How to run a Good Meeting
Especially with Pat

Hard-earned Tips and Techniques

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NOTE FROM NIELS: This is a set of partial ideas that we've gleaned from having many (good and bad) meetings with Pat. I don't get it right every time. They're evolving. So take it as you will. But, I can promise you these ideas are at least *worth trying.*

TL;DR

1. EXPECTATIONS: Tell people how you want the meeting to work: "STFU and let me present my work" (I'm leading!) or "Let's brainstorm, party on the whiteboard!" (I'm following you Pat!)
2. AGENDA: Make an agenda in the room, so everyone buys into it.
    a. The agenda can change and grow over the course of the meeting
3. HAVE ARTIFACTS TO LOOK AT: You're almost always best off by having something people can look at. Slides are basically free, slap a few together. Walk in with a short document, or a prototype, or a few sketches, or a diagram. Something material for people to look at.
4. Communicate well, do mostly listening, minimize interrupting people.
5. Two types of meetings. Type A: You drive to get buy-in into your ideas/work and solicit feedback. Type B: Ones you want to brainstorm and generate ideas.
    a. For Type A: Here it's really 100% necessary to walk in with slides, a document, something people can look at.
6. Get stuff on paper/whiteboard, write down what's happening, ideally walk in with something to look at. Don't *just* talk, *write*.
7. Be flexible with meetings going on tangents… if that's the expectation you set ahead of time.
8. Eject early if necessary!
9. Be compassionate and flexible, be direct and honest, don't be an asshole.

Running a Good Meeting

0. Set your own mindset

- We're all here to help each other grow. Part of that is *critiquing* each other's ideas. This can be painful, but it's not personal. If someone makes it personal, they are being inappropriate. Don't be that person.
- We're all excited about the ideas! When things get out of hand or on tangents, people are loving what you're saying so don't get pissed. Just gently bring it on track while maintaining the excitement! If you're the one making things get out of hand, write your ideas down rather than derail the meeting.

- Be helpful, courteous, compassionate, and respectful. Don't be a bully, don't be an asshole, don't be confrontational.
- Do more listening than talking. Don't interrupt people.
- Remember the common enemy: those pesky SIGGRAPH reviewers! Frame discussions in terms of how to convince a reviewer rather than whether you agree or disagree.

1. Meetings should have a clear goal. Decide the type and purpose of your meeting

Having a clear goal gives the meeting a sense of purpose, and if the goal is accomplished, people feel good about the meeting.

What type of meeting do you want?

- Do you want to *drive* the meeting and *present* work?;
    - Goal here is to get *buy-in* and to get *feedback* on the things you might be blind to. This is a checkpoint meeting.
- Do you want to have a *brainstorm* or *round-table* so everyone is putting in ideas?
    - Goal here is to *generate ideas* and *get unstuck*.

2. Decide on appropriate people... and perhaps scrap the meeting

Pat is particularly helpful *early on* in a project during brainstorming, and *at the end* of a project when you're crafting the paper story.

> Don't try to get low-level detailed help out of Pat. He will not write code for you, he will rarely do math with you. This is not the role he takes. Find colleagues (other students) to help you with this. If this is the purpose of a meeting with Pat, it's best to cancel or to find someone else to have a worksession with you.

3. Set Expectations

Start the meeting by setting everyone's expectations. Say something like "In this meeting we want to XXX, and the style/interaction of this meeting is YYY." The main distinction you want to assert is whether you're actively *driving* the meeting in a specific direction and just want critiques, or whether it's open for *anyone* to take the meeting on a *tangent*.

For example:

- "In this meeting I want to first present my current paper framing and then have you critique it. I'd like to first talk through it completely, then have people give me slide-by-slide comments";
    - *implication: I'M driving this talk, you guys LISTEN*
- "In this meeting we want to come up with a paper title and abstract, we have some ideas we want to put on the board and then we want to hear additional ideas from everyone else.";
    - *implication: I'm kicking off the talk and other people can contribute inside my guidelines.*
- "We'd like to see if we can come up with exciting problems to work on in the area of quadrotor trajectory planning. I have an idea I'd like to throw out, how about the rest of you?"
    - *implication: I'm happy to have the meeting go whether Pat wants.*

Many bad meetings happen when I want to present a completed set of work, and Pat wants to brainstorm about new ideas. When you feel like Pat isn't listening to you, it's likely that you and he is having different ideas about the type of meeting you're having.

4. Make an Agenda on the board... in the room

Next, make an Agenda on the board. An agenda is a list of agenda-items: individual things people want to discuss in the meeting. Come in with an idea of what you want to talk about, but make the agenda interactively in the room.

- Ask people what THEY want to talk about. Even if you're running the meeting very actively, STILL ask "if there anything else people want to discuss or perhaps not discuss?"
    - *implication: we're all buying into the agenda and want the meeting to do this. we're agreeing to have a meeting with this content, and we can change it if necessary*
- Time-box things on the agenda!
    - *if you have more stuff to talk about that the allotted time, that's okay, schedule another meeting! DO NOT OVERFILL MEETINGS!*
- The Agenda is a **living document**: during the meeting you can change the agenda *as long as EVERYONE agrees to do so!*

Meetings are best when they are *consensus-based*: everyone buys into the meeting fully

5. Don't overfill a meeting. Time pressure will kill it.

Only 5 minutes left and you wanna talk about 5 things? Don't try. Pick one (or zero!). People feeling time pressure to discuss many points will kill your meeting in a heartbeat. If your agenda is too long, cut it down.

6. Keep the Meeting on Track... or Let is Go

If you're running the meeting, you can *choose* to keep it on track. Your agenda and the way you set expectations helps you with this.

Wanna keep a meeting on track?

- If people go off on tangents, you are allowed to stop the discussion!
    - **put the new (tangent) item on the agenda! refer to the agenda!**
    - "hey guys, sounds like we want to discuss this point, how about we put it on the agenda, and see if we can complete the previous discussion first?"
    - ASKING is always better than TELLING. BE NICE ABOUT IT! DON'T BE AN ASSHOLE! People do not need to be in a meeting with you. Practice gratefulness. Which is vastly different from grovelling. Don't be insecure or needy, be grateful and happy. We're all here to help one another. Don't be an asshole. After a meeting, ask yourself very honestly "Was i an asshole at some point?" and work on it.

    - If someone has a great reason for why you want to discuss something *right now*, be *flexible!*

Be okay with letting meetings wander *especially if that's the type of meeting you want to have*

- If it's more of a brainstorming meeting, then *let go of the reins!* Pat might very well want to explore some crazy ideas and intellectually wander around. These meetings can be super fun, if you're flexible and don't get stressed out that we're not talking about what you wanted to talk about. If you set expectations early, it helps.
- Words that indicate intellectual wandering will happen:
    - "brainstorm", "ideation", "some ideas", "do you have ideas?", "what *might*/*could* we do",

7. Eject if Necessary. Sometimes people are just in a bad mood.

You WILL have bad meetings. It's **totally fine** to eject early. Saying something like "you know what, I'm doing a bad job presenting this idea, rather than keep going, how about we stop here and I'll go and clean it up. Can i have another shot at presenting this?"

Sometimes people are just in a bad mood. And people in this building are smart enough to tear apart anything regardless of how good it is.

8. Check in with people afterwards

Post-meeting check-ins is useful in the following cases:

- **Things got heated?** DE-ESCALATE or EJECT, and check in afterwards. Be compassionate.
- **Someone raised an interesting idea**. Even if you think you got it, talk to them afterwards and make sure you're both on the same page.
- **The meeting went badly** for you and you don't know why. Asking Pat about it can be useful.
- **Someone was disruptive**. Talk to them AS SOON AFTERWARDS AS POSSIBLE! Be polite.

9. Iterate!

Meeting styles vary. If a meeting went super badly, pick yourself up and dust yourself off. See points 7! Then try to have the next meeting in a different way. Sometimes that just means "bring in cake so people are in a good mood"! Sometimes it means to ignore my pointers since they didn't apply.

10. Practice gratefulness

Even in the worst meetings, find things to be grateful for. Take a second to take care of yourself and your mental health. Think about things to be grateful for from your meeting. You'll be happier that way :) Then get back at it!

Tips on Meeting Etiquette

It's expected that you come prepared

Don't walk into a meeting unprepared. How to prepare (the minimal necessary): Take 10 minutes to think about the purpose, type, expectations and agenda items you want. It's often good to make simple slides. Doesn't matter how informal, come prepared!

Don't explain another person's work

You're in a meeting. Someone is presenting an idea to Pat. Pat isn't getting it. You think the person is doing a terrible job explaining it, and you know how to do better! Don't go "What Person X is trying to say is XXX…" You're attempting to help, but you're undermining them and pissing them off. Much better to go "Hey Person X, let me see if I understand this. Are you saying XXX?".

Same outcome. Much better happiness.

In a formal meeting: don't correct your students' work. Do it after, privately.

Extreme case: In a thesis defense, you will FAIL if your professor steps in and starts answering questions or correcting your answers. Don't do it if you're in anything but a super informal meeting.

If your junior colleague or student is messing up, catch them RIGHT AWAY *afterwards* and ask them whether they thought they were correct, and guide them to discovering what they were missing.

Listen very carefully. Write down ideas rather than shout them out.

You're getting super excited in a meeting. You're engaging with ideas! "Goddamit, I have the perfect answer here!" you think! **Write it down and don't interrupt!** Now raise your hand or say a brief "i've got something". Your turn will come.

Now that you have an idea on paper, it won't go away! So **listen carefully to what the current speaker is saying!** They might have the same idea as you have, or have an even better idea!

Assume people (including yourself) are bad communicators. Be okay with it, and make it better.

Engineers are notoriously bad communicators. You're probably bad at it too. An MBA degree boils down to 2 years of "simulating communication scenarios". When people are doing a bad job communicating an idea or you're not getting it:

- Accept that this is super hard, cut them some slack; THEN

- *Listening super carefully* and try to figure out what people are saying. Then ask them about it. Rephrase it back at them and check whether you got it right. Try to get the good stuff out of what they're saying.
- Afterwards give people constructive feedback after you ask them if they're open to receiving it.
- And to make your own communication better: Prepare! Think about how to best communicate your ideas beforehand. Try explaining something in a different way if the meeting gets bogged down.

Make sure everyone gets a chance.

You've been talking all meeting? That might be appropriate for the type of meeting you're running… But often it's great to say "I have three more points, but first, does anyone else want to add something?" OR "I have one more point, and then I'd really like anyone else to add things!"

Check in with people on whether they have something to add. You can do this on an individual basis: "Do you have something to add something Person X?"

Please be selective in what you bring up!

Rookie meeting-goers will try to talk about everything that goes through their mind in a meeting. Expert meeting-goers will filter most of their stream of exciting and fun ideas, and present only the most relevant ones. Write down the rest!

Take Criticism Well, Be Good at Critiquing

You are allowed to critique work in a meeting. Do this well! Give feedback by pointing out both strong and weak parts ("I like X, I wish it did Y"). Couch this discussion in terms of the common enemy: "A reviewer might say X, how can WE defend against that?"

When people critique your work, take it in stride! Listen carefully, they might be doing a bad job communicating, but there might be pure gold in what they're saying! If they're saying some super harsh things, that you think is out of place, you can respond with "That's a mischaracterization of what's going on here" or the like. Or if it's misplaced, you can respond with "You know, I'm not quite ready to have this critiqued yet, can I do some more work on my own and then come to you for a critique?". Or even "You know let me think about that. I don't think that's the case, but I'll go think about it. No, I don't want to keep talking about it now"

Cooler heads will prevail!

Resources

These are **REQUIRED READING.** Absolutely study these in **gory detail.**

- Kayvon Fatahalian, "Tips for Giving Clear Talks"
- Pat Hanrahan, "How (and How Not) to Write a Good Systems Paper"

These are **INTERESTING IDEAS.** Read this rather than Netflix reruns of your favorite show for the nth time:

- Pixar's Braintrust meetings and process:
    - Ed Catmull's Creativity Inc.
    - https://www.fastcompany.com/3027135/lessons-learned/inside-the-pixar-braintrust