's important for psychological safety that you set some rules around triangulation. If your team member has an issue with another person, you need to encourage them to have that difficult conversation with them directly. You can talk through together how best to approach this. You could even offer to facilitate. But make sure your 1:1 doesn't turn into a bitching session. There should be rules around not criticising others when they're not in the room.

This is all part of building radical candour as a framework. You're working on increasing the level of task conflict and reducing the level of personal conflict. So you and I might fervently disagree about something on a philosophical level. That's ok. But we should be able to do this without slinging personal insults.

NEED HELP TO BUILD AN AGILE CULTURE AND A HIGH PERFORMING TEAM?

Dominic Monkhouse is a proven architect of business growth with a demonstrable track record scaling two UK technology companies from zero revenue to £30 million in five years. During his time as MD of Rackspace, the company was recognised as outstanding workplace in Europe, **winning several awards for its results-obsessed customer service and deep technical expertise, Fanatical Support®.**

Since 2014, Dominic has worked as a CEO and executive team coach, helping ambitious CEOs and their leadership teams adopt an agile culture to power growth.

**Ready to reach your full potential and
achieve sustainable growth?**

Book a call with us today.

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