

How to think strategically at every meeting

By John M. Fulwider, Ph.D.

At every meeting attendees should think and talk about how each agenda item advances the organization's strategic plan. [John M. Bryson](#), who [wrote the book on strategic planning](#), says your periodic planning efforts are wasted if you don't think strategically about them—constantly.

To achieve this *strategic thinking*, leaders need to make time in agendas packed with reports and other material that wastes the time and/or pay of those present. Here's how:

Agenda: Allocate half the allotted time to *strategic thinking*, which involves doing three things in the context of each of your strategic plan items:

- Asking questions to identify and clarify problems
- Finding new ways to think about opportunities and challenges
- Drawing on the possibly hidden knowledge and talents of your colleagues and stakeholders

You can make time on the agenda by moving recurring and/or noncontroversial decisions to a *consent calendar* and moving reports to the *briefing book*. There's no reason to let politicians monopolize the consent calendar, which is simply a list of decisions to be approved by acclamation unless someone objects to an individual item and asks for its removal from the consent calendar. (The other items remain.) Setting this year's date for an annual event is just one example of an item that needs no discussion, or even mention, at a meeting.

Briefing book: Stick your reports in here and never look back to the days when colleagues read to you something you could have read yourself. All decision-supporting material and staff updates belong in a briefing book compiled by one person responsible for

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gathering contributions from the entire staff. Adopt a strict expectation that the briefing book be distributed to and read thoroughly by every attendee well in advance of the meeting—no exceptions, no excuses. Ensure the organization’s top-level strategic plan goals are reprinted in every briefing book.

Scott Morris, who [blogs for Results.com](#), suggests [three items for review at each meeting](#), which I in turn recommend as items for your briefing book’s standing table of contents. These are items any colleague can contribute to the briefing book:

1. Roadblocks – issues that are keeping me from getting my work done.
2. Suggestions – ideas I have for making things better.
3. Lessons – something I’ve learned that I want to share with the team.

Careful facilitation: The most skilled facilitator in the group—not necessarily the most senior person—should help the group stay on task throughout the meeting, but especially during the agenda items preceding the good stuff: the discussions of how to make current events and decisions advance the organization’s strategic plan.

Delegation: When you determine how to make current events and decisions advance the strategic plan, delegate action steps immediately. On a pre-printed grid, hand-write the action steps, the responsible parties, and the deadlines. Then send someone to the nearest photocopier to copy the grid so everyone leaves the meeting with clear expectations. The results are worth the trees; people will think strategically knowing they can transform their thoughts into success reports for the next briefing book, instead of further discussion items for the next agenda.

Online Resource

For a PDF version of this white paper with clickable links, please go to www.johnfulwider.com/free-resources.

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