



# KEEPING A MEETING ON TRACK



Getting  
down to  
business

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## **3M** Meeting Network

How often have you been in a meeting where the subject of conversation was everything *except* the stated objective or agenda of the meeting? Too often? What if you could recognize some common things that get meetings off-topic and have some tools to get them back on track? You can.

### **Three way meetings go off-topic (and what to do about it).**

Meetings don't actually go off-topic, people do. It usually takes at least two people adrift to take the meeting off-course. That means you don't have to be an expert on meetings to help. You just have to notice when certain things show up in a meeting's conversations.

#### **Topic drift.**

Any topic can attract comments irrelevant to the meeting agenda or objective. Juicy as they are, such comments seduce one or more participants. If pursued — well, you've been there — the conversation diverges farther. Topic drift (sometimes called "being in the weeds") can be more fun and interesting than the meeting's objective, but can only be briefly tolerated if the group is to achieve its original purpose.

#### **What to do.**

- For a minor diversion, treat the occurrence lightly: "OK, let's come back and focus on the problem we need to solve. . ."
- When participants have been seriously diverted, say: "This discussion appears to be veering into areas outside the scope of this meeting. Can we table it or do we need to add it to the agenda?"

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### Great leader tip.

When you suspect a conversation has abandoned the objective or agenda of the meeting, verify your assessment by calling for a clarity check (sometimes called a process check). Get the group's attention and then say: "Excuse me, I'm not clear that this conversation is on-topic. I'd like to check to see if it's important to pursue now." If it's not important, other participants will confirm your assessment and those engaged in the conversation can be asked to continue it after the meeting.

### Breaking time agreements.

Time agreements are typically broken in two ways:

- The start and end times of the meeting aren't honored.
- The actual versus budgeted time for a given agenda item isn't honored.

Both problems can prevent the meeting from reaching its objective and cause participants to feel frustrated by the process.

### What to do.

- Call for a realistic agreement: "I notice that we don't heed our stated start and end times, which

causes a bind for me. Could we make a new agreement that reflects our true intentions and practice?"

- Announce it when agenda items run over the budgeted time: "We have spent more time on this item than intended. What does the group want to do?" Of course, if you assign more time, you'll need to reallocate the entire meeting's time budget at this point.

### Sub-Group Focus

Often, agenda items spawn dialogue among a small group who have important views to share with each other. However, when other attendees have no interest in the conversation, they become bystanders at their own meeting.

### What to do:

Make the spontaneous break-out session public by saying: "This discussion appears to involve only a few people. Is it something that can be resolved rapidly or is there another way to handle this? What does the group want to do?"

Once you know what to look for, keeping a meeting focused is something almost anyone can master.

*Make the meeting.*

### Related Reading

**How to Make Meetings Work;**  
Michael Doyle & David Straus;  
Berkley, Publishing Group: 1993.

### How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time;

Milo O. Frank; Washout Pub Co.; 1995.

### Helpful Hints

Be sure to create an agenda for your meeting. Doing so helps participants know what they should be talking about and keeps the conversation focused.

Anybody can ask if the conversation is still on-topic. If the meeting is off-course, don't wait for the leader to notice. Keeping a meeting focused is everyone's job!

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