



THE CHECK-OUT

A different way to close a meeting...

AN INTRODUCTION

Typically, a meeting ends when the business has been completed, or when the time for the meeting has run out and remaining agenda items or outstanding matters are deferred. A Check-out is a more deliberate way of closing a meeting, providing an opportunity to give orderly attention to the progress that has been made (or not made), and to note what still needs to be done. When managed well, the Check-out ensures the meeting ends at the agreed time.

The Design of a Check-out

The facilitator or chair needs to determine how soon before the end of the meeting to introduce the Check-out. This depends on the length of the meeting and the number of participants. For an hour-long meeting with 10 people, five minutes should be adequate. A day-long meeting with 20 people may require 30 minutes. The Check-out generally takes the form of a question posed by the facilitator that is answered by everyone, including the facilitator themselves. The question is an invitation to reflect on the meeting in two ways. There is the content of the meeting, including noticing what was covered successfully, what is unclear and what still needs to be considered. Then there is the tone and dynamic of the meeting, including the way people participated and the awareness of those present of what was happening during the meeting. So, the generic Check-out question is probably: "How did we do in our meeting today?" which would cover both content and dynamic. This can then be adapted according to what occurred. Examples are:

- "What do you think we agreed today, and what do you think still needs to be considered?"
- "Is there anything you wanted to say but didn't have a chance to bring into the meeting?"
- "How would you describe the tone of our meeting?"
- "What was the most interesting part of the meeting for you?"
- "What did you discover today?"
- "How could we improve our future meetings?"
- "What needs to be on our agenda next time?"

The Structure of a Check-out

People take turns to answer the Check-out question, meaning only one person speaks at a time. Often it is best to tag the Check-out, with the speaker making their response then choosing the next speaker. This keeps the pace to the end of the meeting. Alternatively, people could be invited to speak when they choose (which may be helpful if the subject or dynamic has been difficult and some are still processing what has happened) or take their turn in a set pattern like around the circle, alphabetically or by geographic region if there are a wide spread of people meeting online.



Surprising Benefits

For the short length of time it takes, the Check-out is an extremely valuable activity for many reasons. Hearing from each person provides an orderly completion to the meeting for everyone, rather than a ragged close where some people drift away before the end, both literally and metaphorically. The facilitator and other participants may hear helpful feedback, and leave with a shared understanding about the experience, rather than uncertainty about what colleagues are thinking. The Check-out invites people to Bystand the meeting, and that will reveal dysfunctional patterns in the dynamic of the group that would otherwise be left unaddressed and persist to everyone's detriment. So, this will improve the quality and effectiveness of future meetings. Lastly, and even more importantly, it is a way of developing the Bystanding skill in all those present without any teaching. People learn for themselves how to reflect and Bystand. This ability to know and be able to say what happened will prove a huge benefit in all work and social situations.

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February 2022

