



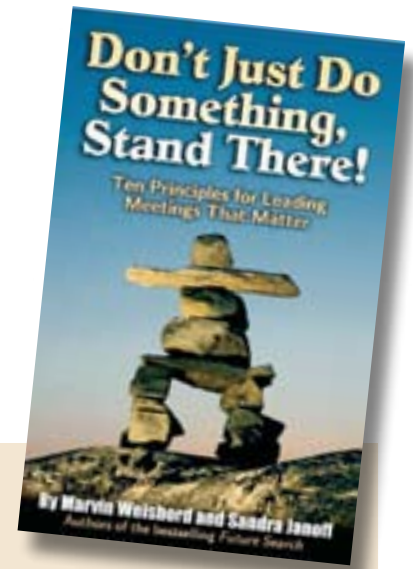
# Stand Back for More Effective Meetings

It's time to lead meetings in a new way. Here's what you need to know.

By Terrence Fernsler

## Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter

By Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff. 219 Pages.  
Softcover. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
([www.berrett-koehler.com](http://www.berrett-koehler.com)).



Much can be accomplished in meetings, but most of us don't know how to conduct them productively. A new method of meeting facilitation is necessary, one in which time isn't wasted and everyone has the opportunity to participate.

As the book's title suggests, this new method calls for less facilitation, not more. During the meeting, facilitator control should be limited to what's needed to keep people working on the task.

Your role as facilitator is to stand back and let participants find solutions. Only when they put themselves at risk of fighting or giving up do you need to do anything—and even then you should do only what's necessary to get the meeting back on track.

Do less so that others will do more.

Finding common ground increases cooperation. When some agree with a statement and others don't, treat that as a reality to live with, not a problem to solve.

Anxiety is natural when stakes are high, perceptions diverse, issues complicated, and answers uncertain. Learning to contain and harness anxiety can turn it into creative action.

As a meeting facilitator, encourage people to share responsibility for the meeting's outcomes and don't take the entire burden on yourself. One way to do this is to give up trying to diagnose or change people. Structure, not individual behavior, becomes the meeting's focus. Organize your meeting by paying attention to its purpose and goals, and help people find their own solutions.

Learning to "just stand there" means letting go of the need to have all the answers and the desire to keep everybody happy. It means observing, listening, and inviting people to say what's on their minds. It means acting less and paying attention more. ■

*Terrence Fernsler has been a nonprofit professional for nearly 30 years.*

### Make Your Meetings Matter

Use these principles to promote effective meetings:

- **Get the whole system in the room.** Define your "system" according to the meeting's purpose, and be sure participants have the expertise, authority, and information to accomplish that purpose.
- **Control what you can, let go of what you can't.** Don't try to manage what others think, say, or do. Instead, manage the conditions under which people interact.
- **Explore the "whole elephant."** Find out what everyone has to contribute. Affirm everyone's views and perceptions, and give all a sense of where others stand.
- **Master the art of subgrouping.** Invite meeting participants to ally with others based on similar views. For instance, if someone makes an emotionally charged statement, ask, "Does anyone else feel that way?" It takes only one ally to form a subgroup and validate the person's right to an opinion.

### Suggestions for Your Next Meeting

Put elements of effective meetings to good use with these ideas (the book offers dozens more):

- **Suggest active roles** for participants, such as timekeeper, flipchart recorder, discussion leader, and reporter.
- **Go around the group** and find out what every person has to say on a matter of consequence.
- **Put people's chairs** in a circle instead of a row. Or get rid of tables. Note the impact on the meeting.
- **Consider times** when it will be more productive to have people break into small groups or to work alone for awhile.