

Work meetings - how to be heard

by Sue Hadfield

Do you worry about how you perform at meetings? Do you see meetings as an opportunity to show off? Or do you use meetings as a chance to settle scores by undermining someone with sarcasm or muttered comments? Are you sometimes silent even though there are things that you want to say?

Many jobs require you to spend a good proportion of your time at meetings. It is important that you perform well and are actively involved; otherwise, you are wasting your time and you may be giving out the message that you are not interested in your job.



Meetings are when other people may be making a judgement about you and your performance. It is also worth examining how effective you feel you are at meetings, because this will affect your sense of **self-worth** and, ultimately, your sense of satisfaction with your job.

Making effective contributions

- Express your opinion using the word 'I': 'In my experience, I find that...' or 'I find that what works well is...' or 'I believe that'
- Refer to other people by their name: 'I agree with John's suggestion that we...' don't just nod or shake your head. Always give other people credit for their ideas or help (they will remember this).
- Don't assume that other people know what you are talking about. More arguments are caused by wrong assumptions than anything else. Check that they understand by watching their body language: people usually nod their heads inadvertently when they understand or agree with you.
- Don't be afraid to disagree, but it's best to at the same time to give your reasons and, preferably, your alternative suggestion: 'I can't see that working because....what I'd suggest is...'
- **Confident** people say when they don't understand something: 'I'm not sure what you mean by that. Are you saying..?' Don't be self-deprecating: 'I must be thick' and don't blame the other person: 'You've made that as clear as mud.' Sarcasm is always aggressive.
- It's OK to admit that you've changed your mind about something. In fact, it's disarming to say: 'I used to think that...but after listening to Carol I can now see that...'
- It's also fine to admit that you've made a mistake: 'I've given this some thought and realized that I was wrong about....' You don't have to be perfect to be good at your job.
- Always let the other person finish what they are saying. It's annoying to be interrupted - unless they have misunderstood you. If that's the case, then be polite: 'May I interrupt you as I think you have misunderstood...'
- Fend off interruptions (unless you are the one who has misunderstood) by saying politely: 'I'd just like to finish what I'm saying.'
- Sometimes you have to encourage other people to be more assertive by asking them for their opinion. Again, make sure that your tone of voice isn't aggressive and use their names: 'I'd like to hear what you think, Jo, about this...'
- If you've been having a long discussion or a disagreement propose the action that could be taken next: 'I suggest that we....' or 'Shall we agree that...'. If you don't do this someone else will.
- Be prepared to compromise. It's not about winning.

Of course, the way that you perform at meetings isn't just about the words that you actually speak; your **body language** is equally important. It's no good saying the right thing if the expression on your face is aggressive, or if you look down and mumble.

Posture

Throughout the meeting, lean slightly forward when people are speaking to show that you are interested; leaning back or slumping in your chair sends the message that you are bored. When you are speaking, move back briefly and then lean forward to signal your intention.

Supporting the head with the hand (elbow on the table, chin on the palm of your hand, fingers curved round your face) also indicates boredom and is insulting to the person speaking. (Although just touching your hand/fingers on your face shows genuine interest).

Leaning back on your chair with your hands interlocked behind your head is a sign that you think you are smarter than everyone else - and simply looks arrogant.

Hands

It's fine to gesticulate, but make sure that any actions you make with your hands are not aggressive. Don't point or wag your finger. Doodling or looking sneakily at your mobile when others are speaking indicates boredom or irritation.

Having your hands clenched together is usually seen as a sign of frustration - and the higher the hands are held the more negative you are feeling (so resting your elbows on the table and having your hands clenched in front of your face shows hostility).

It is generally accepted that folding your arms is a defensive posture. You might say that you feel more comfortable folding your arms when sitting at a meeting. But it feels comfortable because it corresponds with your attitude.

If you see someone else with this posture, then try handing them a book or a pen - changing the posture can **change** the attitude.

Eyes

It is usual to catch the eye of the chair before you speak to make sure that it is okay. Then you need to make sure that you have eye contact with others around the table (at least six, if there are too many) while you are speaking.

If you are disagreeing with what someone has said previously, make sure that you look at them (but not in a hostile way). Don't look down, as this implies submission.

Voice

Whenever you speak to a group, you need to raise your voice above conversational level - to ensure that everyone listens to you. Make sure that you speak clearly and confidently; don't cover your mouth with your hand or fiddle with **your hair**.

Remember: it's not only what you say, but also the way that you say it that makes a lasting impression on people.

Sue Hadfield is the author of [How To Be Assertive - available to buy now](#)