

Save Time, Temper and Tedium

3 Simple Steps for Better Meetings

Caitlin Walker

Meetings can be the bane of a project; taking up time, causing conflict, achieving little. How often have you listened to people complain about meetings at work?

Meetings can also be the boon of a project; co-inspirational, a chance to air and dispel fears, a time to rehearse the next steps and share great practice and get the support you need to work at your best. What would it be like to look forward to meetings knowing you had a tool to navigate more successfully through them?

A common complaint about meetings is that people come with hidden agendas. That one person is trying to sabotage a discussion or bulldoze through a point. In our practise, using the '**Clean Set-Up**', we've noticed that hidden agendas could more appropriately be called conflicting agendas. The fact that they are 'hidden' is simply a result of there being no space to hear about them before the meeting began.

Part of our focus at Training Attention has been on what are the *simplest* processes we can leave behind in an organisation that will keep on working long after we've left. The '**Clean Set-up**' is a great example; it takes an hour to learn and only a few minutes to put into operation yet it can save time, temper and tedium.

Where did Clean Set Up come from?

Clean Set-up was originally designed to allow two trainers with very different styles share training space without annoying each other.

Using David Grove's clean questions they elicited metaphors for how they wanted projects to go, what state they needed to be in and how they wanted to work

together, before going public. This ensured that both were clear about the intentions for the event.

It's Clean because it is a well bounded space in which each of them gathers clean information to really understand what the other wants to have happen.

Over the last 10 years it has been tested and honed and is now in a format where it can be applied to self, in partnership and across large groups.

What is it?

I find the best way to introduce it is by example so I've chosen two actual set-ups.

Scenario 1 is prior to a meeting with two directors of a private company.

Scenario 2 is with one senior manager, prior to a whole department team building event for a high level central government team.

Clean Set Up - Step 1

The **first phase** of the **Clean Set Up** asks overtly for everyone's agenda with its initial question. It also trains people's attention on what they'd like to have happen.

For this _____ to be really useful for you, it will be like what?

You then ask 2 or 3 non-leading questions to elaborate on their answer 'cleanly'.

Follow this by asking for sensory specific evidence 'what will you see or hear' when things are the way they want them?

Articles on 'clean questions' are available in previous editions of ReSource.



Clean Set Up - Step 2

The **second phase** of the Clean Set Up devolves responsibility for achieving agendas from the facilitator or chair to the individuals attending.

It encourages people to be self-aware and to take responsibility for their own state.

For this _____ to be like _____ (use some of their answer) _____ you'll need to be like what?

(Note: the 'need to be' opens the frame of necessity which can be useful in contexts where people are reluctant to take responsibility for their state. In other circumstance 'you'd like to be like what?' or 'you could be like what?' may be more useful.)

The facilitator or chair then asks 2 or 3 non-leading questions to elaborate on their answer 'cleanly' followed by sensory specific questions.

Scenario 1:

For this meeting to be really useful for you it will be like what?

I'd like it to be like sorting out a big sewing box with thread and buttons and pins and scraps of material.

When it's like sorting out a sewing box, what happens before the sorting out?

We'll each have assigned ourselves to one role i.e. I'll collect buttons if you do all the material.

Is there anything else about the sorting?

We're all involved in the sorting and it's tedious but we're chatting and laughing while we're doing it so time flies.

Evidence: *Lots of smiling, a nice pace where we can stop and make tea, no-one talking over anyone else. All the to-do list gets done without any complaints.*

Scenario 2:

If this team building event were to be really useful it will be like what?

Something new & different. A fear-free but challenging environment.

When it's fear-free, where will the fear-free come from?

I will be able to say what I need to say without fear of reprisals.

When it's challenging, what kind of challenging?

Bouncing a heavy ball powerfully to one another and rising to the challenge of catching it and passing it back.

Evidence: *No power point slides. Sitting in a non-hierarchical style. Whoever is facilitating makes sure that each person has equal time to speak.*

When someone says something negative, at least 3 questions on it before we move on so that even if we're uncomfortable we show one another we believe we can sort it out.

Scenario 1:

For the meeting to be like sorting a sewing box, you'd like to be like what?

Clear about my role, not trying to do buttons and pins and thread at the same time but sticking to my job and trusting they'll stick to theirs.

When you're trusting like that, where does the trusting come from?

It will come from this exercise. If we've agreed to it I'll trust them to get on. Its not knowing that makes me anxious and trying to do to much.

When you're clear about your role, what happens next?

Pride in all my buttons being sorted on time. Interest in how they're getting on.

Evidence: *I'll be sitting back when others are presenting their sections and actually listening instead of jumping in.*

Scenario 2:

For this team building to be like passing a heavy ball between you, you'll need to be like what?

Dressed correctly, warmed up, aware of how heavy some balls might be, aware of how delicate some team members can be.

What kind of delicate is that?

Some people are quite wary in this team and they'll need more of a warning that I'm going to pass a ball to them.

When dressed correctly, is there anything else about dressed correctly?

Yeah, I mean I've got what I need to play the game.



Evidence: I'll have facts and figures summarised and available with me so that if people want to ask questions they can be answered there and then. If I find that I've thrown a ball too hard and someone couldn't catch it, I'll apologise first and then say something like – let me try and put that more clearly.

Clean Set Up - Step 3

The **third phase** is about getting agreement between individuals for the support an individual needs.

For this _____ to be really useful for you, and you to be like _____, what support do you need?

Again ask 2 or 3 non-leading questions, then ask for sensory specific evidence 'what will you see or hear when you're getting the support you want?'

Scenario 1:

For this meeting to be like sorting a sewing box and for you to be trusting others to get on with their job and proud of your buttons, what support do you need?

I want people to enjoy their bit of the box as much as me.

When they're enjoying their bit of the box, what happens next?

I can really get on with mine and not worry about them.

What kind of enjoy?

Maybe that's not the right word – I mean more that they're getting on with it enthusiastically and not coveting any of my buttons.

Evidence: *I'd like each of us to write up what bit we're going to do and then a 10 minute debrief when we've finished and give each other feedback.*

Scenario 2:

For this team building event to be like passing a heavy ball between you and you to be warmed up and aware, what support do you need?

I need to know we're all playing the game.

When need to know, is there anything else about need to know?

I want to know other people's agendas so that I know what kind of balls other people are likely to be passing.

When we're all playing the game, what happens next?

We get better at it. We can throw harder and practice, then when we're out in competition we can take anything our opponents throw at us because we've been working so well together.

Evidence: *Could we make these pre-course sessions public? Maybe post them on the wall so we can go over them during coffee before we start?*

Tips for Success

Tip 1

Make the length of time you do the set-up appropriate to the event. 5 minutes for a 1 hour meeting? 20 minutes for a one day workshop? You can save time and appeal to those who need processing time by sending out the questions prior to the event.

Tip 2

Many people find it difficult to distinguish sensory specific information from conceptual. It may take a couple of goes to get the evidence for what they'll see, hear and feel.

Tip 3

When using clean set-up in a business context ask no more than three questions of any one answer. More than this turns the interaction into a coaching or therapy session and may elicit quite personal information. If you want to develop clean coaching skills that will allow you to work more deeply and safely with clients, explore some of the clean trainings on offer to find one that suits you.

Once the agendas are articulated the facilitator can use the material in a number of ways. It can be put on flip charts. It can be displayed on walls. It can be kept private with just one or two key points being shared publicly. It can be used to review the meeting straight afterwards or used to track a project during quarterly reviews. It can be used in staff appraisals and in team coaching.

Mini Case Reports

Case 1.

Cheryl Winter, an associate using clean set-up in her own consultancy writes: I continually use the clean set-up with 'Boots People Point' to set clear mutual outcomes for business meetings and to discuss future training projects.

This keeps us on track during our 2 hour meetings and ensures we are even more open and relaxed with each other.

Case 2.

During my own 1-1 coaching sessions with Managers at E:ON, the clean set-up is used at the start of every coaching session, and indeed one manager requested a clean set up over the phone in preparation for a Senior Management Team meeting. The benefit for him came from me asking what 'support' he would need for the meeting to go just the way he wanted to go. He realised he wanted feedback from his colleagues who sat in on these meetings and he decided to ask for it. This proved even more valuable than expected. Asking them for feedback allowed him to share the contents of his forthcoming presentation, and gave him the opportunity to run through it 'live' prior to the event.

He then found during the meeting his colleagues contributed even more to the SMT issues raised than in previous meetings which gave him a level of support he had not experienced before.

He continues to use the clean set up for himself and encourages others to do the same.

Clean set-up isn't just a business tool. I personally use it with my husband before a potentially difficult argument escalates. Invariably it moves us from blameful carping to enthusiastic planning then leads into positive regard and really hearing what's important to each of us. Suddenly a row about housework and baby duty turns into a chance to remember just why I agreed to marry him.

The Clean Set Up can be seen demonstrated in the DVD: Clean Language and Systemic Modelling which also contains a workbook and many other exercises for developing the skills of communication across groups. Available from www.trainingattention.co.uk priced £30

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Caitlin Walker BA graduated in Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies and did four years post graduate research in 'Strategies for Lexical Access' including fieldwork in Ghana. She began modelling teaching while at SOAS, volunteering intermediary classes to translate information presented at lectures into different learning styles for the students.



She went on to set up literacy clubs in King's Cross, where children could come to learn to spell.

From 1996 to 1999 Caitlin was an Education tutor with the Dalston Youth Project, a Home Office run experiment to offer accelerated learning to at-risk students, alongside mentoring, to keep them in school. She ran these sessions as NLP modelling workshops and achieved excellent results with the students. The project won the Crime Prevention and Community Safety award for Great Britain.

She has since developed her modelling skills in business and education and designs modelling projects across a wide range of clients. She is an NLP trainer and

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