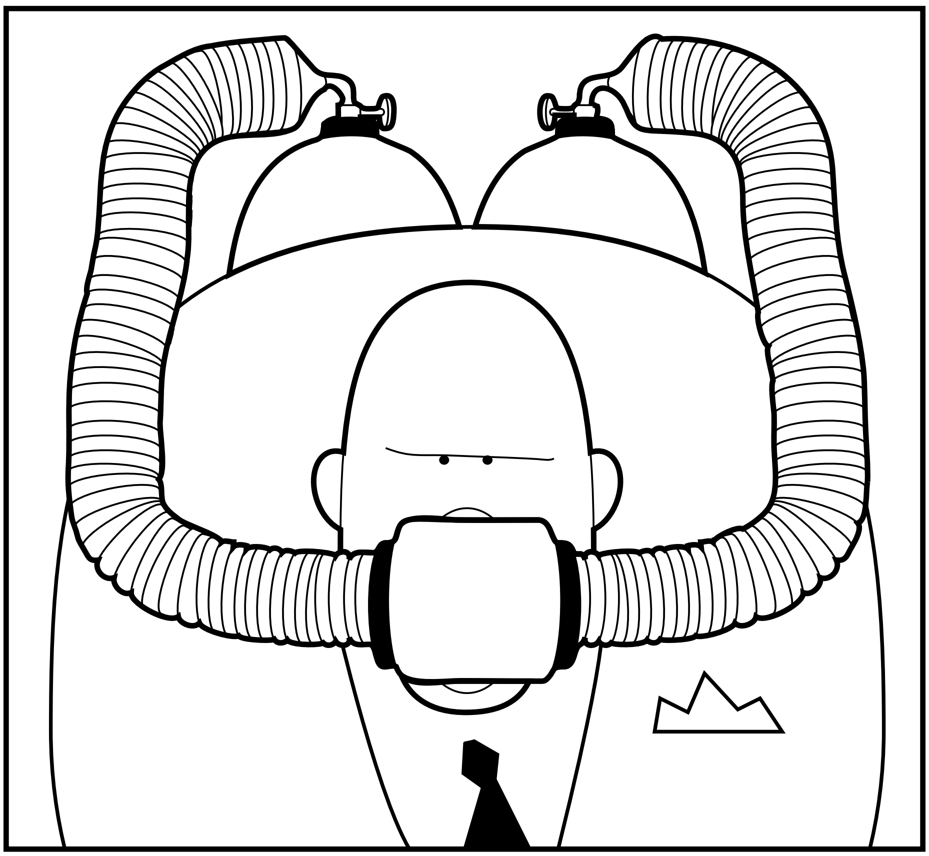
THE Oxygen Manual



How to Help Your Team Turn Good Ideas Into Great Solutions

By Dan Willis

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The Need for Oxygen

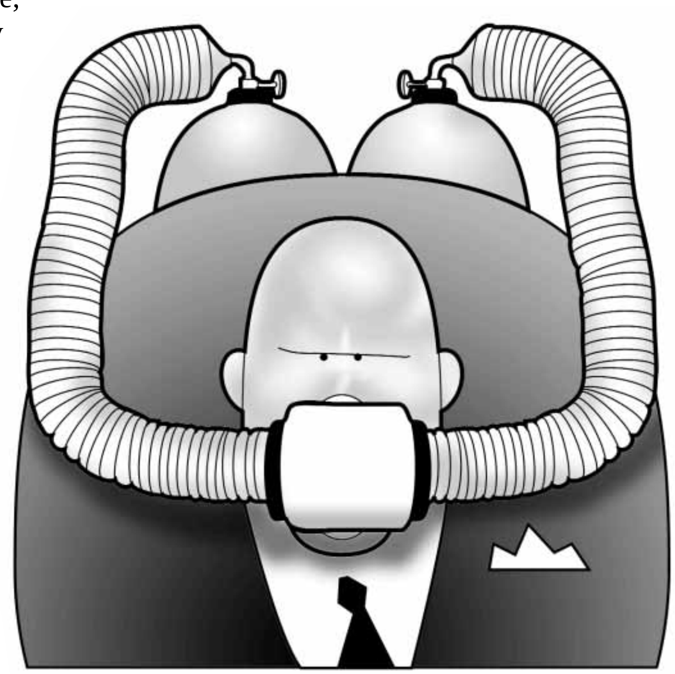
Changing the Way You Solve Problems Can Make Your Company Better

Ideas, like fires, get bigger the more oxygen you add to them. This handbook will show you how to use "oxygen meetings" to turn good ideas into great ones by marshalling the talents of many people. Oxygen meetings are non-traditional, cross-functional exercises. They can be used to develop new concepts; to define issues, goals, and challenges; to create requirements; and to reach consensus.

Mostly though, oxygen meetings solve problems. Without a central problem to solve, oxygen meetings aren't worth the effort they take to set up and lead. The ideal environment for an oxygen meeting will have these elements:

- There is a problem and a diverse group of people is both capable and empowered to solve it.
- Functionally appropriate tools, processes, and solutions are embraced even if they are culturally inappropriate.
- The effort has to deliver something tangible (the next steps, a full course of action, etc.)
- Going into the meeting, the leader has to be 100 percent dedicated to solving the problem, but without any real idea as to what the solution will be.

The leader of an oxygen meeting isn't an objective facilitator, but rather an active participant in discussions. They are aggressive but polite, directed but flexible. Their job is to maximize the value of a diverse team's collective talent. The work of that team will be far superior to what the leader could have delivered independently. The work will also be far superior to what the group could have delivered without the leader.



Oxygen Meetings Compared to Other Types of Meetings

Type of meeting	Example	Required of leader	Required of attendees
Information giving	Staff meeting	Knowledge of subject, presentation skills	Expected to listen and understand, present info when appropriate
Information seeking	Vendor interview	Facilitation	Knowledge of subject, expected to ask and answer questions
Planning	Meeting to plan use of new payroll system	Facilitation, knowledge of subject	Knowledge of subject, responsibility for specific tasks
"Blue-sky" brain-storming	Traditional requirements gathering meeting	Good penmanship	Knowledge of subject, expected to suggest requirements, solutions, etc.
Oxygen	Initial product development meeting	Knowledge of subject, ability to see big picture as well as details, problem-solving skills, presentation skills, ability to hear overlapping ideas, translation and distillation (of concepts, etc.)	Knowledge of subject, expected to supply requirements, solutions, etc.

Oxygen Meetings and Corporate Culture

The traditional meetings of your company are probably useful for planning, updating team members, and communicating information. They may not be quite as effective at addressing more complicated challenges.

Albert Einstein said, “You can’t solve a problem with the same thinking that created it.” Within an oxygen meeting, assumptions, traditions, and departmental politics are set aside. There is an intentional shift away from the existing corporate culture in order to change the thinking that created the problem.

This approach unleashes the full talents of the group, but it also requires each team member to give up the white-knuckle control of their own work (as well as the work of their department). While this leads to better solutions, changing how ownership and control is dealt with, even for a single meeting, can be uncomfortable for some.

Changing corporate culture is like recycling. Very few people will tell you they’re against recycling. In fact, publicly denouncing recycling would bring one overwhelming scorn from the neighbors. But on trash day, how many recycling bins do you actually see out on the curbs in your neighborhood?

Washing out bottles and cans, stacking up newspapers, and dragging bins to the street can feel like too much work to add to our hectic lives. The work of changing a company’s culture can feel like that too. It’s hard (and painful) to make change happen.

Agents of Change

> “Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator. And change has its enemies.”
>
> **- Robert F. Kennedy**

People who become agents of change are easily mocked and maligned. They spend a great deal of their time convincing others to try things that don’t conform to the prevailing corporate culture. Success only comes with great effort and is usually only seen in tiny, incremental shifts in the status quo. If these people can’t expect love, glory, or even thanks for their actions, why would any rational human being want to be an agent of change? I only know of two reasons people become agents of change:

1. They can’t help themselves. Square pegs have two options: Keep trying to fit into the round hole or find a square hole. But what if there are also three-sided pegs? A triangle-shaped peg can fit in either a round hole or a square hole. They don’t fit particularly well, and they tend to look out of place, but they do fit. Some agents of change keep offering up three-sided solutions that fit just enough in their round hole companies because those are the only solutions that really make sense to their three-sided brains.

2. Being an agent of change may be the only way to move something forward that is personally important to them. For these folks, what they accomplish by using non-traditional methods is worth the abuse they get.

How Agents of Change Made Billions of Dollars for IBM

As the sun rose at the dawn of the World Wide Web, the largest computer company in the world was sleeping in late, according to Gary Hamel in his book *Leading the Revolution*.[1]

It was 1994. Sun Microsystems was stealing IBM's data feeds from the Lillehammer Winter Olympics and using them to publish results on a Sun Microsystems Web site.

"If I didn't know any better, I would have thought that the data was being provided by Sun," says David Grossman, a midlevel IBM programmer at the time. "IBM didn't have a clue as to what was happening ... It bothered me."

Grossman complained to the marketing folks at IBM, but wasn't satisfied with their reaction so he loaded a UNIX workstation into his car and drove the four hours to IBM headquarters in Armonk, New York. Once in Armonk, Grossman found a T1 line he could borrow for an hour and, in an empty storage closet, introduced IBM to the Internet. His audience was as small as the room. It included the woman in charge of IBM marketing, the guy in charge of the supercomputer division where Grossman worked, and John Patrick.

At the time, John Patrick was a senior executive in the corporate strategy division. He'd spent his career at IBM and was also a "lifelong gadget freak," according to author Hamel. Patrick saw IBM's future at Grossman's presentation, and that future was online. Soon after the Armonk meeting, Patrick hired Grossman and another Internet activist within IBM, David Singer.

The three agents of change had a primary goal: To loosen up the stiff IBM culture just enough to allow Internet development to flourish. Grossman and Singer started work on the company's first corporate intranet and Patrick created a nine-page manifesto (titled "Get Connected") outlining how IBM should leverage the Web. Hamel writes:

> "The Get Connected paper, distributed informally by e-mail, found a ready audience among IBM's unheralded Internet aficionados. The next step was to set up an on-line newsgroup of the sort that allowed IBM's underground hackers to trade technical tidbits.
>
> " 'Very few people higher up even knew this stuff existed,' says Grossman.
>
> "Within months, more than 300 enthusiasts would join the virtual Get Connected team. Like dissidents using a purloined duplicator in the old Soviet Union, Patrick and Grossman would use the Web to build a community of Web fans that would ultimately transform IBM."

Rather than setting up an Internet department, Patrick's boss encouraged him to "keep this grassroots things going as long as possible." Patrick needed to infiltrate the system rather than become an official part of it. "It would be easy for others at IBM to ignore a dinky department," writes Hamel, "But they couldn't stand in the way of a groundswell."


John Patrick

To help make that groundswell happen, Patrick used every opportunity to talk about the Internet. He spoke to IBM's top 300 officers, he spread the word at trade conventions, and he preached the gospel in a meeting with IBM's CEO, Lou Gerstner.

"If you believe it," Patrick says, "You've got to be out there constantly talking about it, not sometimes, but all the time."

And it worked; IBM started to show signs of change. The company put their annual and quarterly reports on the Web. While Bill Gates was still calling the Web an insecure medium for consumer e-commerce, Gerstner was giving a keynote address at an Internet World trade convention. In 1995, IBM developed Web sites for the U.S. Open and Wimbledon.

Just two years after Sun angered David Grossman by swiping IBM data feeds, IBM launched the first official Olympics Web site.

By the end of 1998, IBM had completed 18,000 e-business consulting engagements and more than $20 billion of the year's revenues were Internet-related.

IBM's agents of change were successful because they cared more about credibility and effectiveness than fancy job titles or a status-confirming monster budget.

"Fighting IBM's parochialism," Hamel writes, "Patrick took every opportunity to drive home the point that the Web was a company-wide issue and not the preserve of a single division."

Like any good agent of change, Patrick chose to beg forgiveness rather than ask for permission. "If you don't occasionally exceed your formal authority, you are not pushing the envelope," he says. "If you think of yourself as being in a box with boundaries, you're not going to have any breakthroughs."

Hamel concludes:

> "Again and again, throughout their Internet campaign, Patrick and Grossman broke long-standing IBM rules and overstepped the boundaries of their own authority. But because their cause was so important and their commitment to IBM's success so visibly selfless, they got away with things that had often sunk careers at Big Blue.
>
> "Inside IBM and out, Patrick and Grossman are today recognized for their pivotal contribution to their company's e-business metamorphosis."

How to Plan an Oxygen Meeting

To Be Successful, Oxygen Meetings Must Be Deliberately and Skillfully Planned

Crafting the Guest List

Try filling out the guest list for your oxygen meeting as if you were throwing a really cool party. Mix together different kinds of personalities, balance introverts with extroverts, and always include people with a sense of humor. If you can get away with inviting only big-brained participants, you should. Smart people, especially in packs, can be their own kind of trouble, but they will usually take you much further much faster. You'll probably find that you have to invite some average-brained folks to address departmental representation or consensus issues. Don't worry; they'll do just fine. (They'll also keep you company when the smart folks go off on some confusing, intellectual tangent.)

The most important thing you can do in crafting your guest list is to find people who are open to the non-traditional experience. "Those who dance," comedian George Carlin said, "are called insane by those who can't hear the music." Your most important criteria for the guest list are that you have enough people who have the potential to "hear the music."

Defining Boundaries

Take care creating the boundaries for your oxygen meeting. Boundaries are created by:

- Topics or issues that will be included in the discussion
- Topics or issues that won't be included in the discussion
- How much initial information you provide participants
- Whether you'll make all meeting process decisions as the meeting progresses or if you'll invite the team to help out

You'll want to determine your boundaries for each meeting individually, rather than sticking to an all-purpose standard.

Here's the tricky part about boundaries: They are most effective when they're communicated through process and as part of the environment you create in your meeting. If you give a ten-minute explanation of what will be discussed and what won't be discussed, your team members will actually only hear something like this:

> "NO blah blah blah DON'T blah blah blah I DON'T ACTUALLY THINK YOU HAVE MUCH TO ADD. Blah blah blah NO! NO! NO!"

Instead, set up the progression of tasks during the meeting in a way that defines the topics on which you want the team to concentrate. When team members stray from your

**How Many Therapists Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?
One, But the Light Bulb Has to Want to Change**

You should only invite people to oxygen meetings who have agreed to try something out of the ordinary. As with most things I know, I learned this by doing it the wrong way. I was leading a group of directors and VPs in an oxygen meeting and I hadn't properly prepared one the grouchier VPs. As I launched into a wipeboard exercise, he started to mutter loudly. After a bit, he added dramatic eye rolling and an awkward sort of rocking. Ten minutes into the meeting, he stood up, made a loud comment about not wasting his time, and stomped out of the room.

His actions weren't exactly conducive to a successful meeting.

I should have met with him a couple of days before the meeting. I should have clearly outlined what I planned to do in the meeting and why I planned to do it. This particular VP would have almost definitely said that he had no interest in going to the meeting. But I wouldn't have tried to talk him into participating, or made any effort to convince him of the validity of what I was planning. His reaction would have given me two options: Run a traditional meeting and have him attend, or go ahead with an oxygen meeting and not have him there. Both options would have had better results than what actually happened.

planned path (and you're actually better off in the long run having team members that can't help but stray), let them know that they've been heard and politely nudge them back on point.

Sweating the Details

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the tiny details of preparation for your meeting, but it's always time well spent even if you get a bit obsessive.

Is there too much light in the room? Too little? Is this even the right room for what you need to do? Is it close enough to the bathrooms? Are you going to use a wipeboard? If so, how fresh are your erasers?

The tiny details always matter. Some details will suck all of the air out your oxygen meeting if they aren't addressed beforehand:

Dead markers: Take time before your meeting to make sure any markers you plan on using have ink and aren't worn down. Also make sure you have a nice variety of colors. There's nothing worse than getting the team all fired up, jumping up to a board, and being forced to write their brilliant thoughts with a squashed brown or dried-out orange marker.

Ringing cell phones: You work with the folks in your oxygen meeting; you know which ones are going to want to leave their phones on throughout your meeting. Talk to each of the likely offenders before the meeting to see if they can turn off their phones. Try to avoid a formal announcement at the meeting. It can embarrass team members or make them feel defensive about their phone use.

Besides, some movie theaters make a formal announcement. Doing so for an oxygen meeting could make the team feel like the meeting is something that you're presenting to them rather than something they're helping to produce.

PDAs: PDAs are only a problem if they're used to record the meeting leader's notes on the fly. Those folding keyboards are neat technology, no doubt about it, but there is great value in having the team see your notes as they develop (on oversized paper or a wipeboard).

Podiums and microphones: A fixed location for the team leader (or an amplified voice) instantly communicates to your team:

> "This is just like a dozen other meetings you've been to, speak only when spoken to, conform, conform, CONFORM!"

Remember, running an oxygen meeting is all about freeing your team from the existing corporate culture.

PowerPoint: PowerPoint is a good tool only if you have more to offer than endless screens of cramped, tiny type that you plan on reading word-for-word to the team. An oxygen meeting needs the energy of your team. If your presentation isn't going to get them fired up, or if it's going to kill their creative buzz, skip the slides. If you're sure it's going to be as entertaining as informational (or if it's just really entertaining), PowerPoint can be a good tool.

How to Lead an Oxygen Meeting

The Leader Doesn't Solve the Oxygen Meeting's Central Problem;
Rather They Help the Team Solve It Together

An oxygen meeting leader has to believe that the best solution will come from the combined efforts of her team. For that to happen, the leader has to unleash the team's talents without getting in their way. A good way of staying out of the way is to lead from behind.

"Leading from behind" may sound like one of those tired, namby-pamby, sensitive-manager terms from an earlier decade. (Like a guy who leads from behind must inherently eat quiche and "be in touch with his feminine side".) Or maybe the term sounds to you like part of some contemporary jargon jamboree. (Like a leader who wants to "lead from behind" so she can "interface" with the team to build a "matrix" of "eventualities … from 10,000 feet.")

In fact, leading from behind is very difficult to do well. It requires a leader who can follow the seven mantras listed in the box to the right.

Not everyone can pull it off. Bringing out the best work of the team requires the right kind of leader.

Seven Oxygen Meeting Leadership Mantras

1. Your job is to extract information, not to supply it.

2. Your job is to learn more than you teach.

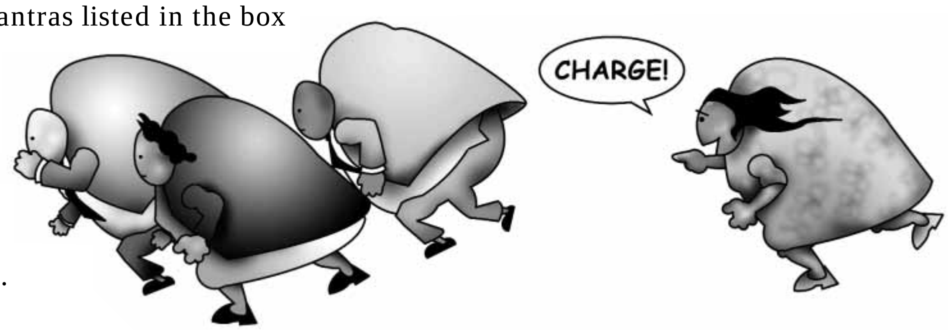
3. Your job is to ask questions, not give answers.

4. Never compete with your team.

5. Always protect your team (protect them from EVERYTHING).

6. When in doubt, stop talking and listen carefully.

7. If you know the answer to a question (your own or one from the team), don't keep it to yourself.



Four Faces of Leadership

Imagine your company's revenues are plummeting, staff morale is low, and the your senior staff is overwhelmed. The company hires a series of outside consultants to help staffers solve the company's problems. The staff members assigned to the project come from several departments and include vice presidents, directors, managers, and other staff.

The first consultant, a Mr. Bonaparte, turns on the conference room's projector and begins a PowerPoint presentation.

"Your problem is your suppliers!" he says, as he flashes his only PowerPoint slide onto the screen. The slide says: "Your Problem is Your Suppliers!"

"Your solution will have three parts," he continues, "1. Find new suppliers; 2. Cancel existing supply contracts; 3. Modernize supply systems." He turns off the projector and distributes team members to three conference rooms. Each of the groups is charged with figuring out how to satisfy one of the three actions outlined by Mr. Bonaparte.

After five minutes, the team finding new suppliers asks Mr. Bonaparte if they can talk to the team canceling existing supply contracts.

"Oui?" Mr. Bonaparte asks. "Why would you want to talk to them?"

"Well gee, we figured that they would have a complete list of our current suppliers so that we …"

"No! Get back to your room!" Mr. Bonaparte interrupts. "You only need to know what I tell you! Now get it done!"

A few minutes later, a different team asks to talk to another team and gets the same reaction from the short, dyspeptic Corsican. This goes on

Napoleonic Conquest

Facilitator: Napoleon Bonaparte

Facilitator's actions:

- Dictated definitions for both the problem and the solution.
- Used breakout groups to figure out the details of the solution.
- Didn't allow groups to share information.

Result: Solution is only as good as the one person who formulated it. Solution is also limited by a suspect definition of the problem. Separating the larger group allowed for parallel progress, but lack of interaction created "silo" solutions.

Lesson: An excellent way to win a war in the 19th century, but it seriously underutilizes the contributions of the team.

for most of the rest of the day to the great frustration of the teams and Mr. Bonaparte (who keeps putting his hand inside of his jacket as if he's having stomach pains).

Your company takes the steps outlined in Mr. Bonaparte's exercise. Now it's a month later. Revenues are still falling, morale is even lower, and the VPs are all updating their resumes.

A second consultant is now addressing a different set of staff members in the large conference room. The consultant has a bowl haircut (like Moe of the Three Stooges). He tells everybody to call him Hank. He's also wearing a full suit of armor and carrying a sword (which seems a bit odd).

Hank shakes each team member's hand aggressively and starts to talk about the challenge they all, together, have ahead of them:

> "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
>
> "For he (or she) today that works with me shall be my brother (or sister); be he (or she) ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his (or her) condition. And the rest of the company shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their lives cheap while any speaks that worked with us today!"

Although the team's not completely sure what Hank just said, they all feel inspired and they start joyfully suggesting ideas.

"We should start by figuring out exactly what the problem is that we're trying to solve!" Julia from Accounting suggests. But Hank shakes his head as if Julia's face is smeared with chocolate as she's denying breaking into the cookie jar.

"No, no, try again," Hank says.

"Um, let's describe the ideal place we'd like the company to get to and then figure out the steps to get there!" Alan (VP of Marketing) suggests. Again, Hank is shaking his head.

Bert from Human Resources: "How 'bout

if we talk directly to our customers and ask them …"

"No, that will never work," Hank interrupts. Now nobody talks for a few minutes. They shuffle their feet or stare at the ceiling. You can smell traces of resentment in the air.

Finally Holly from Administration asks, "Should we list the solutions we've already tried?"

"Yes!" Hank exclaims with a broad smile, "That's CORRECT!"

This turns out to be the model for the rest of the meeting, with the group guessing at the answers Hank wants. The team members are exhausted by the end of the day, but at least a course of action is clearly outlined. Someone asks if they should write the course of action down and Hank says that there's no need. He goes to a briefcase that hasn't been opened all day and pulls out 20 copies of the course of action on which they just "reached consensus."

Shakespearean Tragedy

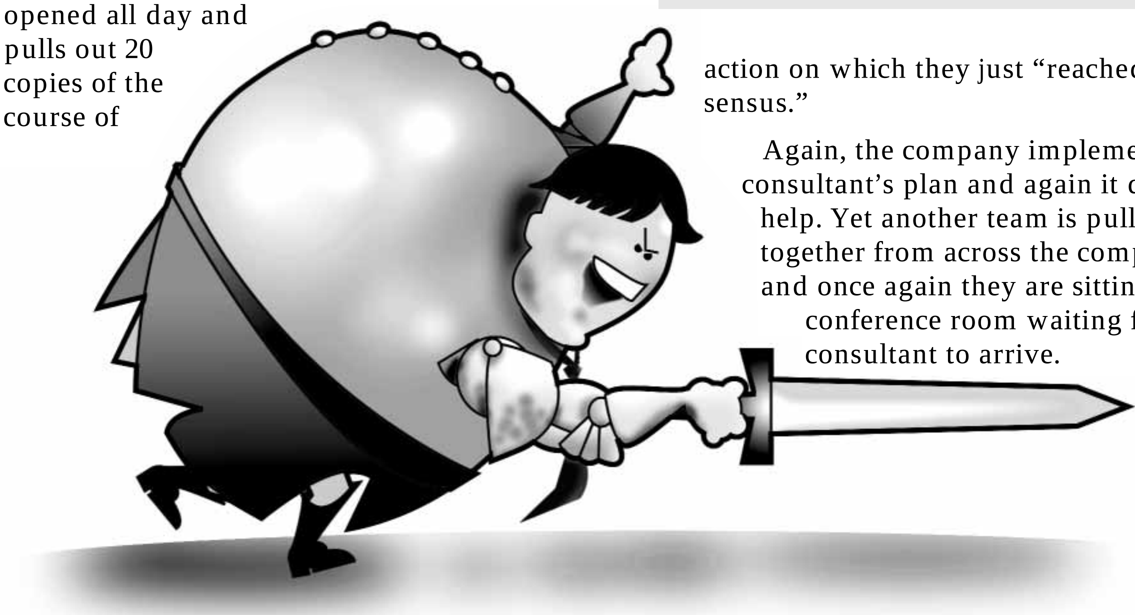
Facilitator: King Henry V

Facilitator's actions:

- Inspired team by describing a courageous, non-hierarchical environment.
- Reverted to acting like a monarch once the work actually started.

Result: An emotional upswing was lost to a quick cynical downswing when the team found that they weren't actually equal members of the team. They resented having to guess at the "correct" answers. As in Napoleon's case, the solution is only as good as the one person who formulated it.

Lesson: False emotion is more damaging than no emotion.



Again, the company implements the consultant's plan and again it doesn't help. Yet another team is pulled together from across the company and once again they are sitting in a conference room waiting for a consultant to arrive.

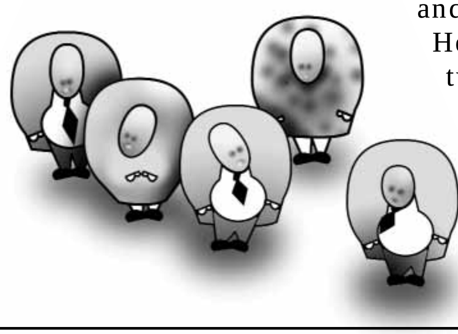
The consultant is 20 minutes late and some of the more senior members of the team are talking about canceling the meeting and getting back to work. There’s a loud rumbling in the hallway. As Latitia from Sales moves to open the conference room door, it flies open, knocking her to the floor. A man with a bushy moustache, thick eyebrows, and an ill-fitting gray suit strides to the front of the conference room table (almost stomping Latitia in the process). He’s followed very closely by four large men with equally bad gray suits. (They just miss stepping on Latitia as well). As the consultant sits, his four comrades move to the four corners of the table.

“I yam Josef Stalin,” the third consultant says in a thick Russian accent, “Am here to help.” His four comrades each slam a thick gray binder on a corner of the conference table. Mr. Stalin opens his own brown, leather-bound copy. “Only four copies! You must share! Now! Does everyone agree with the solution we have all put together today?”

The shocked team members look at each other and then at Mr. Stalin. Jonas, the VP of Operations, speaks up. In a flustered tone, he answers “No, no indeed. Besides, I can’t even read the copy of the document; the only page that’s clear is this one that we’re all supposed to sign. Mr. Stalin, I can’t in good con-”

Mr. Stalin’s four gray comrades converge on Jonas and drag him screaming from the room. After a few, silent, uncomfortable minutes, three of the four large men come back into the room. They clumsily straighten each other’s ties. Mr. Stalin stands, slowly circles the table, and corrects Jonas’ tilted chair. He leans over the chair on his two meaty hands.

Quietly, he says “Does everyone agree with the solution we have all put



Red Scare

Facilitator: Josef Stalin

Facilitator's actions:

- Forced team to sign off on comprehensive solution without any understanding or agreement.

Result: Solution will be abandoned as soon as the force behind it leaves or is distracted.

Lesson: This style isn't all bad if you have a staff of idiots.

Otherwise, it's despicable.

together today?" and team members dive on the four gray binders trying to sign the documents and get out of the room as quickly as possible.

The first phase of Mr. Stalin's plan (it actually outlined many phases as part of a five-year plan) fails to change the direction of the company.

A final, frightened group of staffers is organized. They're sitting in the same conference room staring at a somewhat weathered, yellowish-brown stuffed teddy bear that is sitting at the head of the table. The bear is tapping his paw on the side of his head and muttering "Think ... think, think."

"Oh bother!" he says looking up, "Could anyone please tell me the answer … that I was trying to question?"

"Silly Pooh Bear," Chris from Security says, "You're getting paid to help us solve our company's problems." While the bear's face usually presented a somewhat confused expression, it now held an Especially Confused Look.

The bear scrunches his nose and says, "my only problem is that my Tumbly is especially Rumbly. Is that anything like your problem?"

"Well, uh, I guess our hurting for revenues is like being hungry..." answers Betty.

"But morale is low, too," Archie glumly adds.

"And we're all going to get fired!" Veronica whimpers.

Pooh is smiling now because he's thinking that whatever these big people are talking about, it all seems much more confusing than his own Rumbly Tumbly Problem. "Whatever are you going to do?" he asks.

"Um, should we prioritize our problems?"

The Especially Confused Look is back on Pooh's face. "How are you going to pray-er-tise?"

"You know, put them in order of importance," Wesley from Custodial says. "We could probably expand the definition for each problem, then figure out which ones are more of a short-term threat than others? We should probably consider other kinds of threats, ones less tied to periods of time. Maybe strategic threats should be considered?"

Pooh is smiling again. "Oh that would be wonderful!" he giggles. He knew the word "expand." That's what his tummy did when it was full of Honey. "Would I be able to eat a bit of Honey while you did that?"

And so the rest of the meeting goes. The group works their way through the complexities of solving the company's problems and Pooh keeps responding with gleeful encouragement. When the team gets stuck, Pooh's words make the complex seem simple and they get unstuck. After many hours (and many Honey breaks) the group outlines a complete description and prioritization of the problems facing the company. With the problems fully defined, they are able to formulate holistic, effective solutions in future meetings.

The company is saved and they all live Happily Ever After.

Think ... Think, Think

Facilitator: Winnie the Pooh

Facilitator's actions:

- Asked a lot of deceivingly simple questions and restated complex thoughts in simple ways.
- Communicated the glee he felt when he heard good ideas from team members.
- Depended on the energy and brains of the team to power the meeting.

Result: Took full advantage of the big brains in the room, subtly leading the team's actions, progress, and direction (primarily using questions).

Lesson: Results should reflect the best efforts of every participant rather than a single dominating presence.

Leading With Questions

Asking smart (but simple) questions is one of the most powerful tools for leading a team from behind. (This is partially because human beings usually feel compelled to answer when they're asked questions.)

You can initiate and maintain the cycle of asking the team a question, getting an answer, then asking a deeper question. The team will do their best to answer the deeper question and that will lead you to ask a question that's deeper still. This should go on until you decide that the team has figured out as much as they can in one area. Then it'll be your job to begin a new line of questions.

Some things to consider when leading with questions:

1. The best questions you can ask are the ones you don't know the answer to. The team will sense when you've turned into their third grade teacher (the one who knew damn well that Pierre was the capital of South Dakota). In fact, they'll suspect that you're asking them a particular question because you want a particular answer.

First, make sure you're not doing this. Then convince them that you're not doing this.

2. Stay obviously curious. You're going to be juggling quite a few things when you lead your team: the time left in the meeting, the interaction between team members, etc. If you find a way to stay focused and curious about the conversation you're leading, you'll be a lot more fun to talk to. If you're more fun to talk to, the meeting itself will be a lot more interesting for everybody.

3. Use active listening. Active listening is a technique that helps you collect data from other people without getting in the way. Some active listening guidelines:

- Hear other people without judging what they say and without projecting your own feelings and ideas onto the person speaking.
- Be non-defensive. If your energy is spent protecting yourself, you'll find it hard to focus on the other person.
- Imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as your own.
- Concentrate your efforts on understanding the other person rather than trying to reach an agreement or change their opinion.

4. Almost always, try to make "yes" be your first answer. You'll be asking some questions that are hard to answer so people will be self-conscious about sounding dumb when they try. You owe your protection to every brave soul who's courageous enough to risk looking foolish in front of a group of their peers (as well as team members above and below them in the corporate food chain). It may sound like overkill, but give positive reinforcement to everybody that speaks up every time they speak up. The key to this is finding positive things in what you hear and reporting those things back to the group.

However, if you say "Hey! Great Answer! You Are One Smart Honcho!" every time somebody opens their mouth, you'll be risking your own credibility. You have to be genuine in your positive reinforcement.

6. Use progressive questions to get to broader issues. The best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. If your first question is "What is the meaning of life?" you're going to get a lot of blank looks and an uncomfortable silence. (What I like to call "cricket noises."*) Even if somebody takes a shot at answering such a colossal question, their response won't have any context to help others understand the answer. If you wanted the team to figure out the meaning of life, you could try something like this:

A. Ask: "What's important to you?"

B. Find the overlap between different team member answers.

C. Ask: "Why do so many feel <whatever the overlap is> is important?"

D. Build the next round of the conversation off of their answers.

E. Use the same method to ask progressively deeper questions until you've addressed the bigger, elephantine issue.

Tools

Four active listening techniques[2]:

1. Stop, look, and listen. Let the other person see that you are doing one thing and one thing only: listening to them.

2. Use minimal encouragers ("ah," "hm," etc.). These help people explain their point of view more fully.

3. Paraphrase content and feelings. You're making sure that you understand what they're saying at the same time that you're reassuring them that they're being heard. End your paraphrase with "Is that what you're saying?" or similar questions.

4. Use minimal inquiry. After the person has explained herself and after you've used paraphrasing to check your understanding of her comments, ask the person "So what should we do?" or other questions that help them take the next step in their thinking.

*In the 1957 cartoon *Show Biz Bugs*, Daffy Duck tries to impress a rough vaudeville crowd, but their only response is the sound of chirping crickets rather than applause. As you run more and more oxygen meetings, you'll probably feel more and more empathy for Daffy.

Response Strategies

Type of comment by team member	Possible strategy for your response
On-point and mind-expanding	No strategy needed because you'll be able to honestly respond "Wow, that was great!"
On-point, but obvious	More positive reinforcement than praise, for example: "Yes, it's important that we not assume anything. What else seems obvious that we need to mention?"
On-point, but just repeating something already said	Thank them for underscoring a key point. Repetition is good.
Somewhat off-point	Like sifting river mud for gold, you'll need to find the relevant point. Don't be afraid to talk out loud when you're trying to tie it in, this can open up the effort to everybody.
Completely off-point	Two choices: 1. Thank them, show that they've been heard, and move on; 2. Keep asking questions about their comment until it becomes something relevant.
Not sure if it's on-point or not, they seem to have an important point but they can't find the right words	The good news is that these frequently turn out to be the most important comments of the meeting. The bad news is that you'll need to become that team member's translator and that takes skill, practice, and patience.

More Tips for Leading Your Team

Use Your Own Weaknesses

If you take your strengths for granted, you'll have the brain space to concentrate on maximizing the value of your weaknesses. I'm usually pretty good at hearing the overlap between seemingly disparate comments, so I take that for granted when I run a meeting. But sometimes the energy of the group gets me so fired up that what I write on the board doesn't make much sense ten minutes later. I use this to my advantage by getting the team to explain my own writing to me. This pulls them deeper into the process and helps them better understand the information.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't work to improve our weaknesses. Of course, we need to do that for the rest of our lives. But our imperfections are more likely to bond us to each other than the things we do well.

By the early 1960s, comic book readers were getting tired of Superman. It wasn't really the superhero's fault; it's just that he did everything so well. Other than kryptonite, Superman's biggest concern was that Lois Lane might realize that he was Clark Kent without glasses and a tie. In 1962, Marvel comics (a competitor to DC Comics, the company that owned Superman) introduced a crime fighter who didn't have a regular job or enough money, couldn't get a date, and who worried about getting zits. Spiderman became one of the most popular superheroes of all time. People read Superman comic books, but because of all of his weaknesses, they *loved* Spiderman.

Stand Up

The chair is not your friend. You want to be able to move throughout the room, to talk face-to-face, to use body language to make a point. You can't do any of this well if you're sitting down. The team will feed off of the energy you expend as you move around the room.

The only time you'll want to sit down is when you want to send a subtle message that somebody else is controlling the meeting. You'll find that as soon as you stand back up, the team will subconsciously expect you to control the meeting again.

Use Whimsy

Silly or fantastical approaches to your material make it very hard for even the stodgiest team member to keep their thoughts trapped in a small box. It breaks the pattern of their daily work. Be aware though, some people don't react well to being forced out of their boxes. You'll know this has already happened when they refuse to treat you or your meeting as credible.

Empower Your Team

Some managers spend a great deal of time trying to develop programs and elaborate solutions so that their employees feel empowered. The real answer to this challenge is both much simpler and much more difficult than typical corporate solutions. The best way to help people feel empowered … IS TO ACTUALLY EMPOWER THEM.

If you're going to lead a team in a problem-solving exercise, do what you can before the meeting to secure the company's commitment to take action on the team's recommendations. If you've secured the commitment, make sure the team understands the position you've put them in: They have the power to identify and solve a problem, but it's their ass if the solution doesn't work.

And don't worry about scaring off your team by being specific about their responsibility. If you have a team that complains about being powerless, but who shies away from power when it's married to the responsibility for failure, that team will eventually let you down anyway. The folks you want on this (or any) team are the ones who grab the power and fully expect the responsibility. The responsibility for failure can supercharge their efforts.

Something I do to empower teams is to make sure that I don't bring them in just to provide simple feedback for a particular solution. If I'm going to have a group take a look at an existing solution, I'll ask them to take any combination of these three actions:

- **1.** Review
- **2.** Revise
- **3.** Replace

This means that I have to be willing to tear up any and all parts of a solution (regardless of who championed it, or how long it took to create) if a team unearths a superior approach.

Embrace Innocence While You Can

I don't know when I became a forehead kissing kind of uncle. My wife's brother has four young children and I can't help but kissing their foreheads whenever they're around. I'm not sure why I enjoy it so much, but I suspect it's because of how sweetly they react to the affection and attention. Their faces light up with innocent, unfiltered joy.

I've seen a similar joyful innocence in oxygen meetings. It happens when diverse groups of people talk to each other using the same language (sometimes for the first time) and work together towards solutions to problems that they've defined as a team. These folks excitedly feed off of each other's energy and ideas.

I've noticed lately that my oldest nephew is enjoying the forehead kissing less and doing it more just to humor me. This will happen to your team's joy as well. The innocence of new solutions (and the temporary relationships that created those solutions) is fleeting. You need to help the team cherish the innocence for as long as possible.

What You Can Expect from Your Team

Your Team Won't Mind That You're the Alpha Dog

Dogs are descended from wolves and even though they were domesticated more than 10,000 years ago, they still retain many of the original behaviors of their wolf ancestors. Dogs conform to a specific social structure: the pack. There's a chain of command in the pack, with each dog dominant or submissive to other pack members. But one dog (called the alpha dog) is always in charge.

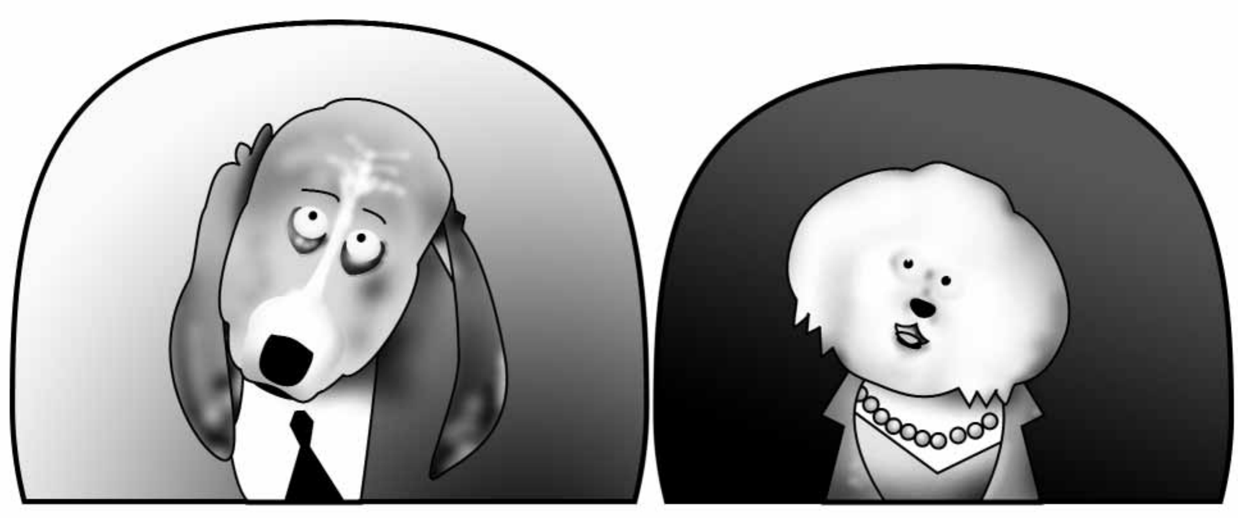
We could get sidetracked by any number of testosterone-injected tangents about how to be your team's alpha dog or how to defend against the occasional team member who acts like they want to be the new top dog. I'd rather take a look at the behavior of the pack, at how other dogs react to the alpha dog. The pack expects to follow the alpha dog; your team expects you to lead them. To illustrate the impact this will have on your oxygen meeting, I've modified a list of "Tactics to Get Your Siberian Husky to See You as the Alpha Dog":

- **Tactic 1:** Go through doors before your dog.

What this means for oxygen meetings: The team will expect you to be willing to roll your sleeves up and have a go at any challenge that you've asked them to address.

- **Tactic 2:** Eat first - then feed your dog.

What this means for oxygen meetings: You have to avoid dominating the discussion, but that doesn't mean that you can't say what you think. The team will be comfortable with



this, even when you choose to share your opinions and ideas before they've offered theirs.

- **Tactic 3:** If your dog is blocking your path, make him move out of your way - do not go around or step over him.

What this means for oxygen meetings: This is more about being patient than being aggressive. If a team member is intentionally hindering you, politely (but persistently) move your process forward. Try to hear the value of anything the team member offers up, but continue forward in a straight line regardless.

- **Tactic 4:** Call your dog to you for petting and attention. Don't go to him.

What this means for oxygen meetings: People like when you praise them, but if you refuse to praise them on any terms other than your own, they will STILL like it.

- **Tactic 5:** When you play with your dog, be sure that you end up with possession of the toy, and then put it up.

What this means for oxygen meetings: Your meetings should be as fun as possible, but at times, you will need the team to set aside the fun things and work on things that aren't as fun. Don't worry about how the team will react. They're going to be cool about you deciding to put the toy away.

- **Tactic 6:** Be your dog's leader. Prove to him that he can trust you in all situations, and that you will provide for his every need. Be consistent in enforcing all rules of the house.

What this means for oxygen meetings: If the members of your team have agreed to participate in your meeting, they expect you to be their leader. They want to be able to trust you and they want you to be consistent in your actions and reactions.

Your Team Will Prefer Culturally Appropriate Solutions Even When Those Solutions are Functionally Inappropriate

In his book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*,[3] Gordon MacKenzie talks about actions that are culturally appropriate, but functionally inappropriate. He uses a painfully ineffective task force meeting he attended to explain. The meeting was dying because it stuck so faithfully to the approaches of past meetings (including the use of an archaic overhead projector with greasy-fingered transparencies). The meeting was appropriate for the culture of the company, but functionally inappropriate because it accomplished none of the task force's stated goals.

MacKenzie shocked the task force with a guided imagery meditation exercise (complete with finger bells and candles) at the beginning of his session. The attendees were shocked because MacKenzie's actions were intentionally inappropriate (according to the company's culture). But his approach was actually an invitation for task force members to escape traditional, inhibitive standards for behavior. MacKenzie writes:

> "Release from their inculcated culture allowed the task force members to metamorphize – for a little while – from mere attendants at a meeting into vibrant participants in an evolving endeavor.
>
> " [But] the escape from habitual culture must always be temporary if you wish to be permitted back into that culture … 'Yes, you may go out and play; but you must be home by dinner time.' "

Sometimes, culturally inappropriate actions are the best catalysts for developing solutions. But it's up to the leader to make this happen because people's natural, comfortable tendency is to stick to things that conform to the existing culture.

Even though you're only breaking the rules within the arc of a single meeting, you'll need to be sensitive to the different levels of discomfort among your team members. (To some extent, everyone likes it when things fit comfortably inside the culture. Some people, however, REALLY like it.)

Your Team Will Observe Their Company's Unwritten, Unspoken Rules of Etiquette

From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

> "et-i-quette: The forms prescribed by custom or authority to be observed in social, official, or professional life."

I'd like to tell you that you CAN create a standard of conduct for your oxygen meetings that team members will respect and aspire to, but I'd be ignoring the key part of the definition of etiquette, that bit about "forms prescribed by custom."

In every company I've ever worked in, standards for conduct start at the top and roll quickly downhill. If the CEO and / or senior staff members are always late for meetings, inattentive in group settings, tend to excitedly interrupt other team members, or are just plain rude, then staff from all levels of the organization will exhibit the same behavior.

However, this doesn't relieve you of your responsibilites as leader. Even if you run meetings for the National Organization of Unbelievably Offensive Buttheads, there are some things you still have to do if you're leading an oxygen meeting:

1. Protect your team members from the rudeness of other team members, BUT …

2. Avoid chastising rude team members in front of the group. Embarrassing someone in front of others is one of the top three ways earn an enemy for life (the other two ways are to kill someone in their family or to use their cell phone for long-distance calls). Besides, getting them mad will just make them act more rudely.

3. When you have to correct someone, make it non-directed. For example, if two people are competing to talk at once, try "one

Two Etiquette Issues That Can Fool You

Just Let Me Finish!

It might seem that a team member who repeatedly steps on the last few words of others is just being rude. What might actually be going on is that they're finding the conversation so stimulating that they're having trouble not blurting out the ideas exploding inside their own head. You want this kind of joyful excitement from your team, so you'll need to use tactics that allow them to sustain their joy, but in a more polite way.

1. Casually stroll behind them when you think they're about to interrupt. When they start to, make silent, light physical content, like touching your fingertips to their shoulder. This breaks the rhythm of their rudeness and gives them a chance to realize what they're about to do.

2. If subtlety fails, pull them aside on a break. Rather than telling them that they did something wrong, objectively describe their actions. If they still don't get it, describe the impact their actions may be having on their victims.

Was I Just Talking?

The insidious flip side of the excited interrupter is the team member who never interrupts other team members, but never listens to them either.

These folks will pleasantly nod their heads while someone else is talking. They'll politely wait their turn and then say something that has no relation to the comments of the last person.

It usually takes two or three times of seeing this to realize it's going on. Once you recognize it, you'll probably find that only overt action will protect your other team members. But you can still approach it in a friendly manner:

> "And I think that's going to be an important point Fred, but I need to make sure I understand Wilma's point first.
>
> "Wilma, *<fill in a question relevant to Wilma's comment here>*?"

at a time" rather than "Eric, shut the hell up!"

4. When decorum is threatened, make fast decisions and communicate them with just a few words in a firm, but friendly tone. For example, if three people all want to respond at the same time, offer a fast solution: "Okay, Boris first, then Natasha, and then Rocky. Go ahead, Boris."

5. Never fight noise with noise. Human nature is to react to loud noise with louder noise. Try the opposite. As others get louder, speak more quietly. As the meeting leader, many will feel the need to hear what you're saying. The only way they'll be able to do that is to make less noise to hear your quiet voice. (NOTE: This won't always work, but you might be surprised how often it does.)

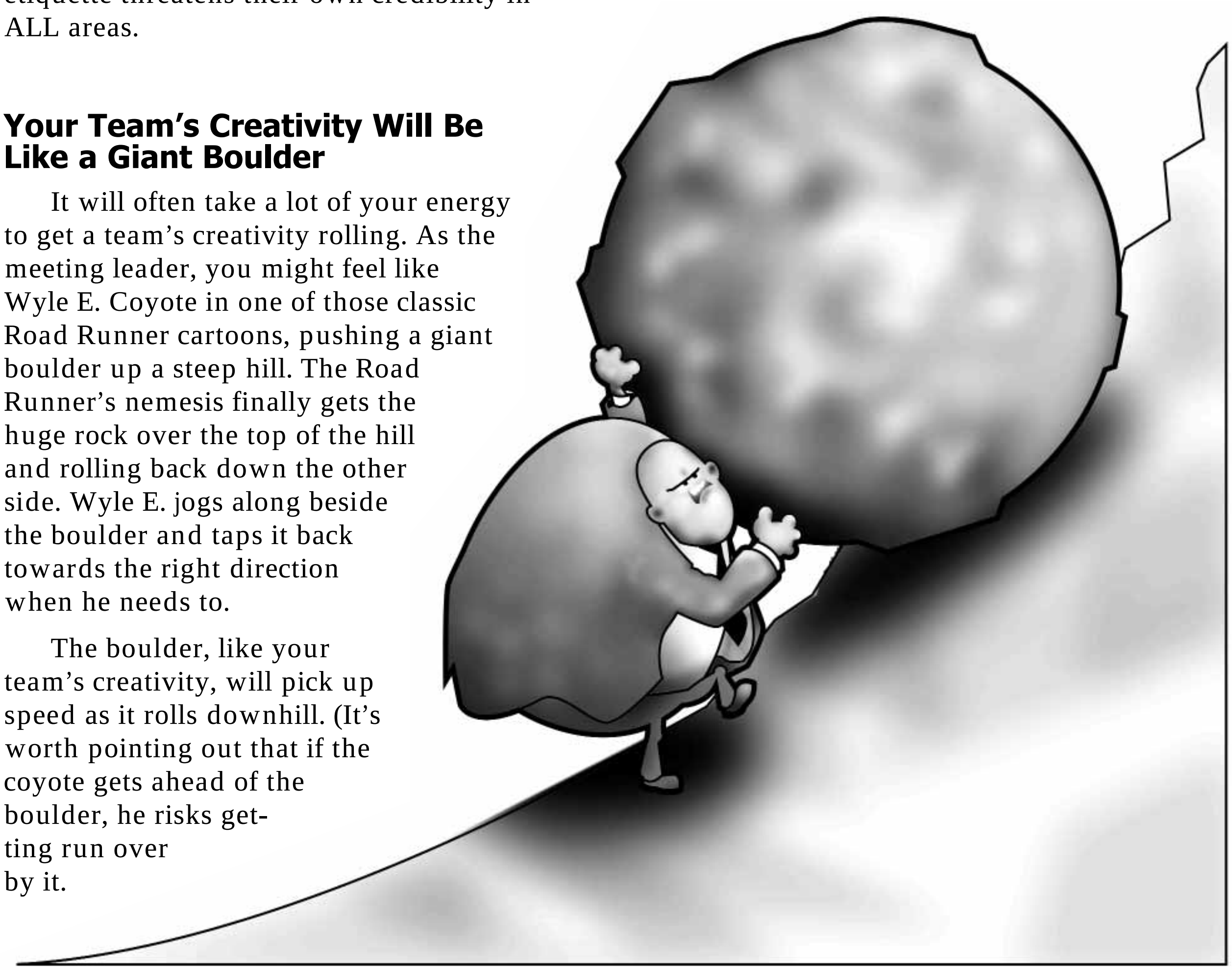
6. Walk the talk. This is the single most important thing you have to do. A leader who continually tells the group to observe etiquette and then doesn't observe the same etiquette threatens their own credibility in ALL areas.

Your Team's Creativity Will Be Like a Giant Boulder

It will often take a lot of your energy to get a team's creativity rolling. As the meeting leader, you might feel like Wyle E. Coyote in one of those classic Road Runner cartoons, pushing a giant boulder up a steep hill. The Road Runner's nemesis finally gets the huge rock over the top of the hill and rolling back down the other side. Wyle E. jogs along beside the boulder and taps it back towards the right direction when he needs to.

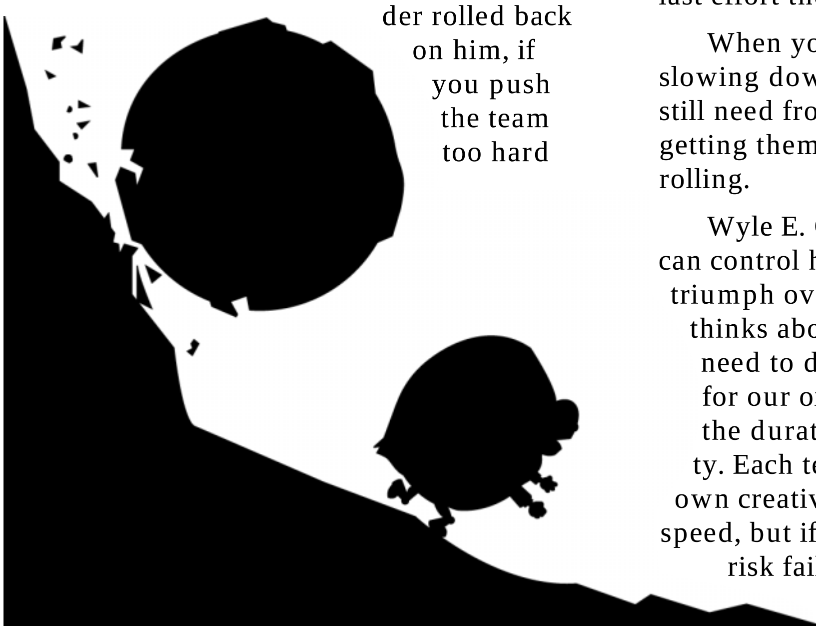
The boulder, like your team's creativity, will pick up speed as it rolls downhill. (It's worth pointing out that if the coyote gets ahead of the boulder, he risks getting run over by it. The same is true of your team's creativity: You don't want to try to slow it down or get in its way once it's rolling.)

Wyle E.'s boulder will eventually reach the bottom of the hill going as fast as it will ever go. On the flat surface of the desert val-



ley, the boulder's momentum will eventually die out. Mr. Coyote is not generally considered to be the wisest of cartoon characters so he may get upset when the boulder starts to slow down and he may use a lot of his own energy to keep it moving. In fact, he may push it all the way back up a new hill. But even the healthiest coyote gets winded eventually. If this happens half way up the new hill, the boulder will roll back over old Wyle E.

Each team's creativity has its own top rolling speed. Not long after it reaches that speed, your team will start to get tired and their creativity will slow down. You can keep trying to push them along, but remember what happened to our cartoon friend. Just like Wyle E's boulder rolled back on him, if you push the team too hard and too long, they will turn on you. Once they start rolling at you instead of with you, they'll find new energy with which to roll over you.



Long before that happens, you need to be looking for signs of the team's creativity petering out. There will be times in any meeting where the team needs you to push them to understand a new concept, or to use a new way of talking about something, or to find the overlap between concepts. But just because you have to push them in these situations doesn't always mean that they're tired.

A more effective way to gauge creative fatigue is to look for points of comparison. For example, if the team is trying in earnest now, are they being less successful than the last effort they made in earnest?

When you suspect the team's creativity is slowing down, identify essential things you still need from the team and concentrate on getting them. Then let the boulder stop rolling.

Wyle E. Coyote foolishly thinks that he can control his destiny; that he can some how triumph over the Road Runner if he just thinks about it hard enough. While we need to do all we can to guarantee success for our oxygen meetings, we can't control the duration or speed of a team's creativity. Each team in each situation will have its own creative speed. We should gauge that speed, but if we try to control or dictate it, we risk failing as badly as Wyle E.

Problem-Solving Tools

Oxygen meetings are most effective when you they're used to solve problems. If you get stuck while you're leading a group problem-solving exercise, one of the following techniques should help you move forward.

Problem-Solving Tool #1: The Scientific Method

This methodology is useful for more than scientific challenges. The key to this method is repeating the steps as many times as needed until a hypothesis is proven.

Step 1. Define the problem

This first step is both essential and surprisingly difficult, especially when a team is doing the defining. (Several people may think that they're all describing the same problem when they're actually talking about different problems.)

Defining the problem is the single most important step in any problem-solving exercise. The scientific method forces groups to develop a single description of the problem. For example, let's say that a Web site has seen a steep decline in page views over the last month. Different departments may see the drop in different ways:

- **From the Marketing Department:** "The site traffic has dropped because users aren't coming to the site as much."
- **From content programmers:** "The site traffic has dropped because users are exploring the site less."
- **From the Research Department:** "The site traffic hasn't dropped. The traffic numbers have changed because our vendor screwed up."

Each of these explanations is important, but if the team tries to address all of them at once, none of problems will be properly defined. The team will have to work on the three problems one at a time if they want to be successful.

Step 2: Form a hypothesis

If the team above used the definition of the problem that dealt with the validity of the vendor's traffic numbers, their hypothesis might be:

"The vendor's site traffic numbers are valid."

Step 3: Test the hypothesis

The scientific method uses experiments to test whether the hypothesis is correct or incorrect. For example:

- "If the site traffic numbers are valid, different parts of the site should have different changes in numbers. Investigate traffic to subsections of the site and compare percentile changes."

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The Scientific Method Shows Up in the Strangest Places

From the 1979 movie *The Jerk*:

Cans begin to pop on the display next to Navin (played by Steve Martin).

Navin: Hey Harry, look at this! What's the matter with these cans?
Madman: (Firing a rifle from up in the hills.) Die milk face!
Navin: (More cans pop.) These cans are defective - they're springing leaks! Come over here and look at this!
Harry: Listen, you better run for cover or you're going to spring a leak!
Navin: Huh?
Harry: We don't have defective cans; we have a defective person out there!

Navin's definition of the problem:
The cans are leaking.

Navin's hypothesis:
The cans are defective.

Navin's test of the hypothesis:
Have Harry observe the cans.

Navin's interpretation of the test results:
The cans aren't leaking, they've been shot. Navin will need to develop a new hypothesis based on this redefined problem.

Navin (Steve Martin) has a theory about the leaking cans.

M. Emmet Walsh plays a madman who picks his victims out of the phone book.

Navin: He hates these cans! Stay away from the cans!
Madman: Die gas pumper! (The glass on a pump breaks.)
Navin: Get away from those cans! (Navin runs inside the station.)
Navin: There's cans in there too! (The gas station window breaks.) More cans!
Madman: Die you bastard!
Harry: He doesn't want to put holes in the cans, he want to put holes in you!
Navin: What?
Madman: Milk faced bastard!

Navin's new hypothesis:
The gunman hates cans.

Navin's new test of the hypothesis:
The gunman will only shoot at places that have cans.

Navin's interpretation of new test results:
Hypothesis is confirmed by gunman trying to hurt cans in the station as well.

Navin: Oh my God, I'm endangering your life! Cover me!
Harry: You're covered.
Madman: Suck my toes!
Navin: You stay here, I'll distract him. (Navin pulls away in a car with no tires on its wheel rims, Madman follows behind on foot.)

Navin's reassessment:
Navin realizes that he misinterpreted the data and must develop a new hypothesis.

Navin's final hypothesis:
The gunman is shooting at HIM, not at the cans.

Navin's test of the final hypothesis:
If Navin is the target, the gunman will chase him.

Navin's interpretation of the test results:
The third hypothesis is correct. Now run like hell. The scientific method has saved yet another life!

Continued from page 27

- "If site traffic numbers are NOT valid, other sites using the same vendor may be experiencing radical changes in their numbers. Investigate the experiences of the other vendor clients."

Step 4: Interpret test results and draw conclusions

Sometimes, the team will only need to use the first three steps of the scientific method. "Define the problem," "Form a hypothesis," and "Test the hypothesis" can be used to set common goals and develop relevant actions. The actions for the team we've been using as an example could include investigating traffic to subsections and contacting other vendor clients. (Depending on the problem being solved, some teams will be able to interpret test data and draw conclusions while still in the oxygen meeting.)

If a team needs to continue with the scientific method, the fourth step they take will be to analyze the results from testing the hypothesis. If the hypothesis is proven wrong, the team goes back to the first step of the method to make sure that they properly defined the problem.

The cycle has to be repeated as many times as necessary to develop a hypothesis that can be proven.

Problem-Solving Tool #2: User Goals

Product development isn't about artistic expression. Products are created by people so that other people can use them (in contrast to a painter who may paint primarily to satisfy herself). Because of this, user goals can be a powerful problem-solving tool.

When groups solve problems, their solutions tend to satisfy their own needs first. This results in flawed solutions. A problem can be addressed much more effectively by concentrating on the needs of the people who will be affected by the solution.

If a group of printers got together to design the ultimate paperback book and they addressed only their own needs, they may develop a book with no margins, little white space, and no cover. The type would be tiny, just big enough to be legible, and the paper would be as thin as onionskin. A 200-page book that costs three dollars to produce today would only have 30 pages and would cost its producers less than a dollar. It would satisfy all of their needs except one: Nobody would buy it.

The same group could also try starting their process by escaping their own world and entering the world of their customers. They could generate a list of user goals. (I've always found it most effective to describe user goals as a series of "I want" or "I need" statements. It seems to help teams better understand their users' worlds.) The list of user goals the printers might come up with:

- "I want to be able to read it easily."
- "I want to be able to shove it in my back pocket without screwing up the pages."
- "I want to be able to write notes in margins."

If the group was being truthful and forward thinking, they would also include these kinds of user goals:

- "I want to transfer parts of the text to digital devices like my computer or my fax machine without retyping."
- "I want to be able to read it in the dark."
- "I want make the type bigger when my eyes are tired."

It would be a mistake to stop the group from listing these kinds of user goals even though these types of goals would suggest a product (an electronic book) that might actually put the group out of business. If you tell people to filter out one kind of ideas, it inhibits their ability to generate the other kinds of ideas. Instead, it's better to generate all kinds of ideas and only afterwards, identify which ones are out of scope for the project. (In the printers example, the goal of the exercise isn't necessarily to come up with the best possible solution, just the best solution the company can actually produce.)

Problem-Solving Tool #3: Minimum Good, Maximum Bad

This tool helps you analyze solutions by comparing the least you can expect from a course of action to the worst that the course of action may cause.

Scenario A

You just finished a massive, homemade dinner and your mother cuts you a big slab of strawberry cheesecake. You're totally stuffed, but you're considering eating that thick, rich slice of dessert.

Minimum good: It tastes sooooooo good.

Maximum bad: It's just too much food for your body and you end up vomiting. Repeatedly.

Scenario B

You're walking home from a movie and someone stops you, pulls a gun, and demands your money. You consider trying to grab the gun.

Minimum good: Nothing. It is entirely possible that nothing good comes from the effort.

Maximum bad: You die.

Minimum good and maximum bad won't tell you what to do, but they can go a long way to simplifying the criteria around your decision. If the person in the first scenario is a glutton, great food might be worth throwing up. A different person may so dislike the possibility of getting sick that they would take the same data and decide to just say no. It depends. (The decision in the second scenario seems much more obvious: If you reach for the gun, you'll be risking your life for something that may have no benefit.)

Problem-Solving Tool #4: Flip the Problem

Whenever you get completely stuck, try looking at the opposite of whatever you want.

Let's say that you're leading the group of printers mentioned earlier. They've figured out the structure of the best book that they could print. Someone has asked how they'll get people to buy the book. An uncomfortable silence stretches out to a few painful minutes until someone else says: "Well, what would you do so that people WOULDN'T buy it?" The quiet becomes a silent confusion. Finally, somebody speaks up.

"I wouldn't let them see any advantages over the way books are made now and I'd charge more."

The group's creativity surges with ideas for packaging and marketing to show distributors, store owners, and readers the advantages of the new kind of book. Business models are roughed out that cut the initial prices.

Running the Meeting

There's no single right way to run an oxygen meeting. If you want to try running an oxygen meeting, use elements described in this handbook that you like and ignore the rest. It's really important that you make each meeting you lead your own.

So go do that now. See you. Thanks for reading up to this page. Have a nice day.

Hmm. You're still here.

Well, I guess some of you might feel like the higher level oxygen meeting concepts aren't enough without a tangible set of instructions on how to run a meeting. Okay, well here's some steps that should work, but I meant what I said about making your meeting your own. This set of steps is just a suggestion:

- **Step 1:** Describe or divine what success looks like for the group.

This first step is a tricky one. If you overzealously plan where you want to be by the end of the meeting, you risk both limiting the work of the team and setting unrealistic expectations. Not describing any kind of target on the other hand, can make your team feel like they're just wandering around.

If you've ever driven a car in the valley of any U.S. western state, you've been on a seemingly endless, flat highway with only a big mountain in front of you for directional reference. You end up staring at the damn thing for hours before you finally get to it.

When you first start your drive, the mountain looks like it's a single color. The closer you get though, the more colors and shapes you see on the mountain. You notice all sorts of details that you couldn't have seen when you started.

That can work for oxygen meetings too. You'll want to describe success to the team in very general terms (since they haven't done any work yet, those terms are all you should really know at that point anyway). If you keep this initial description in front of the team through the course of the meeting, they'll eventually be able to fill in many of the details.

- **Step 2:** Use questions to lead the group through an analysis of the central problem that is to be solved.

Baseball slugger Reggie Jackson used to describe himself as the "straw that stirs the drink" for his team. Well, asking questions is what stirs oxygen meetings. The question is the oxygen meeting leader's most important and effective tool.

- **Step 3:** Look for overlap.

As the team wrestles with the answers to a progression of questions, you'll need to be looking for overlap in the thoughts, statements, and concepts expressed. Any overlap, even if it's on just a single data point, is the foundation for a common language.

For example, the contradictory rhetoric of these statements …

> "We will bury you!"
>
> **- Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev**
>
> "[Communism will be] left on the ash heap of history!"
>
> **- U.S. President Ronald Reagan**

… can be said to contain this point of overlap:

> "One of these two systems will outlast the other."

■ **Step 4:** Build a common language.

Use the overlap you heard in step 3 to build a common language. You need important definitions (of problems, deciding factors, success, etc.) to be understood the same way by different people. This will allow the team to collectively solve problems.

In the democracy versus communism example, the overlap was "One of these two systems will outlast the other." Depending on the problem trying to be solved, the common language could include these concepts:

- This conflict involves success over time, rather than success right away.
- Success is defined as being the only system that survives.
- These two systems are very different.
- We won't compromise our systems.

The people of this example, despite their diverse backgrounds, would understand at least these four concepts the same way. (What you next do with this language depends entirely on the problem you're trying to solve.)

■ **Step 5:** Get to the turning point.

Many oxygen meetings have a turning point. The turning point is when it suddenly becomes clear (usually just to the leader) where the team has been heading all along. The turning point isn't the solution; rather it's the point where you realize in what direction the solution will be found. When you recognize the turning point, you can relax.

Sometimes this happens at a reasonable time (halfway through the meeting, perhaps) and other times it happens 15 seconds before the meeting ends (in those painful instances, it usually seems to be a couple of minutes after everyone except you has given up).

It's going to be up to you to hear the Great Cosmic Tumblers clicking into place, signifying the meeting's turning point. Then you'll need to figure out how to describe to the team what you just figured out.

■ **Step 6:** Head home fast.

Your team has done what you asked; now you need to get them out of the meeting quickly and back to their normal lives. Once you've described the turning point to the team, it's your job to calculate the remaining steps (which usually deal with figuring out details). Be decisive in the steps you suggest, but let the team review, revise, and replace whatever you come up with.

Follow-Up the Meeting with e-Mail in Order to Own the Results

You're going to be pretty tired by the time your oxygen meeting is over, but you have one more essential task. You'll want to produce concise notes from the meeting and distribute them quickly.

You are the steward for the work that was done in your oxygen meeting. Your report (sent to all team members as well as some key non-team members) is your first and best chance to explain what went on.

It's essential that you use the right level of detail for the notes. To help determine the right level of detail, imagine that you're sitting on a park bench on a beautiful spring day. A car slams into the front of the empty shop across the street. You decide to send an e-mail about the crash.

You send your mother an exhaustive list of details about the incident including the time of day, the year and model of the car, the square feet of the storefront that was destroyed, and the name of the first cop on the scene. Mom calls you on your cell phone three minutes after you send the message. She tells you that she doesn't care about a single detail you gave her; she just wants to know that you're okay.

When you report on an oxygen meeting, you'll want to concentrate on what your audience cares about. You won't be doing anybody a favor by listing every detail from the meeting.

Let's go back to the car accident. You send an e-mail to a friend. This time, you list the events of the accident in chronological order using precise timestamps. Your friend sends you back an e-mail that says "… And at 4:06 p.m. I stopped reading your message and threw it in the trash."

Don't waste your time describing that this happened, and then this, and then this. Your readers will be much more interested in what it all really means.

If you were explaining what the car accident really meant, you could write about the traffic congestion caused by the accident or the dangers of opening a store at a major intersection. But if you wrote about all of the possible meanings, you'd again be flooding your readers with too much detail.

As leader of the oxygen meeting, it's up to you to decide what was important. It's your job to pick the important meaning out of all the possible meanings. If you're concise and coherent and deliver your reporting quickly, your perception of the meeting's outcome will become a mutually accepted reality within the company.

Other Things to Consider When Running a Meeting

When to Start

"Okay, let's just go ahead and start anyway …"

On the ultimate list of unanswerable questions (along with "Who created God?" and "Is man basically good or basically evil?") is "How do I get everyone to my meeting on time?"

"I know the answer to that one!" you may be saying, "I'm going to start my meeting on time even if only one person shows up!" Good luck. What I suspect will happen with that approach is that you'll start introducing addendums "… unless the CEO is late" or "… I'll only repeat missed points for VPs and above!"

That's not to say waiting for a critical mass of the team to show up is always a great play either. The people who are on time will get more resentful the longer you wait. If they get really pushy about telling you to get the meeting started, they can (whether they mean to or not) subtly take control of your meeting.

And if you treat your team like little kids ("Now make sure you show up on time …"), they will tend to act like little kids.

So make a decision on the meeting's start time individually for each meeting (one size doesn't fit all) and get used to the idea that they'll never be a great solution. Each time, you'll be picking the least bad solution for that particular meeting.

Repetition is Good and so is Repeating Stuff

Repetition is good and so is repeating stuff. Fill lulls in the meeting by recapping the meeting's key points. Repeating this kind of a list is also a polite way of steering the team back on course when they've strayed (but go ahead and let them stray for a couple of minutes first).

Professionals Don't Need Hall Passes

If you treat your group like school children, they'll act like a group of school children. Professional adults know when they have to go to the bathroom, and they generally know how to slip out of the room without much fanfare. They also tend to know when they're uncomfortable from sitting too long.

The funny thing about professionals is that they have to be told what they don't have to be told. By the time they're sitting in your meeting, they've been to hundreds of other meetings where they were expected to sit still until allowed to do otherwise. Do yourself a favor and make an early announcement that throughout the meeting, participants should do whatever they need to (including walking around, leaving the room, changing seats, standing against a wall, whatever) to keep their minds focused on the tasks at hand and that no hall passes (like the ones you needed to leave the room in elementary school) will be required.

Fatigue

It's easy enough to tell when a member of your team is getting tired. You'll see that cloudy look in their eyes, or you'll notice extra yawning. Sometimes, you'll be the first to see them fall asleep (my advice is to let them nod off until they start to snore or drool).

It's a bit harder to recognize your own fatigue because you'll only see it as it's reflected in the action of others. You'll start to think to yourself that the team is being really slow or thick, and that they're starting to act more rudely to one another. In reality, it's probably you that's not explaining things as well and you may be cutting people off (or in some other way dragging down the team's politeness quotient). Use whatever tools you think appropriate (breaks, sodas, snacks, etc.) to combat the fatigue for you and your team.

My Favorite Tool for Running an Oxygen Meeting

I really love using wipeboards (you know, those white things that use dry erase markers). It seems like there's never enough room on a wipeboard, even if the thing's the size of Utah, and even if you use both sides. But this is actually a good thing because it requires you to erase. And done correctly, erasing can help you and your team create some wonderful revisions.

For example, let's say that you're asking a team to identify what's wrong with the company telephone system (as part of a larger effort to make the company more efficient). You did such a great job setting up your meeting that your team members are just bursting with information. You're barely keeping up with the phone system criticisms bouncing around the room. Making no attempt to organize the group's frenzied feedback, you write:

Default voice=irritating
Bad to have to enter phone number to get messages
Need better vacation message
Preset buttons – confusing
Old phones made more sense
Why do we have to use phones – not part of computer?
2 much like old phones

You run out of room on the front, so you flip the board around and launch into a second exercise listing problems with the computer support system. This fills the other side and now there's no more space on the board.

You see in your team members' eyes that same frenzied look a dog has when it's straining at its leash. Stopping the meeting to copy the notes from the board would drive the team crazy and they'd never get their creative momentum back. So you decide to direct their energy towards getting to a greater level of detail on the original phone system critique.

You flip the board back to the front side and you read the list of phone system problems to the team. Somebody suggests that some of the problems can be grouped together. With a different color marker, you get the team to assign a letter for each grouping of problems. It looks like this:

A Default voice=irritating
B Bad to have to enter phone number to get messages
A Need better vacation message
B Preset buttons – confusing
C Old phones made more sense
D Why do we have to use phones – not part of computer?
C 2 much like old phones

And in a small patch of open board (squeezed sideways in a corner) you record the team's key to the groupings:

A=voicemail	**C=subjective**
B=phone unit	**D=out of box**

Since you've done a good job of inviting people from many different departments, one member of your team knows something that the rest of the team doesn't: Since the phones are less than a year old, the company doesn't plan on replacing them for three years. This means that items in the "B=phone unit" category are out of scope for the team's exercise.

The team also decides that largely subjective complaints aren't going to get solved to anybody's satisfaction. With a red marker, you cross out all B and C complaints. You're left with:

A Default voice=irritating
~~B Bad to have to enter phone number to get messages~~
A Need better vacation message
~~B Preset buttons – confusing~~
~~C Old phones made more sense~~
D Why do we have to use phones – not part of computer?
~~C 2 much like old phones~~

You erase the entire board and in the top right corner, very small, you write:

Phone system
- Improve voicemail
(irritating voice, vacation message)
- In future, computer-based?

You're making efficient use of the board, but that's not really the big deal. The big deal is that every member of your team now has a deep understanding of the changes needed for the phone system and every member could tell someone outside of the group how you all ended up with such a short list.

A more traditional approach would have been to have a noble member of the team agree to play stenographer and race you as you listed item after item on the board. You'd have erased the items as soon as the board was full. (As a result, the team would barely understand the flaws in the phone system.)

The real work of organizing all of the complaints and deciding on the next steps would have happened sometime after the meeting was over, probably by a subset of the overall team. The sub-group would have e-mailed their notes to the rest of the team.

Team members, buried in the workload of their normal lives, would have either not responded or they would have typed "OK" and hit the "send" button without reading the notes.

She who owns the marker owns the meeting

Wipeboards can affect the way your group reacts to your leadership. If you want tangible proof of this, try an experiment in two separate meetings. (The meetings don't have to be ones you're leading, but they do have to utilize the wipeboard.)

Meeting One

Place all the dry-erase markers next to the wipeboard. Make sure whoever is leading the meeting sits next to the board.

What you'll likely see: Folks will act like they're watching television and they'll treat the board like it's the leader's personal space.

If anybody in the group feels the need to use the board to make their point, you'll probably notice that not only do they first ask permission from the leader, but they may even seem apologetic about asking.

Meeting Two

Put all the markers in the middle of the table. Spread them out somewhat haphazardly.

What you'll likely see: If the markers on the table are within reach, you'll see a couple of folks pick them up absent-mindedly. If any in the group are particularly anal, they may even try to organize the markers (watch out for these folks, because it's also possible that they will try to put the markers in their "proper" place at the wipeboard, which will screw up your experiment).

As the meeting turns to the board, folks will be much more likely to jump up with marker in hand and use the board (and they probably won't even ask permission). When the leader uses the board, you'll see the group treat it as a tool owned by all, like a community bulletin board.

What the experiment results mean

There's nothing wrong with the ownership of the wipeboard in either meeting. The lesson is more about understanding the impact your actions can have on the group. If you're following the model of the first meeting, be aware that people may feel a barrier between them and the board. Make sure that's going to help you more than hurt you. If you make the board a public tool as in the second meeting, make sure that the ensuing free-for-all is appropriate for whatever you're trying to accomplish.

Three More Reasons I Love Wipeboards

■ **The wipeboard is visual.**

In many oxygen meetings, you try to describe solutions or other products that haven't been created yet. Words are frequently not enough to describe things that aren't there yet. Wipeboards allow you to use text, images, flow charts; whatever will best describe a thing. You (and each member of your team) can show complex relationships with just a couple of well-placed arrows and circles.

Text-specific meeting tools (like the group using a computer to create a single Word document) may seem efficient, but if it results in endless word editing rather than conceptual exploration, you're going to end up in later phases losing the time you saved. (NOTE: I've worked most of my career for newspaper-dominant media companies. People with any connection to a newsroom will word-edit a bottle of aspirin if you let them – "Shouldn't we define 'buffered?' " But if they're open to it, a wipeboard can liberate even those poor souls.)

■ **The wipeboard helps you empower your team.**

Don't underestimate the impact of writing a team member's comment on the wipeboard. It proves to them that they were heard and it encourages them to make further comment. (It also gives them the power to correct you if you misunderstood their point).

■ **The wipeboard is common property.**

You'll often want each member of the group to feel comfortable stepping up to the wipeboard with a marker. You'll see their comfort reflected in a higher level of participation. They may never actually step up to the board, but you might have a more successful meeting if they feel that they could if they wanted to.

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