

*Excerpt of*  
**Meetings, by Default or by Design**

You are reading **an excerpt** of a workbook with 100+ upgrades and enhancements for all those who desire better meetings & events.

## **Meetings, by Default or by Design**

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Revised and crash-tested by Martin Sirk

Meetings, by Default or by Design describes 40 different default meeting practices in 40 chapters and analyses the potential for improvement for each of them. It does so in 4 Areas of possible improvement. This excerpt contains 8 summaries of those chapters, 2 summaries per Area. It also has the Introduction by Martin Sirk.

Below you will find the list of titles divided in the 4 Areas of Improvement.

### **Area 1, Reasons and Objectives**

- Why are you holding your meeting?
- Outcomes, impact and behaviour change
- Meeting reason: Information transfer
- Meeting reason networking
- Meeting reason: uniting your participants
- Meeting reason: motivation
- Meeting reason: decision-making
- Meeting reason: routine
- Designing meetings about strategy
- Making meetings memorable

### **Area 2, Production**

- Getting started the right way
- Who has the final say about the meeting?
- Budgets: spending rationale
- Face-to-face, online or hybrid?
- Working with suppliers
- Venue choice and achieving your objectives
- Room set-up and achieving your objectives
- Food, beverages and meals
- Big meetings: crowd power
- Multi-day meeting programmes
- Sustainability

### **Area 3, Participants**

- Who should attend the meeting?
- Whetting participants' appetites for your meeting
- Using diversity to unlock serendipity
- Meetings for participants from different countries
- Interaction? Yes, but for what purpose?
- Engagement must come to life

- Giving shape to your sessions: formats
- Participant bodies: what can they tell us?
- Conducting the meeting programme
- Managing clashes of Interest

#### **Area 4, Content**

- Speakers
- Q&A
- Spicing up content
- Connecting meeting content to a bigger picture
- How much fun can serious meetings be?
- Sensitive issues: elephants in the room
- Openings
- Closings
- Rituals and routines in meeting programmes

#### **Not in this Excerpt:**

- MindMeetings Manifesto: the 12 values our designs breaths.
- The chapters in full: including an advice you can do immediately and an advice for the long term
- How to use the book: the methodology that helps you to get the most out of the book.
- The real-life examples: illustrating the chapters with what we did in actual designs.
- Bio's of the Authors.

8 Summaries out of 40, 2 per Area of improvement

**Area 1, Reasons and Objectives:  
Why are you holding your meeting?**



**By default:**

Every meeting begins in the mind of an organiser. There, an idea takes shape, sparked by a good reason. Usually there is an important need for the organisation, for the participants or for both. Or there is a clear expectation that the meeting should take place in order to achieve something specific. Usually, the spark comes from one or two of these good reasons, such as getting people to think about a certain issue together.

**What you are missing:**

The initial thought is usually sparked by one or two important identified needs. These needs can be distinguished into six fundamental reasons why organisers may want a meeting. They are: learning, networking, alignment, motivation, decision-making and as a ritual. Each of the six reasons has a dedicated chapter in this area of improvement, reasons and objectives.

Most meetings can achieve objectives for several of these reasons in one go, rather than only the single function for which they were conceived originally.

**By design:**

Before getting into the fine-grained detail about the programme, hold on for a minute and have a close look at all six reasons. Can the meeting fulfil any other needs than the original idea you wanted it for? Can it perform multiple functions in one go? If it can (and it almost invariably can), then formulate objectives for these other reasons too, in addition to the ones you already had. That way, you kill two birds with one stone. Or perhaps even more!

## Area 1, Reasons and Objectives:

### Meeting reason: networking



#### By default:

Meeting organizers and participants claim that networking is among the main reasons for holding and attending meetings. However, the term networking has no clear definition, neither do organisers commit to what it should produce. As a result, the programme includes relatively unstructured activities (coffee breaks, drinks, receptions, etc), where they hope their loosely defined purpose may be fulfilled. It is assumed that all participants are able and willing to take part.

#### What you are missing:

That question should perhaps be: who are you missing?

Because the networking is ill-defined, many people are unsure whether it is an integral part of the programme or time they are free to dedicate to other things. This translates into a lack of commitment. Different participants may have very different expectations and objectives for networking activities.

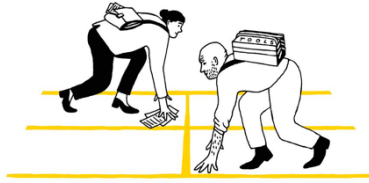
The second thing that is missing is structure, because organisers and delegates alike assume that networking will happen 'naturally' – which it doesn't. At least, not for everyone. Thirdly, it is assumed that all participants can take part in an equal way, which is even further from the truth. Many individuals and groups are at a distinct disadvantage when joining default networking activities: introverts, newcomers in the community, people who have other business to attend to, people for whom English is not their mother tongue, people who prefer content instead of small talk and people who want to connect with their home base or family. In short: all those people who feel uncomfortable in an unstructured situation where they are expected to engage 'spontaneously' in conversations with others previously unknown to them.

#### By design:

Make your networking easier and more meaningful by:

1. Clarifying what you mean by networking and how you intend to make it happen.
2. Lowering the natural barrier people feel when they are expected to talk with other people they don't know well, thanks to a light but clear structure: guided networking led by a skilled facilitator. This helps to make it culture and diversity-proof.
3. Slotting in time in the programme to network about content instead of merely socialising.

## Area 2, Production: Getting started the right way



### **By default:**

Your organisation has decided to hold a meeting for a certain purpose and to achieve certain goals. One of the first things you do is put a team of people together who will organise it. This project team includes both content and production-focused members. Their proposals and decisions for the programme come from *their* perceptions about content and execution, further shaped by the organisation's leaders, sometimes an advisory committee and satisfaction surveys.

### **What you are missing:**

The programme aims to achieve the stated objectives through the mindset of the project team. However, because it is based for the most part on input from the project team, it falls short on the participant perspective.

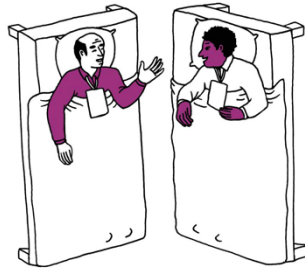
Input from participants adds essential insights into the ways in which the meeting and its participants must achieve the goals. It also provides the organisers insights into the participants' own objectives for the meeting. Good meeting programmes incorporate both.

### **By design:**

Have someone conduct at least six in-depth interviews with future participants. Ask the interviewees what they themselves want to get from the meeting as well as their views on organisational goals. Make sure the interviews are broad, open conversations. Once you start doing them, you should quickly extend the practise to all your meetings.

A giant leap forward is to organise sessions and whole meetings in which the content is entirely participant-generated. Participants decide what is relevant to them about a certain topic. As an organiser you step back and offer participants a simple process that helps them *navigate* the session, while you *facilitate* all the necessary support. That's all.

## Area 2, Production: Multi-day meeting programmes



### **By default:**

Typical multi-day meetings include recurring corporate management meetings and association conferences. The programmes for these meetings tend to follow a blueprint that can easily be replicated year on year. Such blueprints cover the overall needs of the organiser: reporting for companies, a wide choice of educational options and governance necessities for associations and alignment, networking and some rituals for all. There is ample space and time for inspiration and social activities, mostly during the evenings. A theme or concept, captured in a tagline, guides the programming and is used for marketing the event.

In comparison with one-day meetings, organisers are keen to include social activities because they understand that the relationships developed or strengthened through these pleasurable moments are beneficial for their organisation and for the participants.

### **What you are missing:**

Meeting organisers make little use of design options to enrich their programmes as a result of the night or nights away from home. It is as if the programme is merely a sum of two or three meeting days, simply adding more content and activities from one day to the next. The multi-day meeting, though, is a typical case where the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Seeing the entire programme as one continuous experience, instead of a series of loosely connected ones, opens up many options. One big thing to capitalise on is the fact that participants literally sleep on things. This inevitably produces a shift in perspective. Another is the possibility to perform activities that can extend over several days.

### **By design:**

Start connecting the experiences and learning that take place on the subsequent days. This can be as simple as explicitly inviting participants to reflect on the previous day and using these thoughts in the programme for the next days. Without any doubt, the night's sleep and the social programme will have modified their ideas and perceptions. Make use of that shift.

With regard to types of activities, your programme can benefit from longer and more comprehensive tasks, involving different formats. A particular form for that are exercises or formats that are iterative. Iteration allows participants to complete learning cycles more than once, adding new insights or improvements with each cycle. Multi-day meetings are perfect for these more comprehensive learning experiences.



### **Area 3, Participants: Who should attend the meeting?**



#### **By default:**

Meeting participants may be present because they pay for the experience or because their company tells them to attend. In the first case, the organiser's attention focuses on absolute numbers while in the second case it is on getting selected groups from the company's organigram. Few organisers actively take into account the function participants may have in the programme.

#### **What you are missing:**

Achieving the meeting's result should prevail over any other criterion for inviting participants. And the more you have the right people in the meeting room, the greater the chances of achieving the results. That means you need people who can contribute to generating the meeting's outcomes and who will act on them when the meeting is over. People's presence should be based on an analysis of their expected contributions, either during the event or afterwards.

Considering who *should not be* in the meeting is part of the reflections on having the right people there.

#### **By design:**

One way in which you can help participants to get a clear idea about their role in achieving the meeting's outcomes is by using the appropriate language. Your communications about and during the meeting should indicate the role you have in mind for them. If you expect participants to actively contribute to outcomes, filter out words that have a hospitality ring like guest, host, invitation, audience, etc.

A more radical way of getting the right people is by selecting them or offering them a way to self-select. Either way, the selection should happen based on what the meeting wishes to achieve and then working backwards to figure out who you need in order to achieve that.

### **Area 3, Participants: Engagement must come to life**



#### **By default:**

For most meetings, the organisers assume that delegate engagement will be the logical and automatic consequence of offering participants strong, captivating content, presented by authoritative speakers.

#### **What you are missing:**

Engagement created by the passive absorption of input is relatively weak. What you are missing is the power participants will unleash in dealing with any topic if they are intrinsically motivated and activated for a purpose. That creates strong engagement! Moreover, engagement is not a solitary activity, but is enhanced by stimulating group interactions and peer-to-peer reinforcement.

#### **By design:**

You achieve this strong engagement by offering participants the opportunity to act right away upon the content they receive, either as individuals or collectively. Challenge them to create their own outcomes by asking them to do something concrete and meaningful, for example by setting personal commitments or creating group projects. Such actions should be initiated right away, in the meeting itself. In addition, there are now unprecedented on-line opportunities to bring participants into action mode before and after meetings.

## Area 4, Content: Spicing up content



### By default

All meeting organisers want their content to be of the utmost interest to participants. For this purpose, they look for content that is of high quality, relevant and useful for participants. They also tend to look for full coverage of all possible aspects and angles on the content. They painstakingly source the most reputable and enticing speakers to ensure that content is indeed covered in-depth and to the full.

Since the content they present belongs to these speakers, the organiser often has a limited say over what is tabled. By securing the best content experts, organisers hand over a good deal of the responsibility for spicy content and hope for the best.

### What you are missing

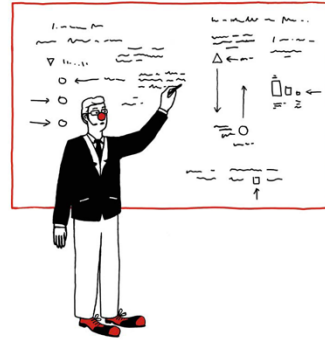
Meeting organisers too frequently fail to make use of concepts and tools that are routinely employed within other fields such as journalism and marketing to build attention and engagement with audiences. Meeting organisers can borrow from these other activities where professionals curate content. The assumption that content experts can naturally spice up their material into an irresistible attraction is almost guaranteed to fall short!

### By design

The tool we think organisers are missing to spice up content already exists. It is called the *Hotness Fueller*, and it consists of four mechanisms that will make almost any content hot and spicy. They are 'stickiness' (arousing basic human feelings, emerging from the content, so that it 'sticks'); a direct connection with participants' personal and professional lives; conflict (two equally viable but opposite interpretations of the content) and arousal of curiosity (for instance about the end of an unfinished story).

You can use the *Hotness Fueller* in many different ways to spice up your content. In an existing programme it may guide sharper Q&A or comments from a non-expert. When creating programmes from scratch, the four mechanisms may extend to single presentations by content experts or even to the entire programme and its objectives.

## Area 4 Content: How much fun can serious meetings be?



### By default:

Meetings can be more serious or more light-hearted. Participants from different cultural backgrounds (with different national, organisational or professional cultures) have different expectations about what they find appropriate. Some have a default that favours a relatively 'heavy' programme, others prefer programmes that contain more fun elements. The first group may consider the preference of the second superficial and on the verge of becoming unprofessional, while the second may perceive the first as pompous and on the verge of being boring. To avoid taking too many risks, especially in international meetings, organisers tend to err on what feels like the 'safe' side, which means more serious.

### What you are missing:

When different participant groups have different expectations about something, your first reaction is probably to look for the right balance between the two. That may work in relatively homogeneous groups, but in heterogeneous groups the right balance risks becoming an unsatisfactory compromise that enthruses no one. In that case, you risk losing all your participants' attention.

What you are missing is a sound analysis of how you can strike the right 'tone of voice' that keeps everyone on board. This means that you need to play with the balance between more serious and more fun elements and develop it into an optimum alternation. The optimum is not an average between serious and fun, it is the right oscillation between serious and fun for your participants and for the right reasons.

The most important part in that is how to get the various groups of participants to accept that sometimes it is good to address a heavy topic in a light-hearted way and sometimes it is good the other way around.

### By design:

The right tone of voice literally has a voice expressing it: that of the person or people who conduct your meeting, probably your moderator. Make sure these people understand how the programme incarnates the optimum balance between seriousness and fun. And how they can make choices about the right alternation between the two, while delivering the programme.

A deeper intervention is to analyse how heavy or light your programme is in comparison with the default expectations of your participants. Check whether the alternation between the two will help the participants to stay tuned and focused, in other words, whether their capacity to process the content is stimulated appropriately. There are ways in which you can make programmes either more serious or more fun, so as to optimize the balance.

# **Extroduction**

By Martin Sirk

## Designing for Good Meetings

Great design gets under your skin. It's the feeling that whatever *this* is, it was meant to be, it was crafted for *me* (or collectively for *us!*), it does what it's for, it serves its purpose. We can spot shoddily designed clothing at a hundred paces, a poorly designed online user experience gives us visceral shudders, a functionally inept building swiftly becomes a laughing stock or a source of communal shame.

Great design elicits an ancient feeling, going back to the first time our ancestors grasped a perfectly knapped flint tool, when our forebears gazed in awe at the dawn-lit symmetry of Stonehenge or participated in ritual song and dance at prehistoric springtime ceremonies. We instinctively recognise great design when we see it, touch it, experience it: we're genetically hard-wired and culturally-reinforced design nerds, both individually and collectively.

You know when you've attended a great meeting: an event designed to solve significant problems, where you and your fellow delegates feel involved and important; that creates a positive environment and makes it easy to interact with strangers; where you feel stimulated with fresh insights and where your perceptions are challenged; from which you return knowing what to do next to advance your career, your business, your research projects, or a societal mission. Where you leave feeling simultaneously energised and exhausted!

But the default is that the great majority of the meetings we attend are not particularly well-designed. We have all suffered in identikit hotel ballrooms through hours of predictable PowerPoint presentations or hyper-motivational keynotes from which we remember almost nothing of value; we spend most of our time with the people we already know; we listen passively as corporate change management initiatives are rolled out repetitively by the same old faces. There's usually a decent party somewhere in the mix (but the music is usually too loud to talk), and when it's over, the best we can say is that the buffet lunches were better than the previous year and that the meeting was "OK".

Why is this so? In part, it's because of the default ways in which our education and business models were organised over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today's meeting decision-makers grew up with these models and too often think of them as universal or 'natural': theatre style and classroom style room set-ups, and lecture and workshop formats that stem from top-down pedagogy and command-and-control corporate norms. Authority figures – experts and motivators – rule the roost. Delegates are there to absorb information and follow the centralised workflow. Standardisation is the norm.

It's also because of the roles that meetings suppliers have cast for themselves. Venues offer standard room layouts for standard price packages. Many city marketing organisations still think in terms of aggregate bed-nights, not impact and outcomes. Technical suppliers rigorously follow technical specifications; social programme designers follow narrowly defined RFPs. Few suppliers ask questions such as "what are your delegates' objectives from attending" or "what feelings are you trying to elicit during this part of the programme?" There is a reluctance amongst suppliers to initiate or engage in conversations about design

concepts, event psychology, experimentation or desired outcomes, even though they are often in the best position to offer novel solutions and valuable outsider perspectives.

Perhaps even more crucially, we have not yet seen an uprising amongst delegates! No-one would accept a mobile phone today with 30 minutes' battery life that has to be carried slung over a shoulder; we would reject out of hand any child car seat design that hasn't been crash-tested to destruction; and even icons like the Boeing 747 are now abandoned forever in the Mojave Desert, for design-knowledge, design-thinking and design solutions have moved on. You would expect delegates to revolt at meetings that clearly display a profound lack of imagination, with programmes that offer little help in delivering useful results. Instead, they all too often attempt to make the best of a poor job, to find personalised solutions in the liminal spaces hidden away in the shadows of the official event proceedings. And of course, every now and then, often surprisingly, we are exposed to a really brilliantly designed conference, which gives us an energy boost sufficient to bear the burden of the next half-dozen mediocre meeting experiences.

If this sounds depressing and pessimistic, I should clarify that I am actually an eternal optimist by nature, especially when it comes to the future of meetings. This optimism is fed by the knowledge that there are profound changes emerging today in the worlds of work and education, and it is inevitable these will powerfully influence the ways in which meeting design evolves. Societal priorities are being reordered, values are being upended, and everywhere we look the concept of 'purpose' is taking centre stage, whether in the motivation of young workers, the mission of corporations, or the relationship between citizens and their policymakers. These mega-trends cannot help but shape the way we design and experience our meetings, and they will be all the better for it.

The biggest work mega-trend has to be remote working. Tools to support remote teams and asynchronous work are proliferating, measured output is replacing excellence at office politics as the prime determinant of success, life-work balance is becoming the top employee demand. Corporate culture and relationships are at last being recognised as critical components of long-term success and organisational differentiation, so that when teams or entire workforces do get together physically, a huge amount of intellectual effort is being expended in making that time as valuable as possible. Design thinking and psychological awareness are shaping the new models that are emerging, and meetings are becoming a more integral part of the overall organisational vision, not treated as a stand-alone activity.

More and more of the smartest, most progressive companies are embracing community-led models, involving the management of complex, non-hierarchical networks of in-house and external teams, suppliers, partners, clients and customers across dozens of countries. Delegates at an ever-increasing proportion of corporate events won't be ordered to attend, they will need to be enticed, and if that company's meeting design doesn't deliver what delegates need, they will simply vote with their feet!

In education, collaboration and creative problem-solving are (at last!) winning the struggle against rote-learning and memory-testing. The champions of pedagogical models that prepared workers for the age of mass production are fighting a losing battle, and countries

that are giving their young people the intellectual tools to be successful in the digital age – from Estonia to Singapore – are being emulated by their competitors. With talent being so mobile, not shifting to this new educational mindset – for countries, as for meeting owners, as for individuals - is a recipe for competitive obsolescence. This is the source of a new generation of delegates, who will simply refuse to accept antiquated ways of sharing, critically evaluating and creating knowledge.

We are living through a golden age of association creation, accelerated mightily by the lockdowns resulting from the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. Individuals who care passionately about a shared interest or challenge, whether that be scientific, business-related, or societal, have found each other online and started to build long-term communities, not least because for the first time ever there are scalable problem-solving and engagement tools, from Mural to Zoom. But they wouldn't think of describing themselves as 'associations' and won't have any interest in the traditions and rituals of association general assemblies! Many are already moving from online to face-to-face meetings, and in doing so they will bring their tools and culture and community engagement models with them, and this will help to revolutionise the association meetings sector.

Convention bureaux and city development agencies are increasingly talking about citizen-centred marketing and economic development strategies, intending that the meetings they attract should be aligned with the goals expressed by their citizens: more circular economic flows, better solutions for societal and environmental challenges, bringing in more investment for local institutions, transferring valuable know-how and expertise where it's needed on the ground. If meetings cannot be designed to unlock these benefits, many destinations will not want to support attracting and hosting them. But this trend also creates a growing reservoir of strategic destination partners for those who do design impactful and purpose-driven events.

We have a choice. We can wait for these mega-trends to gradually reshape the landscape of event experience for the better, or we can take action right now by adopting the concepts, practices and overall philosophy that can be found throughout this book. Where to start? My advice is to ask these very simple ten questions that go to the heart of how we design and evaluate our meetings:

1. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it deliver the company's or association's objectives, and those of the attending delegates?*

2. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it pay vastly more attention to what's going on inside delegates' brains than what they put in their mouths at lunchtime?*

3. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Do the positive outcomes dramatically outweigh the environmental impact of holding it?*

4. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it resonate with and influence audiences far beyond its duration and physical*



*location?*

5. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it facilitate understanding and respect between those from different cultures or holding different viewpoints?*

6. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it add to the sum of new knowledge and wisdom in the world?*

7. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it help to reduce the sum of superstition, prejudice, ignorance, and pseudoscientific nonsense in the world?*

8. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Does it generate creative solutions for society's most challenging problems?*

9. Is this a good meeting?

*\* Was it fun or intellectually stimulating to attend?*

10. Is this a good meeting?

***\* If not, why on earth did you decide to organise it, host it, or attend?!***

Designing a “good meeting” isn’t rocket science, but it does require a comprehensive toolkit of proven techniques and new ways of thinking about purpose and outcomes, context and environment, behaviour and beliefs. Put simply, it requires the insights and innovations that can be found throughout “Meetings, by Default or by Design”!