

# Agenda Creation Versus Meeting Design



## 3 Steps to Designing Spaces for Collective Intelligence

**STEP 1:** Don't know whether to create an agenda or design a meeting? Let's start with terminology to answer the question.

### Introduction

I'm extremely passionate about design—particularly designing spaces that, through dialogue, can be places of insight, candor, and truth.

As colleagues and employees, we tend to hop from meeting to meeting every day at work with little preparation. As family members, we sit down to dinner without any thought or intention toward the space we want to create for meaningful connections. We often attend social gatherings or professional conferences that are filled with agenda items and great speakers but very little intentional design around creating a space for what's really dying or wanting to happen.

Designing a safe, collective mental space for connection and innovation is both an art and a skill. Using a blended approach, let's explore the steps involved in designing spaces for collective intelligence. The first step is understanding the difference between creating agendas and designing meetings.



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## **Creating agendas: a definition**

An agenda is a structured outline or plan that guides the flow of a meeting or conversation. It typically consists of a list of topics, objectives, and time allocations for each item. The purpose of an agenda is to provide participants with a clear road map of what will be discussed and accomplished during the meeting. Agendas help ensure that important matters are addressed, time is managed efficiently, and participants are aware of the meeting's objectives.

## **Designing meetings: a definition**

A designed meeting or conversation takes a more flexible and tailored approach. Instead of following a predefined agenda, the emphasis is on creating an environment that encourages active engagement, collaboration, and relationship-building.

Designing a meeting or conversation involves considering factors such as the desired outcomes, the participants' needs and preferences, the overall context, the quality of relationships in the room, and the perceived safety to speak up.

Meeting design may involve incorporating interactive activities, facilitation techniques, or specific conversation structures to achieve the desired goals. This approach is often used when the purpose is open-ended, exploratory, or focused on fostering creativity, innovation, or building strong relationships.

The literal space you're in greatly factors into your design. Is there light? Are there windows? Does the space offer a place to move around? Is there access to the outdoors? Will you use technology?

As you think about the value of designing your next meeting, let's address a common obstacle in Step 2.



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**Step 2:** Overcome the common “agenda trap” with two resources and a rationale for meeting design.

Now that you have a working knowledge of the terminology from Step 1, let’s address the most commonly perceived obstacle to meeting design.

In the workplace, most of us overuse agendas because we feel time constraints. Agendas aren’t bad; they’re actually necessary. But we fall prey to “not enough time,” so we go down a list of agenda items. There’s some talking, chatter, and decision-making, and then we move on.

There are thousands of agenda experts and tips that can help you create better agendas and run better meetings, but I invite you, instead, to consider using meeting design techniques when:

- conversation and dialogue matter
- diverse opinions (which require psychological safety) enhance your thinking and are encouraged
- you want to move past the polite stage, beyond conflict, and into a space of inquiry
- genuine inquiry invites you to ask questions you never thought of and taps into collective intelligence

One of my greatest teachers, Bill Isaacs, wrote a most profound book, called [Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together](#).

I’d like to encourage you to think about connection and conversation design in all aspects of our lives—not just work. For example, what’s the design for your next dinner? Or let’s say you’re taking a walk with your family; how would you like to experience that walk together, and what simple design techniques and intentions might allow that experience to emerge? Perhaps you’re throwing a shower or party; what would happen if you started with design?

Priya Parker’s [The Art of Gathering](#) has wonderful ideas on intentionality and design to get you started. Check out my latest post about [why I loved this book](#) as a resource. Now let’s move on to Step 3, where I provide you with factors to consider when designing your next meeting, plus a checklist and bonus tip.



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## Step 3: Three things to consider when designing your next meeting or gathering.

The following is a primer on design basics to get you started until you consult the resources I've recommended in Step 2.

**1. Determine the Meeting Purpose and Objectives** – Clearly define the purpose of the meeting. Understand why your meeting is being held and what specific outcomes or decisions need to be achieved.

**2. Analyze the Participants and Stakeholders** – This is the part that is often overlooked.

- Identify the key participants: Determine who needs to be present in the meeting based on their roles, expertise, or involvement in the topics to be discussed.
- Understand participant needs and expectations: Consider the knowledge, perspectives, and interests of the participants to ensure the meeting is relevant and valuable to them.
- Assess the stakeholders' influence and impact: Identify individuals or groups who may have a stake in the meeting's outcomes or decisions and consider their perspectives.
- Understand context: When this particular group of people is in the room, what must it be like for them as a collective? What will hinder their participation? What might not feel safe? Who is likely to do more of the talking or less of the talking and why? What fears or anxieties might be in the room? What hopes and attachments are people walking in with? What will their physical and emotional energy levels likely be?

**3. Design the Meeting Format, Flow, and Structure** – Consider the following introductory-level checklist items when designing your meeting.

- Do I need to create any level of safety at the beginning, and how do I do that? This is where check-ins, storytelling, and getting everyone's voice in the room as soon as possible comes into play. Icebreakers can be fun at the beginning of a time-constrained meeting and don't necessarily need to link to the intention and purpose of the meeting. Check-ins, however, are carefully designed to season the space for conversation and are linked to the purpose of the time together.
- How much space and time do I need to give each topic based on my objectives and purpose? This is a good time to edit if you have too much on your list. We almost always do, so I suggest managing your expectations and start with a modest outline.



- How do I design the physical space so there are fewer barriers between people and the right structure for collective intelligence? The worst space possible is classroom-style, and it's one I never use (and refuse to use). Not being able to look at everyone in the room is an immediate barrier to collective intelligence. A U-shape configuration (depending on the people), one big round table, or a circle of chairs without tables is much more conducive to collective intelligence and dialogue. If you have to have multiple tables in a room because of its size, consider no more than five people at a table so everyone can be seen and heard. Three to four people at each table is your sweet spot. Ask yourself if you can enhance the space with:
  - Natural light, windows that open, and fresh air.
  - Flowers on the tables and in the room. This brings nature indoors and provides a calming influence.
  - Music. Music can help you set the tone and warm people to conversation.
  - Less technology or no technology at all.
- How do I manage the energy in the room? As I play out the design in my mind, where might energy increase and decrease, and how do I manage the fluctuations with physical movement in my design, conversation, breaks, and more or less technology? Time to walk and talk and time outside only enhance our energy and creativity, and both are extremely effective and underutilized when designing meetings and conversations.
- Where is there likely to be conflict? How do I make sure that I create enough space after the conflict or tension points to come through it as a group? Note: Don't save that part for the end.
- Where do I need to switch between entire-room dialogue and small groups or pairs?
- Where do I need to audit myself and my agenda so I don't have unconscious hidden agendas and create space for nonattachment?
- How do I ensure my design allows for all voices to be heard, everyone to be seen and feel safe? And do I need to differentiate between the times when people have a voice and when they have a vote? Or both?
- How do I create space to enhance the quality of relationships in the room?
- How do I leave time at the end for a checkout so that, together, we can process what we were sensing, seeing, and feeling as a result of your time together?



## **Bonus Tip!**

One final tip when designing your meeting or gathering: visualization. I know this doesn't work for everyone, but visualizing people in the meeting and working with the design I've drafted is a crucial element to my design process. That said, I am a very visual person. If I can picture the room, the people in the meeting, and the way they interact with each other, then my design comes to life.

It's almost always after my visualization that I tweak some things in my design because I realize I have a missing element or obstacle that will make it more difficult for people to participate or could clog up psychological safety.

## **What's next?**

Watch for my next feature on the Resources page when I'll explore the role of the facilitator or host of your gathering and what it means to hold space for the group to be collectively intelligent. I will also discuss other key design elements and the dos and don'ts for good design.

