

# FACILITATING GREAT INCLUSIVE MEETINGS

A practical guide to designing and leading meetings  
where every voice counts

## WHAT THIS IS

This guide helps you plan, run, and follow up on meetings that make people feel seen, heard, and valued while getting better decisions and outcomes.

It draws on *Be More Strategic, Chapter 10* and integrates best practice from leading research on inclusion, behavioural science, and collaboration (Google's Project Aristotle, IDEO, Harvard's Negotiation Project, and Pixar's creative culture).

"Inclusive meetings aren't just polite they're productive. When more people contribute, the thinking gets stronger."

## WHY IT MATTERS

Meetings are the everyday expression of culture.

If people don't feel able to speak, challenge, or contribute, it's rarely because they have nothing to say, it's because the meeting doesn't feel safe, fair, or structured for inclusion.

Inclusive meetings:

- Build trust, ownership, and creativity
- Reduce groupthink and bias
- Create shared understanding and commitment
- Turn diversity of thought into better decisions



# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You can use it before, during, and after your next meeting or to redesign your team's overall meeting habits.

## 1 BEFORE THE MEETING – SET UP FOR SUCCESS

### Clarify the Purpose

Every meeting should have a clear reason to exist. Ask:

- What do we need to decide, learn, or align on?
- Who truly needs to be there and who can just receive the outcome?

**Tip:** Write the purpose as a verb + outcome:

“To decide on next quarter’s priorities.”

“To generate ideas for improving client experience.”

### Define Roles

Assign these before the meeting (suggestions only; may be one and the same person)):

- **Facilitator:** Guides process and flow; ensures all voices are heard.
- **Chair / Decision-Maker:** Ensures decisions are made.
- **Timekeeper:** Monitors pacing.
- **Note-taker:** Captures outcomes and actions.

### Set Expectations and Prework

Send an agenda and any background material 48 hours ahead, including the desired outcome of each item.

Ask participants to come prepared to share one perspective or idea per topic.

**Tip:** Include an *equity of preparation*: if reading or analysis is needed, give everyone access to the same data.



## Design for Inclusion

Plan the format intentionally:

- Use small breakout groups or pairs for complex topics.
- Vary formats, mix verbal discussion with written input or digital polls.
- Build in silence or reflection time before open sharing.
- Be mindful of different personalities, cultures, and working styles.

## 2 DURING THE MEETING – FACILITATE FOR INCLUSION START WELL

Open with a brief check-in question such as:

“What’s one thing you’re hoping we achieve today?”

“What’s one word that describes how you’re arriving?”

This creates connection and lowers barriers early.

### Model Inclusive Facilitation

As the facilitator:

- **Establish ground rules** early: one voice at a time, curiosity over certainty, respect all input.
- **Balance airtime:** notice who dominates and invite quieter voices:

“Let’s pause, I’d love to hear from someone we haven’t heard yet.”

- **Use rounds:** give everyone 30 seconds to contribute before open discussion.
- **Listen actively:** summarise key points to show understanding.
- **Separate idea generation from evaluation:** brainstorm first, judge later.

**Tip:** Use “yes, and” language, it builds on ideas rather than shutting them down.



## Handle Conflict and Challenge Constructively

Healthy debate is inclusion in action.

When tension arises:

- **Stay neutral:** focus on content, not tone.
- **Acknowledge emotion:** “It sounds like this feels important.”
- **Refocus on purpose:** “Let’s bring it back to what we’re trying to solve.”
- **Encourage curiosity:** “What would make this idea stronger?”

Conflict is energy, use it, don’t avoid it.

## 3 ENSURING ALL VOICES ARE HEARD

### Use Structured Rounds

Invite each person to respond briefly to a question before open discussion.

Example prompts:

“What stands out to you?”

“What’s one risk or opportunity we might not have considered?”

### Leverage Multiple Channels

- Use shared docs or chat for written input during hybrid meetings.
- Allow anonymous idea capture before group discussion.
- Pair people up for short “think-partner” exchanges before plenary.

### Watch for Micro-Exclusions

As facilitator, notice and correct for:

- Interrupting or talking over others.
- Body language that signals impatience or dismissal.
- “Idea theft”, someone rephrasing another’s idea without credit.
- Insider language or references that exclude new members.

### Respond gently but clearly:

“Let’s make sure everyone gets space to finish their point.”



## 4 OVERCOMING BIAS AND GROUPTHINK

### Common Meeting Biases

| BIAS                     | WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE                               | HOW TO COUNTER IT                                |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Confirmation Bias</b> | Only listening for ideas that support your view. | Ask: "What would make this idea <i>wrong</i> ?"  |
| <b>Anchoring</b>         | The first idea dominates.                        | Collect all ideas before discussing any.         |
| <b>Status Bias</b>       | Senior voices dominate discussion.               | Start with junior or quieter participants first. |
| <b>Affinity Bias</b>     | Agreeing with those most like you.               | Rotate speaking order or use random selection.   |
| <b>Groupthink</b>        | Consensus too quickly, no dissent.               | Assign a "devil's advocate" or "red team" role.  |

## 5 AFTER THE MEETING – TURN INCLUSION INTO ACTION

### Close with Clarity

End every meeting by confirming:

- What decisions were made
- Who owns each action
- What will be communicated, to whom, and by when

Avoid the trap of "great conversation, no conclusion."

### Request Feedback

Ask participants:

"What worked about this meeting? What could we improve?"

Rotate facilitation so everyone gains skill and empathy.

### Follow Up

Send concise notes within 24 hours including actions, owners, and next steps.

Share credit widely. Acknowledge contributions publicly.



**Tip:** A follow-up email that names diverse contributors reinforces inclusion and accountability.

## MINI EXERCISE: REDESIGN ONE MEETING

Choose a recurring meeting that feels unproductive or unbalanced.

1. Review its purpose and participants – who's missing?
2. Rework the agenda using this guide.
3. Introduce two inclusion techniques (e.g., rounds, small groups, or silent input).
4. Gather feedback after one month – what changed?

## TAKING IT FURTHER

If you'd like to build stronger facilitation and collaboration skills across your team or organisation, contact Charlie to design a **Facilitating Inclusive Conversations** workshop – blending your context with evidence-based practices from leading creative and high-performance cultures.

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## REMEMBER:

*Meetings shape culture.*

*Every time you invite, listen, and include, you send a message about what kind of organisation you want to lead, one where everyone belongs and ideas have room to grow.*

