

# A Hidden Lever of Leadership – Supporting Meeting Interactivity

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Through their San Francisco-based company, CoVision, **LENNY LIND AND KARL DANSKIN** have over the last eighteen years developed large-group meeting methodologies for face-to-face, multi-site, and virtual meetings. The hallmark of their work is the use of technology to facilitate small-group discussions becoming part of a whole-group conversation.



WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP BEING DEMONSTRATED AT A MEETING, they visualize a single strong person—probably the most senior leader—speaking to the group in a galvanizing fashion. Charismatic, focussed, compelling.

In reality, however, this is rarely what is needed, and even when it is, it is rarely executed. Often the hope is that a meeting will be an opportunity for *many* people to step up, share insights, and have a role in the decisions made. But when meetings get large, the opportunities for people to participate in this way often (and

unnecessarily) diminish.

Ideally, in many situations leaders and meeting organizers would prefer to see people walking away saying things like: “it was real leadership development,” “I feel much more connected to my peers,” or “we had lots of opportunity to influence the future direction.” Clearly, to achieve this kind of meeting, organizers need to cultivate other dimensions of leadership (beyond the charismatic presentation), and frame the goal more broadly than “get my vision across and get people’s buy-in.”

## Meeting competitive challenges ... together

Before a leadership team meeting, a senior leader framed his goal as: “Catalyze a value system and a set of behaviours that would propel our organisation into growth and the needed execution that goes with that.” Clearly this was not just about transmitting information; instead, the goal is to influence the organisational culture and for everyone to embody the needed leadership traits.

The company was a well-established American insurance company with a long and successful history. However, markets were changing, new agile competitors were leveraging new tools and models, the company was in silos, and the new business plan was very ambitious. The company needed to react with all parts working in concert, supporting each other and adapting to new external realities – so that they could provide solutions that were much more relevant to customers.

The leader’s agenda coming into the meeting was to break the patterns that had developed over many years, employing the dictum: “If we do nothing differently, we will continue to get the same results.” He

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wanted to focus on the role of a leader in the organisation. Meaning: he wanted the top 100 to “think and act as owner-leaders of the company – beyond teams, functions and departments.”

The meeting was only a day-and-a-half long, held once a year. The challenge now was how to have this be a broadly shared conversation, where everyone’s viewpoint was heard, challenges were encouraged, and the group could hammer out working agreements, coming away with a feeling of being one large team. Clearly a series of presentations with Q&A and breakout sessions wouldn’t cut it.

In concert with his design team, the senior leader chose a method that used technology to quickly gather what the participants had to say. The method also enhanced his ability to “listen” by providing an accelerated means to review key themes arising in the small-group discussions.

Participants were seated at round tables of six with a stage area in the front. The agenda was unusual; the senior leaders’ presentations were kept short. This allowed time for the group to break into triads (groups of three; two at each table) and discuss the topic with each other. The technology (two networked laptops on each table) allowed them to type in their group’s thoughts as they discussed. This gave the experience of “saying” what they were thinking.

Also in the room was a small, carefully-chosen team from the organisation. They read all of the thoughts and ideas that were being input at the tables. These folks were constantly reading and talking to each other, comparing notes on what they were seeing. In real time, as the participants were still in discussion, this group distilled all of the input into key themes. The team shared their findings with the senior leader and presenters as the themes emerged.

All input was anonymous. The group reading it could see every comment, but didn’t know which table group had sent it – giving everyone the safety to be



## Values encouraged and built through technology-enabled interactivity:

- Honesty
- Respect
- Inclusion
- Trust
- Valuing each person's contribution
- Collaboration
- Ownership
- Creativity

more honest. This was especially important at the beginning. None of the topics were light – the organisation was in a period of transition, and the targets were high. The leader wanted to know what was real.

He chose this method because it could increase the level of honesty in the room and would build the level of trust that was needed if leaders were going to see beyond their own areas of responsibility. The method was more inclusive than many of the usual meeting methods because every person had a voice in the conversation and each person's contribution was included and valued. Rather than being passive listeners, the whole group was engaged in collaborative, creative work throughout the meeting. And the result was a shared sense of ownership for everything that was done in the meeting, for agreements that were made, and for the success of each part of the company.

After several minutes, the discussion period was halted, and the key themes that had been distilled were projected up front on the big screen so that everyone could see what the group as a whole had been discussing. The leader had already had some time to think about the key themes as they were developed, and he was able to give a detailed response, constructive to each point that the group had raised. He then invited the participants – those who were willing – to reply to respond with their views. The give and take was surprisingly robust, and it bred a sense of openness and of being part of a larger team.

At one point in the agenda, the group was asked,

“On a scale of 1-10, what is your confidence level that we will execute on our plan?” Everyone cast a vote through the computers. Then they were asked, “What would it take to raise your score one point?”, and they talked in their groups and sent in their thoughts.

The leader took the quantitative result to the first question in stride. But the turning point came when the themes for “What would it take to raise your score one point?” were projected on the big screen.

The whole group's thinking was there for everyone to see. And the leader saw immediately that there was a misunderstanding about where the company was in the process of reshaping itself, and about the role that these top 100 were being asked to play in the process. Their role, to his way of thinking, was pivotal.

He stopped the meeting and gave his best articulation of their journey, their current reality, and what role everyone needed to play if they were going to succeed. When he paused, he was answered by an emotional voice in the room that spoke for what many were thinking – “offered that role, I am at once challenged and energized to pick it up and try it on.”

Slowly other people started to add their feelings about what the role meant to them and how it felt to take it on. After half an hour, the room was completely electrified. The sense of excitement and commitment was palpable. What could have gone unnoticed, or even unknown, instead became a catalyst for clarity and a bonding point for this whole group. All it took was a half hour, but it put the whole meeting onto a new footing. Afterward, the group took a break and then resumed with the agenda.

Though not always as dramatic, the meeting as a whole was like that – interactive, fast moving, enlivening and inherently meaningful for the participants. And the leader used the meeting to help build leadership in the organisation that is integrated, focused and flexible. In this case, the senior leadership team took full advantage of technology-enabled interactivity and modelled the leadership behaviours needed for a transformative change.

**RATHER THAN BEING PASSIVE LISTENERS, THE WHOLE GROUP WAS ENGAGED IN COLLABORATIVE, CREATIVE WORK THROUGHOUT THE MEETING.**

<b>Desired Behaviour</b>	<b>Enabling Process</b>
<i>Honesty of participants</i>	Assure anonymity in the feedback process
<i>Honesty of leader</i>	Create a safe process for formulating candid responses
<i>Inclusion</i>	Provide many opportunities for conversation in small groups, where everyone's voice is equal
<i>Valuing everyone's contribution</i>	Identify the themes from all of these small group conversations and have the leader respond to them
<i>Trust</i>	Repeat these feedback loops – where participants are able to be honest in giving their input, and the leader is able to be honest in responding to them
<i>Collaboration</i>	Use small group discussions to work toward solutions
<i>Creativity</i>	Focus on solutions, drive the generation of new ideas and proposals
<i>Ownership</i>	Generate new ideas and solutions as a group, and prioritize them as a group

## Tailor meeting design to objectives

Often, meetings are designed to “get across” certain information to the participants. But as we’ve seen in hundreds of large meetings, the most profound information that participants receive is about who the leader is, what kind of culture is tolerated and promoted, and how engaged they feel. The real opportunity is to design a meeting that allows the leader to model the desired kinds of leadership needed more broadly.

A leader can ask: Does the meeting design allow me to listen? Does it allow me to be candid and share and respond openly with the participants? Does it provide the opportunity for me to learn? To make adjustments? To realize and admit mistakes? And does it provide those opportunities for the participants as well?

If the answers are mostly ‘yes’, then full speed ahead. If they are mostly ‘no’, then it is time to explore options with the help of internal and external design experts. There are methods for safely and effectively engaging large groups, and they are not difficult.

Finally, there is no such thing as a “neutral design” in which the information being presented is the sole

focus. How information is presented and processed makes a significant statement about who the leader is, how the organisation functions, and what is expected for the future. By attending to the process as carefully as the content, leaders can benefit their organisations and themselves. It is a hidden lever of leadership. ■