



## How to plan a meeting that people won't dread

My closest teammates sometimes tease me about the time they found me standing in a corner with my headphones on, while a sea of people socialized around me. We were two days into a three-day series of meetings with about 100 of our colleagues, and my extrovert side had totally given up the ghost. I'm a [Guardian](#) and a [Dreamer](#) (a combination of internally-focused types) who works primarily from home, and I'm not used to quite so much togetherness. You might wonder why I didn't just take a little bit of alone time. The short answer is, I didn't want to miss out on anything! What can I say, people are complicated.

A few weeks ago it was time again for these annual meetings, and I looked forward to the event with equal measures of excitement and dread. Among the many things our team does well is engage people, and I knew the event would be valuable and fun. But I also knew that sometimes I need a chance to disengage, or at least to engage differently. And that can be hard to do at these kinds of things. Which raises the question, how can you plan a meeting or event that meets the needs of everyone participating, when the needs of everyone aren't the same? When people have conflicting needs, how do you appeal to all types without turning anyone off? And how can you do so while delivering an exceptional experience rather than one that feels watered down?

You likely won't be surprised to read my suggestion that Business Chemistry can help. I won't claim we've cracked the code on this very complex problem, but I can offer some relatively simple suggestions that will get you closer to meeting more people's needs more of the time.

First, you might simply **acknowledge that's what you're trying to do**. At our recent meetings one leader delivered a great introduction highlighting some of our differences, and acknowledging that those who are a little more internally-focused or reserved may experience our time together differently than those who are more externally-focused or outgoing. Further, he suggested we make an explicit request for "balance" any time we felt things were getting too out of control. This kind of simple acknowledgment can go a long way toward reminding everyone that while particular aspects of an event may appeal more or less to them personally, an effort is being made to balance the needs of many different types. With such a reminder, most people are willing to go along if they understand how and why things have been planned to meet diverse needs.

Want to spark everyone's interest at once? Let people know the overall goal and what you're trying to achieve ([Drivers!](#)), which is to accomplish a lot of work, learning, and connecting while bringing everyone along for the ride ([Integrators!](#)). Tell them you're going to try some new things ([Pioneers!](#)). Present it as an experiment ([Scientists!](#)). Assure them you've got a plan (Guardians!), that you'll use their time wisely ([Commanders!](#)), and that there will be ample opportunity for working together ([Teamers!](#)) and thinking alone (Dreamers!). And of course, let people know they'll have a chance to provide their feedback in terms of how well it all worked (Everyone!).

**Pre-work.** If the word makes you want to retch, you might be a Pioneer. If you find it comforting, maybe you're a Guardian. A key to providing materials in advance of an event is to make reviewing them optional. You don't want the success of your meeting to depend on people doing pre-work, because certain types aren't so likely to do it, and asking them to do so may tint the whole event the color of drudgery. On the other hand, some types will welcome the opportunity to prepare in advance, and alone, so that they're more able to fully participate when with the group. Guardians, in particular, process things more deliberately than other types and are more reserved about sharing their thoughts. Making sure they have a chance to do some of this processing in advance is a gift to them, more than a burden. Integrators, too, might appreciate the chance to consider issues in advance and maybe even discuss them with others before they're asked to comment in a meeting or to make a decision.

Most of us have gotten the memo by now that while we're very accustomed to brainstorming in groups, that's not actually the most effective way to get the highest quality ideas (or the largest number of ideas for that matter).<sup>1</sup> Instead, individual brainstorming is, which involves people generating initial ideas alone, and then

bringing them together for consideration, refinement, and expansion. So, if you want people to brainstorm in an upcoming meeting, let them know in advance what you want to brainstorm about. Send each person a pack of sticky notes along with some context about what you'll asking of them. Let them know this advance work is optional and that there will be a chance to come up with ideas when you're together, but that you understand some people think more clearly and creatively on their own time. If you try this, you'll likely get more active participation from more types when the time comes for brainstorming in a group.

**Shhhhh . . . or not.** If at all possible, particularly during extended meetings, offer dedicated times and spaces for both getting together and getting away. Some types, like Teamers, may want to spend every spare moment catching up and getting to know new colleagues. Others, like Scientists, will appreciate the space, and the implicit permission, to have a moment alone (even if it's in a quiet room with other people who are also spending a moment alone).

I'll admit I played hooky for a few hours during our recent meetings. I'd had enough, so I took a walk, read for awhile in a coffee shop, and even snuck in a brief nap. As I was leaving the hotel to return for the last afternoon session, I ran into another known introvert who had obviously done the same thing. After a little time off I was ready to go back and engage fully, but I definitely needed that break.

Other people may want to socialize or network, but need a little help doing so. One idea is to put conversation starters at tables, in the form of questions printed on cards, intriguing pictures or objects people can't help but discuss, or puzzles that people might tackle together. For some types, there's no need for these aids, they're already skilled at spinning a good yarn or asking questions that get other people's wheels turning. So the point is not to foist "help" on people in a way that feels forced or artificial, but to offer it a bit more surreptitiously, so people can take it or leave it as works for them.

My next post offers a few more ideas for planning meetings and events that meet the needs of more Business Chemistry types. Read part two of this series on our [blog page](#).

# Dr. Suz

## Contact:

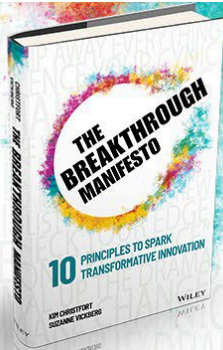
Suzanne Vickberg (aka Dr. Suz)

Research Lead | Deloitte Greenhouse®

[svickberg@deloitte.com](mailto:svickberg@deloitte.com)

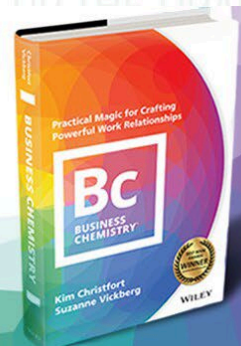
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