

The logo for PIXL, featuring the word "PIXL" in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is lowercase and has a white dot above it. The background is a vibrant orange with various geometric patterns including circles, a grid of small ovals, and concentric circles.

IGNITING LEADERS
CHANGING LIVES

Running Effective Meetings

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Exclusive Content 22-23

The School of PiXL Leadership: Exclusive Content

The aim of these PiXL Leadership Round Ups is to take some of the most challenging issues we face, collate some of the research and leadership thinking on these issues and then turn it into practical ideas you can adopt in school.

Round Up 1: Running Effective Meetings

Meetings! We have plenty of them and may love them or loathe them, but are we doing meetings in the right way to enable us to get the outcomes that we need, see the impact and engage the team? It may be something that you have thought about a lot, or a little, but if we are going to spend so much of our time in meetings, we need to make sure that they are a great use of our time. How do we do this?!

Here are some helpful approaches and theories and some practical steps for you to consider.

What is the point of meeting?

In one meeting we may try and cover all of the following items:

- Shared vision and shared goals
- Efficient communication
- Accountability and transparency
- Discuss and think 'big picture'
- Analysis and drill down into the detail
- Review performance
- Building team

Is that even possible? Patrick Lencioni (*Death by Meeting*) argues that it is not. If we try and be all things to all people in one meeting, we are very likely to be nothing to anyone – he calls this 'meeting stew'. Drop all the ingredients in and hope for the best. It probably isn't the plan that makes the most sense.

What are the problems with meetings?

- Usually only one type of meeting where we throw everything in – meeting stew
- Lack of clarity about what the purpose is
- Lack of drama – we need to up the stakes and tell people in the first ten minutes what is at stake; this also raises the energy in the room. E.g. We are here today to focus on the Wildly Important Goal (WIG). If we do not manage to achieve this, then there are going to be 40 young people who cannot access the next stage of their education and it would also mean that we were performing well below national averages.
- Lack of structure – need to know how thinking will come out, how you will work the people in the room to get the greatest value from them
- No time to think – packed agendas with no thinking time built in
- No conflict – everyone politely agrees or keeps their conflicting opinions to themselves!

How do we up the drama?

- Outline what is at stake, e.g. the dangers of a bad decision, a threat
- ‘Jolt’ in the first ten minutes so that everyone feels the energy and the weight
- Create conditions where they care
- Mine for conflict
- Create conflict – this needs to be healthy and structured. Ask people for all the ways that this idea WON’T work, do a pre-mortem, an After Action Review – without blame.

How do we get the thinking out?

If your meetings are run in the hope that everyone will speak their opinion, all will have equal share of the time and people can think at speed, then that is the first thing that needs to be changed. Many people don’t like surprises, find giving a snap decision with no thinking time almost impossible and then become paralysed in their contributions because they do not want to look foolish by contributing half thought-out ideas. As leaders of meetings, we need to enable people to bring their BEST thinking and to avoid anything that stops that happening. If we get this right, we will create cultures where people are at their best more of the time and can bring meaningful contributions to meetings – this is better for everyone. Here are some ways how:

- **Pre-reading** – give this a week in advance and allow people to annotate/think before they come to the meeting. Give them the questions you want to pose so they can think through their answers. Also allow them time to do this!
- **Avoid HiPPOs** – the Highest Paid Person’s Opinion will always be the one that dominates unless you take steps to avoid that happening. The next two strategies help with this. Be aware that if you express an opinion and you are responsible for the promotion and pay of the people in the room, some of them may think twice about challenging you!
- **Brain writing** – at the start of the meeting, give people some pre-reading and some post-it notes; ask them to write down all their ideas on separate post-it notes and put them on the wall. This means that people must get their ideas on the page without the knowledge of anyone else’s opinion, so they cannot be swayed by that. If you do this, what you will find is that you are more likely to get all the ideas out and can then discuss them equally – no one knows ‘who said what’ so all ideas have equal merit. Helpful hint – give people the same colour post-it notes so they are not identifiable. When this is done, then start discussing the notes in turn, or group them into categories. No one needs to defend their idea or even admit it is theirs, every idea is given airtime.
- **Golden silence** – people are busy, and giving pre-reading before a meeting still doesn’t guarantee that people have the time to read it. At the start of the meeting, give people a drink, the pre-reading, a highlighter and 20-30 minutes to read in silence and gather their thoughts.

- **Before Action Reviews (BAR)** – used by the military regularly, ask the team to identify, in silence, all that may stop you achieving what you have decided OR things that you think will go wrong with the plan. Again, get the thinking out first without discussion and then discuss when everyone has contributed. It's helpful when you have instructed people to be pessimistic – most people won't dare go into that space unless asked! If you are going to do a BAR or AAR, it may be best to do this without leadership involvement, if you really want to unearth the truth without people being too reserved to be honest.

After Action Reviews (AAR) – same approach as above but this time after the event: what went well, what we have learned, update the lessons learned log. A good structure is:

- What were our intended results?
- What were our actual results?
- What caused our results?
- What will we do the same next time?
- What will we do differently?

Some teams hold a Before Action Review (BAR) rather like a pre-mortem:

- What are our intended results?
- What challenges can we anticipate?
- What have we or others learned from similar situations?
- What will make us successful this time?

4 types of meetings: review whether you have the right structure for meetings

To avoid 'meeting stew', Lencioni argues there are four different types of meetings with very different purposes, clear structures, behaviours and contributions.

1. The Daily Check-In
 - Huddle – what is happening today and are we ready?
 - Five minutes maximum
 - Consistent place each day
 - Same time for routines
 - Standing so it can't drag on!
2. The Weekly Tactical
 - The Lightning Round – what are you working on? What do you need?
 - Progress Review – how are things going? How do we know?
 - Real-time agenda – what are we bringing today?
 - Issues of immediate concern
3. The Monthly Strategic
 - Affects the business in fundamental ways
 - The most fun because it is a chance for deep, sustained thought

- Dive into the issues
- At times ad hoc
- Pre-reading essential (or in the meeting – see Golden Silence above)
- Enough time to get into the thinking
- No fear of conflict – mine for it

4. Quarterly Off-Site Review

- Team Review
- Personnel Review
- Big decisions that are massive for the company
- Deep thought about big issues
- Beware over structuring
- Not entertainment – the enjoyment comes by getting into ‘flow’ and working with colleagues closely
- Team unity – no ‘outsiders’ unless a facilitator is brought in

Some key things that you need to be aware of as you conduct/chair/contribute to meetings

- **Decide WHY.** Decide why you are gathering and be very specific about the purpose, not just what people are going to hear but how you want them to feel. For example, if you are having an SLT away afternoon you may say it is because ‘you are getting off site to meet together in a different context’. This is not specific enough. Instead, you could say: ‘to build and practice a culture of candour with one another. To revisit why we’re doing what we are doing and to reach agreement about it. To focus on the fractured relationships between pastoral and academic teams.’ Having a very clear purpose enables the meeting to be more focused. If there is no purpose, there is no point in having an away day – perhaps something more informal would be better. (Adapted from *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker)
- **Contracting.** Have you ever been clear about what you expect in meetings? Have you asked people what they like and what they find irritating? What they need from you to be their best? It may be that they prefer pre-reading, planned agendas, time to cool down after decisions that have been made.
- **Your behaviour.** How do you behave in meetings? Behaviour in meetings says a lot to everyone else about what kind of leader you are. What time do you show up? Are you always five minutes late or five minutes early? Do you check in with them as people? Who speaks first? Who speaks most? Do you cut people off? Does the meeting always over run?
- **Tough moments.** In a newly-formed team there are two critical moments: the first vulnerability and the first disagreement. Setting out ways that you intend to handle things before they happen will help people feel more comfortable in meetings when it does happen.

- **Listening.** In meetings, listening is like trampolines: someone speaks, you ask a question, they go deeper, you ask a question, people add insight. Issues bounce around and are amplified with you all being part of it. Watch your contributions – don't be too quick to jump in. Say things like, 'can you say more about that?' or 'go on' or repeat back, 'what I think I have heard you say is...'

If we can lead meetings better, the team are likely to be at their best more of the time – and so are we!
More impact, better team dynamics and better-quality thinking!

Thanks for reading!

Rachel Johnson

The content of this paper is taken from ideas from the following books:

*The Art of Gathering** – Priya Parker

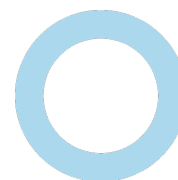
*The Culture Code** – Daniel Coyle

Nine Lies About Work – Marcus Buckingham

*Rebel Ideas** – Matthew Syed

Death by Meeting – Patrick Lencioni

(*Hear more on this book in the PiXL Leadership Bookclub podcast, available on all usual podcast platforms)





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