

How to Get Your Point Across in Meetings

Leading or simply participating in a meeting can challenge your assertive communication skills in many ways. The following examples present some of the most common challenges.

Interruptions. You have a great idea, but every time you try to get it out of your mouth, someone interrupts you. If you allow yourself to be interrupted, you send a message that says, “Go ahead, I’m sure what you have to say is more important.” The question is, how do you politely tell someone to “sit down and shut up”?

Actually there’s a progression of tactics to use when handling interruptions. Always start with number 1, but if it fails, move on to number 2 and so on.

- Send nonverbal signals. Speak louder and deeper, hold up one hand to signal “stop,” and continue talking.
 - If the interrupter continues, add a verbal cue (“I’m not finished yet, thank you”) and continue talking. Address your comments to the whole group, using random eye contact with other participants and breaking eye contact with the interrupter to signal that you’re not going to be distracted by the interruption.
 - If the interrupter insists, add the power of touch by placing one hand firmly on the person’s arm. Look directly into his or her eyes, and say: “Please let me finish. (pause) Thank you.” (If the person is not close enough to touch, leaning forward toward him or her to the point of being out of your seat will create a similar effect.) Make sure you pause for a moment once you have the person’s attention, look him or her straight in the eye when you say “thank you,” and immediately continue what you were saying, addressing the entire group with your gestures and eye contact.

Note: Once you've successfully captured the attention of the group, get to the point. Now is not the time to philosophize and divert from the matter at hand.

Someone is dominating the discussion. When a meeting participant (usually an energetic, gregarious one) has a comment or lengthy opinion about every item on the agenda, one of the worst outcomes is that it can shut down or silence others at the table. Reining in these dominant types requires an assertive, straightforward approach: Acknowledge their contribution, and then ask for the input of someone else by name. "Thank you, Bart, you obviously have put a lot of thought into the subject. Julie, what are your thoughts?"

Side conversations are going on. Side conversations are not only disruptive and distracting, but they potentially withhold good ideas and useful observations from the group at large. When "sidebars" break out, regain the attention of the group and emphasize the benefit of sharing ideas with the whole group. "I'm glad to see that you all have ideas on this. Let's hear from you one at a time. Bill, I believe you were finishing a thought."

Someone comes in late. Whether occasional or habitual, latecomers must be dealt with at most meetings. Don't say, "That's all right"; it's not. If you stop your meeting to review for those who show up late, you risk losing control, breaking continuity, and angering participants who arrived on time. Simply acknowledge these people and ask them to be responsible for finding out what they missed.

An issue arises. For 99.999 percent of the times that someone brings up an item that's either not on the agenda or doesn't align with the purpose of the meeting, it's not appropriate or necessary to amend your agenda or lengthen the time of the meeting. Use the "parking lot" technique instead. List on a board or ask someone to take down any important items that need to be handled outside the meeting. If the issue persists, stop the meeting only long enough to schedule a separate time to handle the issue.

Your familiarity with complicated issues, your seniority or position in the company, your confidence with regard to your own ideas and abilities—all of these and many other variables can affect your desire and resolve to communicate assertively at a meeting. But the techniques and insights in this chapter offer a strong springboard for your plunge into these very important business interactions.