

MEETINGS

Make Your Meetings a Safe Space for Honest Conversation

by [Paul Axtell](#)

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DIGITAL VISION/GETTY IMAGES

I recently met with a group of managers to discuss ways to improve meetings. Our goal was to figure out how to create a space that people actually look forward to being in. We each began by describing a meeting we remembered as especially powerful.

One story stood out.

My colleague told us about a time when he was a young engineer working on several project teams in a manufacturing facility. He said, “Josh, my manager, would take everyone out for pizza when he came to the factory, and we’d have a ‘no secrets’ meeting. Josh asked us about whatever he wanted to know and we did the same in return. It was a meeting where everyone had permission to say or ask anything. It was amazing.”

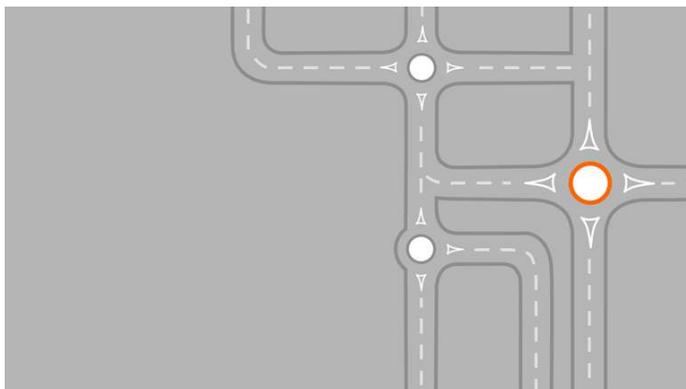
Josh used these meetings to discover how his team was doing, how their projects were progressing, and what they needed in terms of support and resources. He asked broad questions to initiate open conversation:

- What do you think I need to know?
- Where are you struggling?
- What are you proud of?

There was no pressure to have a perfect answer. The only requirement was to be honest and sincere. Of course, it helped that Josh was a thoughtful, authentic, and caring manager – qualities needed to create the psychological safety such a conversation requires.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

Meetings



How to Respond When You're Put on the Spot in a Meeting

The quest for better meetings ultimately lies in leading with mutual respect, inclusivity, and establishing a space that is safe enough for people to speak their minds. You may not need to do exactly what Josh did, but you can increase the freedom, candor, and quality of conversation in your own meetings by focusing on two key areas: giving permission and creating safety.

by Paul Axtell

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that he would like to have a “no secrets” meeting, Josh was giving his team permission to display a level of candor that isn’t reached in most settings. He asked those who spoke not to hold back or edit their thoughts. He asked those who listened to give their peers a chance to be fully heard, which is what we all want – to say exactly what we are thinking and be respected for saying it.

In your own meetings, talk about permission up front – it’s best to address it directly rather than assume it’s already there. What permission would you like from the group so that you can lead effectively? What permission does the group need from you to successfully participate?

As a leader, ask your team permission to:

- keep the conversation on track when it diverges or gets repetitive
- call on people who have not yet spoken
- hold people back if they are dominating the conversation
- ask clarifying questions when you need someone to elaborate

Empower your team by reminding them that they have permission to:

- ask questions at any time
- invite colleagues into the conversation if they have not spoken
- ask to spend extra time on a topic

Here’s how.

Let’s start with permission. Permission to say or ask anything is priceless. It allows us to fully express ourselves: to seek what we want, to give feedback, to speak up about issues when we find the need. By announcing

- ask other people to say more about where they stand on an issue
- express concerns that haven't been fully addressed

Finally, encourage your team (and yourself) to ask permission before making a comment. It will help ensure that your comments are non-threatening and received thoughtfully. Before speaking out, say:

- May I ask you something?
- May I tell you something?
- May I give you some coaching?
- May I push back a bit on what you are saying?

If that feels like too much to remember, the main takeaway is: *You and your team have a right to ask for whatever you need to be effective in a meeting – to lead for results, to fully express yourselves, and to add value to the discussion.*

Now, let's focus on safety. The degree to which a person feels safe in a meeting setting is largely based on their previous experiences. Many of us have – at one point or another – experienced feeling as if we were not heard or appreciated when we spoke up. But when people feel their comments will be listened to and treated with respect, they are more likely to be vulnerable and say exactly what they are thinking. Conversations become broader and deeper when everyone is involved and feels safe enough to speak their minds. To create psychological safety during a meeting:

- ask the group to devote their full attention to each person who speaks (do this at the start of the meeting)
- allow each person to take their time and complete their thoughts
- ask follow-up questions for clarity if necessary
- share what is valuable about someone's question or comment
- use people's names and refer back to earlier comments they've made
- invite people into the conversation who have not spoken

- answer any and all questions truthfully
- summarize what you learned as the meeting comes to an end
- explain what actions you will take to put those insights to use and ask your team for their suggestions as well
- acknowledge the quality of the conversation and thank the group for it

After the meeting, follow up by:

- completing the action items by the deadlines you set
- not sharing the conversation with others without permission
- sending written thank you notes to participants (when appropriate)
- following up with people to ensure their comments were addressed to their satisfaction

People don't just want to belong, they want to contribute. You can give your team the opportunity to do so by applying the above principles. In the process of having more candid, mutually respectful conversations, your team will become more cohesive and able to work together more powerfully. They may even begin to look forward to your meetings because of the remarkable conversations that permission and safety create. And better still, you may even start to look forward to leading those meetings.



Paul Axtell is an author, speaker, and corporate trainer. He is the author of two award-winning books: *Meetings Matter* and the recently released second edition of *Ten Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids*. He has developed a training series, *Being Remarkable*, which is designed to be led by managers or HR specialists.
