

## Three Easy Steps to Better Board Meetings

John Monroe - National Park Service Rivers & Trails Program

March 14, 2015

### By 11:30, Let's Leave With:

- A list of the top reasons why your meetings don't work well;
- A fistful of handouts (available for download from the conference website):
  - Pocket Tool for Better Meetings;
  - Three Easy Steps summary;
  - Let's Leave With List detailed directions and
  - Magic Wall Recipe.

10:20 Welcome & How We'll Work Together Today

10:25 ***What is the most important reason your meetings don't go as well as they should?***

10:35 Introduction to John's **Pocket Guide to Better Meetings**

10:45 **STEP #1: To Begin, Start at the End with a Plus/Delta Review**

Ask two questions:

**Plus:** *What went well during this meeting?*

**Delta:** *Next time we meet, it will be better if....what?*

Write down the answers and use at least one in the next meeting.

[Note: Your friends will be impressed; your enemies will be amazed.]

11:00 **STEP #2: Build your Agendas on a Let's Leave With List**

11:20 **STEP #3: Make Agreements to Launch Every Meeting**

First, explain that

*The following will **help** us to accomplish our work: \_\_\_\_\_*

*It will **hinder** our work if we: give speeches, \_\_\_\_\_*

Then ask,

*Can you **agree** to these suggestions?*

11:27 SURPRISE QUIZ! **Turn your agendas over please.**

11:28 **Plus/Delta Review** of this Workshop

11:30 **Adjourn on Time!**

For information about ways I might be able to support your work, please contact me, or visit [www.nps.gov/rtca](http://www.nps.gov/rtca). Formal requests are due by August 1<sup>st</sup>.

Please note: There is an underscore between first and last names in my email address.

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Have people show approval with a nod, thumbs-up or an audible reply.

**1. Contract for Roles**

*As Chair, or facilitator, may I interrupt to keep us on track? Every person can speak up if we stray from these agreements.*

**2. Agenda & Let's Leave With List**

Preview and ask: *Do we agree to focus on this list & agenda?*

**3. Things That Will HELP our Work**

*Speak so all can hear. Explain your reasoning & intent. Focus on the Let's Leave With List (speak up if we wander).*

**4. Things That Will HINDER our Work**

Speeches and side chatter. (Catch yourself, or one of us will.) Holding back your thoughts. Electronic interruptions.

**5. Agree on Decision-making Techniques**

Establish how and when we'll use consensus, voting and delegation for further consideration.

**6. Describe Tools**

Magic Wall (or table or floor). Clearly write one comment per half-sheet (landscape) Use colors as needed. Post and explain them one-by-one. Silent time is for thinking.

**7. Explain Logistics**

Bathrooms. Refreshments - serve yourself anytime.

**8. Do Introductions...every time!**

Name & affiliation, plus a one-word or one-sentence response to a question that reveals a perspective or attitude relevant to the agenda, recent events or group dynamics.

## D. Manage the Meeting with Agreements

Every one of the agreements you made during Warm-ups is a facilitation tool during the meeting. If reminding a participant of his or her earlier agreement (not to make speeches, for example) doesn't work, reach for one of these:

- Say What's Going On & Ask What's Going On
- Get curious: *What causes you to make that statement, or disagree with...*
- Ask for agreement to revise agenda timing based on realities of the meeting.

## E. Close the Meeting with Wrap-ups

Revisit the Let's Leave With List:

*Which ones did we accomplish?*

*Which ones should return next meeting?*

Then, make it a habit to ask two questions. Even in routine meetings, you'll learn something valuable from this two-minute vital-sign check-up.

**Plus:** *What worked well in this meeting?*

**Delta:** *Next time we meet, it will be better if...what?*

Encourage people to offer one- or two-word answers as you write them down. Move it along briskly. [Use Plusses and Deltas when planning the next agenda.]

Finally, adjourn exactly on time, or a few minutes early. They'll thank you for a great meeting!

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statement. Scrutinize the weak ones: *Is there any reason to spend time on this one now? Defer or discard those. Put the keepers in order of importance, urgency, and/or so actions early in the meeting inform later conversation and decisions.*

**Draft, Revise & Finalize the Agenda**

Set up each agenda item as one or several questions to focus attention on each Let's Leave With item. Estimate time allocations to encourage efficient conversation, but don't plan a forced march. Anticipate fatigue and vary pace and rhythm to maintain interaction. Your agenda will be more like a jazz chart (with room for improvisation) than a fixed symphonic score.

**B. Prepare the Meeting Space & Yourself**

**Tune the Room**

Establish focal points. Arrange chairs & tables for comfort. Set up healthy & satisfying refreshments. Set up a Magic Wall (or table or floor). Prepare & distribute paper, markers, color dots and sticky notes as needed. Adjust temperature & lighting.

**Check Your Attitude & Readiness**

Take a moment to breathe deeply, relax and focus on this meeting. Review the Let's Leave With List & agenda. Be ready to improvise your agenda to accommodate important surprises.

**C. Launch the Meeting with Warm-ups**

Begin by making a series of agreements on the following topics. Supplement the examples shown with whatever works for you. Move forward once you reach consensus all around.

# Pocket Tool for Better Meetings

By John Monroe  
NPS Rivers & Trails



## A. Craft a Results-Oriented Agenda

### Compile a Let's Leave With List

When planning an agenda, the first thing to think about is the last thing you will do: **get up to leave**. Imagine this moment and answer these questions: *Which questions did we answer unambiguously? What decisions did we make? What shared understandings did we achieve?*

For example, you might leave with:

- Agreement on the root causes of our weakening cash flow *so that...* we can take action before it becomes a crisis.
- A decision to select a contractor *so that...* we can start construction next month.
- Understanding of board member questions about a proposed project *so that...* we draw on all of our expertise.

Consider next how you hope group members will **feel** as the meeting ends. For example, you might leave with:

- Satisfaction that our meetings run efficiently **and** we hear all voices *so that...* we look forward to board meetings.
- Confidence that we can produce important results *so that...* we address tough issues promptly and head-on.

Edit the list according to the strength of each *so that*



# Three Steps to Better Meetings

By John Monroe  
Rivers & Trails Program

I recommend that you try these steps one at a time, allowing your board to get used to each one before moving ahead. Please adapt them to suit your particular needs and group dynamics. If you'd like to dig deeper, please get in touch.

## Step One: Ask Two Questions

First, what do your board members see as strengths and weaknesses of your meetings? Find out in less than five minutes by asking two questions at the close of your next meeting:

### ***What worked well during this meeting?***

- Ask board members for answers in a word or a phrase, not a paragraph.
- As they speak, write their comments on a tablet, or a flip chart for all to see.
- Keep it moving by saying "Next!" or "Is there anything else that went well?"
- When the answers peter out, shift to the second question.

### ***Next time we meet, it will be better if.....what?***

- Again, ask for short answers.
- Also, point out that you are looking for proposed solutions rather than problem descriptions (which can turn into rants).
- Suggestions may range from sublime insights to mundane housekeeping, like turn up the heat, or let's have cookies!

Use this list of *Plusses* and *Deltas* (the symbol for change), to plan your next meeting. Build on the plusses and try at least one delta suggestion.

Make the quick Plus/Delta Review a standard wrap-up for every meeting. As your group gets used to the tool, it will take only a minute or two. You'll learn something every time.

## Step Two: Build Agendas on Results

Rather than recycle last month's agenda, try creating a fresh one based on the results you desire. It just might produce a fresh and productive meeting, rather than a recycled one.

### **Compile & Distill a Let's Leave With List**

When planning an agenda, the first thing to think about is the last thing you will do in the meeting: **get up and leave**. Place yourself at the moment of departure: What essential outcomes, or measurable results, does the group have (or hope) to leave with?

These may include shared understanding of important information, decisions on specific issues and commitments to take next steps. Ask the board for specific items to be included in an upcoming meeting. Compile and edit the list to include urgent and important items. Put them in a logical order.

### **Draft, Revise & Finalize the Agenda**

For each desired result, craft agenda items as one or several pointed questions. A series of questions will help everyone keep track of what they are being asked to understand, decide or commit to.

## **Step Three: Make Agreements & Honor Them**

If I am a soccer player and you are the referee, I will bend the rules until you make me stop. Why do we allow meetings to play out like soccer games, with endless running around punctuated by frantic whistles?

Instead, try looking one another in the eye as you launch every meeting, then make agreements on how you will work together. It's a whole new game.

Consider the Plusses and Deltas you've been hearing, then propose agreements to strengthen what your board does well and to make changes. Launch **every** meeting with these agreements.

### **Agree on Roles**

Each person should play one role at a time. If the Chair wants to argue for or against an item, then agree at the outset how and to whom the Chair will hand off the neutral role as needed.

### **Commit to Results and the Agenda**

Next, preview the results you aim to produce and ask, *Is everyone willing to focus on getting this list done in the time we have set on the agenda?*

### **Agree on what will HELP and HINDER**

Explicitly recognize that certain behaviors help your board work productively while other behaviors frustrate and distract. Ask, *Do you agree to do what helps and avoid what hinders our effectiveness?*

The Chair should authorize **every** member of the board to speak up the moment things start to unravel. That gives every person the right and duty to hold board members accountable. Often, the offender will catch himself or herself and apologize.

# Let's Leave With List

## *the first step in agenda planning*

JOHN MONROE – NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

When planning an agenda, the first thing I'd like you to think about is the last thing you will do in the meeting: **get up to leave.**

Place yourself at the moment of departure: **What essential outcomes, or measurable results, will you hope to leave with?** Your first agenda-planning task is to compile a list of possible results you desire, in consultation with others who should have input at this stage. Next, distill your list down to the essentials for this meeting. [Note: Rather than just delete items, you may want to set them aside for the future.]

Send me your distilled list and we will work together to finalize it. Using your Let's Leave With List, I will make a first-draft agenda and think about potential conversation formats and room arrangements. These initial steps are often the most important contribution we will make to a meeting - to build a logical and compelling agenda on a solid foundation of what is important and timely.

At the meeting begins, I will ask the participants whether they can agree to focus their attention on completing this list. During the meeting, the list will be our touchstone any time we begin to wander or bog down. I find it is much more effective to refocus everyone's attention on their agreements, than to lead a forced march. It will be **everyone's** job to focus.

We'll revisit the Let's Leave With list at the end of the meeting to measure our success.

You'll notice that each sample below includes the ending *so that*. By completing the sentence after *so that*, you test the value of each proposed outcome.

- A substantial outcome will lead to a compelling *so that*. You'll know this one belongs on the list.
- A flimsy outcome will make you wonder, *Why do we want to spend time on this issue?* If that's the case, either dig deeper to find the real issue, or delete it from your draft.

### **Rational Outcomes**

There are two categories of so-called *rational* outcomes: Knowledge and Products. I have offered below some ticklers to start your thinking. Don't feel limited by these suggestions, but do begin every outcome with a solid noun: understanding; agreement; commitment; recognition; a decision; etc.

### Sample Knowledge Outcomes

- Understanding of current situation or root causes of a pressing problem *so that...*
- Understanding of potential solutions, courses of action, risks, etc. *so that...*
- Understanding of our history *so that...*
- Recognition and understanding of conflicting attitudes, ideas, or perspectives *so that...*

### Sample Product Outcomes

- A decision to [spend money, hire a contractor, run an event, approve a budget, etc.] *so that...*
- Agreement on next steps *so that...*
- A working draft of a document *so that...*
- A decision by each committee member to \_\_\_\_\_ *so that...*

### Experiential Outcomes

Now that you have identified **rational** objectives, please consider your **experiential** objectives for the meeting:

- What is the context of this meeting?
  - When did they last meet?
  - How well do they know/like one another?
  - Have they recently had a major success, failure, or other significant event? Will there be a not-so-invisible elephant in the room?
  - Is this part of a long-term series of meetings?
- What kind of social experience do you hope participants will have?
- What kinds of interaction do you feel they need, or does their situation demand?
- How do you hope they will feel as the meeting concludes?

### Sample Experiential Outcomes

- Get better acquainted, get to know one another's strengths and skills
- Build trust, or restore trust
- Celebrate recent accomplishments
- Feel more collegial
- Let go of emotional and interpersonal baggage; resolve longstanding tension
- Share enthusiasm for shared mission and upcoming challenges
- Feel confident that we can achieve what we want

I'll work with you to refine the first-draft lists. Once we have a solid list of the essential items, I'll draft an agenda that we will finalize together.

Please call if you have any questions: 617 223 5049.

**John Monroe**



# How to Make & Use a Magic Wall

by John Monroe, NPS Rivers & Trails Program

## Ingredients

- One 8-to 14-foot-long piece of rip-stop nylon from a fabric store. Heavier weight looks sharper and is a bit easier to work with; lighter weight folds into a smaller package, but can get baggy.
- One 10.25-ounce can of either Kylon Easy-Tack Repositionable Adhesive 7020 or 3M Artist's Spray Mount - Artist's Adhesive #6065.
- Markers for participants: Black chisel-tip markers.
- Markers for the facilitator: Use dark, cool colors for text (blue, black, green, brown, purple) and hot colors for accents and highlights (red, yellow, orange).
- Paper for participants: Half-sheets of white and color copy paper work best. The size encourages brevity and keeps your wall from running out of space. Use paper color to distinguish the results of several questions and activities. Hint: to cut paper, use a triangular architect's or engineer's scale as a straightedge to rip sheets in half, five or six at a time.
- A wide roll of Anchor Brand masking tape, blue painter's tape, or push pins to hang the Wall. If you must leave no trace, then use white "artist masking tape." If push pins are acceptable, use them; they are quick and easy and don't let go if the Wall needs to stay up for several days.

## How to Make a Wall

- Lay the fabric on newspaper-covered floor with stupendous ventilation, but out of the wind (a garage with open doors works well). I'm not kidding about the ventilation; read the cautionary information on the can before using.
- With sheets of paper, mask about 6 by 6 inches in each corner and along the sides where you expect to hang the wall with masking tape. It's helpful to have Spray Mount-free areas because it tends to dissolve the masking tape adhesive.
- Spray as directed on the can to cover the fabric evenly. Spray lengthwise, crosswise and diagonally until the can runs out.
- Get out of there and let it dry for three or four hours, or overnight. If you can let it hang for a day or two to air out so much the better.
- Fold it up, sticky side in to keep dirt and hair from attaching to the fabric. If possible, store the wall in a place where it can continue to air out before using it for the first time.

## Set-up

- Don't be timid when pulling the wall open. The fabric sticks to itself with great determination, but it's rip-stop, so you won't hurt it. A helping hand makes it easier to pull the Wall open and tape, or pin, it onto the Wall.
- Before the meeting begins, set out a black marker and about ten half-sheets of paper for the first Magic Wall activity on the agenda.

- Note: If you are having a multiple-day meeting, it's possible that Walls mounted with tape will fall during the night. It's not usually a big deal to re-hang it in the morning.

## Show Time!

- In your Warm-ups, be sure to introduce the Magic Wall and how you will use it as a tool. That will save time later in the meeting; it will also satisfy the curiosity of the participants about that big sheet on the wall.
  - ***We'll use a Magic Wall today to record and organize your ideas. It will allow everyone to contribute and help us to do our work efficiently. The Wall is a piece of rip-stop nylon, sprayed with adhesive; the half-sheets of paper you see will stick to the Wall.***
  - ***Rather than have me paraphrase what you say on a flip chart, each of you will write your ideas with a black marker. Please put just one idea per sheet, written in a landscape format. I hope you can capture your thoughts in a sentence or a phrase rather than a paragraph. Please write as large as possible so we'll all be able to read it from our chairs.***
- When it's time to put the Wall to use, these are good reminders:
  - ***Remember that we want to have one idea per sheet, written in a landscape format, with the black marker, in big letters.***
  - ***State the question clearly, then say Now we'll have a few minutes of silence so you can think, then write. Write as many ideas as you like; let me know if you need more paper.***
- Enforce the quiet rule strictly. Whispering ruins the focused and shared sensation of thinking. I like to point out that thinking is a vastly underutilized tool in most meetings. People laugh about it, but's it true!
- When the writing slows down, transition from quiet time to having participants post their ideas on the Wall. You may find these directions helpful:
  - ***I'd like each of you to come up – one at a time – to post your ideas.***
  - ***Tell us what you've written and make sure everyone understands it.***
  - ***Space each sheet away from other sheets unless the content is similar or related somehow. That way we'll see patterns begin to emerge. And don't hold back duplicates; we want every sheet up on the Wall.***
  - ***The Wall is open for business!***
  - ***Hint: let participants self-select when to rise, even if there is a long pause before the first one. Like popcorn kernels popping, they'll soon rise in quick succession.***
- Distribute different colors of paper as needed. Collect the "old" unused sheets to reduce confusion.
- The rest is up to you and your imagination.

## Wrap-up

- Take digital images before you strip down each set of sheets so you have a permanent record of what was said and how it was arranged.



- When you pull sheets off the Wall, keep them grouped by topic with a cover sheet showing the agenda item, or topic, they relate to; this makes transcription a breeze, especially when compared to balky flip charts.
- Some people prefer to transcribe the digital images rather than the original handwritten half-sheets.
- At the end of the meeting, remove all the paper from the Wall. Paper left on for more than a day will stick more vigorously.
- Always fold the Wall sticky side in.

## Care & Storage

- Your Wall may need a touch-up of additional adhesive after half a dozen uses.
- To refresh a tired wall, throw it in a commercial washing machine with hot water and detergent, then a no-heat dryer. Apply adhesive as before.

