

Keys to Unlock Collective Intelligence in Your Meetings

Make your team meetings more
meaningful, productive and fun.



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At The Zone, our purpose is to make organisations more human. Since 1999 we have been guiding leaders, teams and organisations worldwide to create happy and high-performing cultures, and unlock collective intelligence to creatively solve their biggest challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Remote working at scale has challenged preconceptions about how productive companies can be without an office. Most of all it's helped some leaders tackle the question of how company cultures adjust in the long-term.

The stark reality we face is that physical meetings and collaboration must take a new form, either distanced or virtually, and that maintaining and even accelerating productivity and innovation depends on it. How we work together has and will continue to change. But what hasn't changed is our need to leverage the

potential of the people sitting at the table or screen across from us. The best leaders know that when we pay attention to bringing our best selves to work, and use proven collaborative methodologies, rigor, care and empathy to the dynamics of a team, we can activate a 'super power' called collective intelligence.

We believe collective intelligence, or CQ, will become the single most important factor in creating high performing teams as we emerge from the crisis and look to the future.

This guide will help you understand what's required to create a culture that allows collective intelligence to thrive, why it's vital for survival, growth and productivity. But most of all, it will show you how you can make lasting changes that become part of your everyday leadership and meeting practice.

Bad Meetings, A Badge of Honour?

When you open your diary for the day, how do you feel? A sense of joy at the prospect of a day full of achievement, or dread as another day of life-sucking, time wasting meetings unfolds? Sadly for many it's the latter and it's enough to make us want to run for the hills.

It begs the question, how much of our adult lives is wasted in unproductive meetings? According to [The State of Meetings Report 2019](#) by Doodle, 68% of professionals in the US and 72% in the UK lose time every week because of unnecessary or poorly organised meetings.

When you add this lost time up, it has a significant impact on economies worldwide: almost \$400 billion in the US and over £45 billion in the UK annually. And we haven't begun to calculate the substantial, yet tolerated, cost in 'human' terms.

We often observe people wearing the impact of bad meetings as a dark badge of honour. They take a strange pride in back to back meetings, with no time to care for basics like bathroom breaks, nor exercise, hydration or nutrition that will

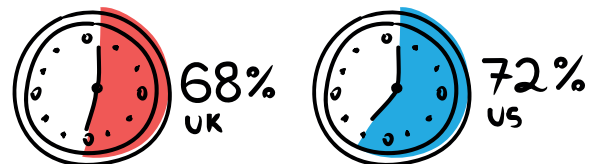
fuel our best performance.

Meeting fatigue and death by a thousand cuts is almost glorified. An unconscious behaviour we willingly endure.

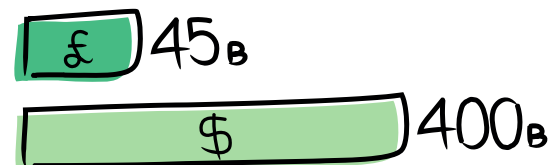
But how can this possibly continue? If we are serious about working conditions, finding ways to do more with less, and helping people strike a sustainable work-life balance, then we cannot possibly expect them to waste time and energy on unproductive and unpleasant meetings.

Instead we must find ways that make meetings purposeful, super productive, creative, outcome focused, and ultimately an experience that we all enjoy and find energising. Our teams, and the people we serve from customers through citizens to patients, deserve better.

Professionals losing time due to poorly organised meetings*:




Economic impact of poorly organised meetings*:



So What's The Alternative?

How can we supercharge how we do business? You need fuel, and the smart money is on collective intelligence.



Collective intelligence can boost a team's creativity and its ability to effectively solve the big issues and challenges it faces.

It works on the principle that teams become smarter when people work together in a particular way.

In essence, the right work gets done, and it's done with energy and a motivation which can be sustained for long periods of time. Knowing we are doing the right work in the right way allows us to not only sprint to a deadline but also run a marathon. But most of all the approach to getting things done does not kill the

human spirit. In fact the opposite happens, it nurtures it. Making a contribution pays dividends at an individual, team and company level.

Collective Intelligence

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

In 2010 [Dr. Anita Woolley](#), associate professor of Organisational Behaviour and Theory at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University, found that the traditional view of group intelligence, where the individual intelligence of each person in a team is used to predict the overall intelligence of the team, was flawed.

In her research, Dr Woolley found that the collective intelligence of the team was in fact a way to predict the team's potential performance and that teams with high collective intelligence were more successful.

At the heart of their success were two factors: social perceptiveness, an ability to read verbal and non-verbal cues, and the ability to harness the diversity of the team through an even distribution of

conversation known as 'turn taking'. For today's leaders, successful groups that operate online follow this same pattern. Their means of communicating and collaborating may be different, but the even distribution of contribution - be it speaking, use of the chat box or other online technologies - is still at the centre.



Most importantly, it's underpinned by a facilitative leader who has a collective intelligence mindset and an ability to facilitate and coordinate the group so everyone brings their best self to the task in hand.

What is a Facilitative Leader?

At The Zone we define a facilitative leader as:

“One who believes in, and applies, collaborative processes to facilitate or make easy the work of the group to achieve its purpose in a way that is aligned with the agreed values of the organisation”

They know that the team is smarter together and that no one 'talent' holds all the answers.

They know that meetings need to be creatively and thoughtfully designed to unlock the potential of people. That psychological safety is where it all begins and where it can just as quickly end. They work on their facilitation skills with humility and regular feedback from the team.

They know that by slowing down to speed up is not just a quote, it actually works.

Let's get practical.

How can you change your approach to meetings and start unlocking collective intelligence?

Here are our seven guiding principles.

1 Start with purpose

2
Human first,
agenda
second

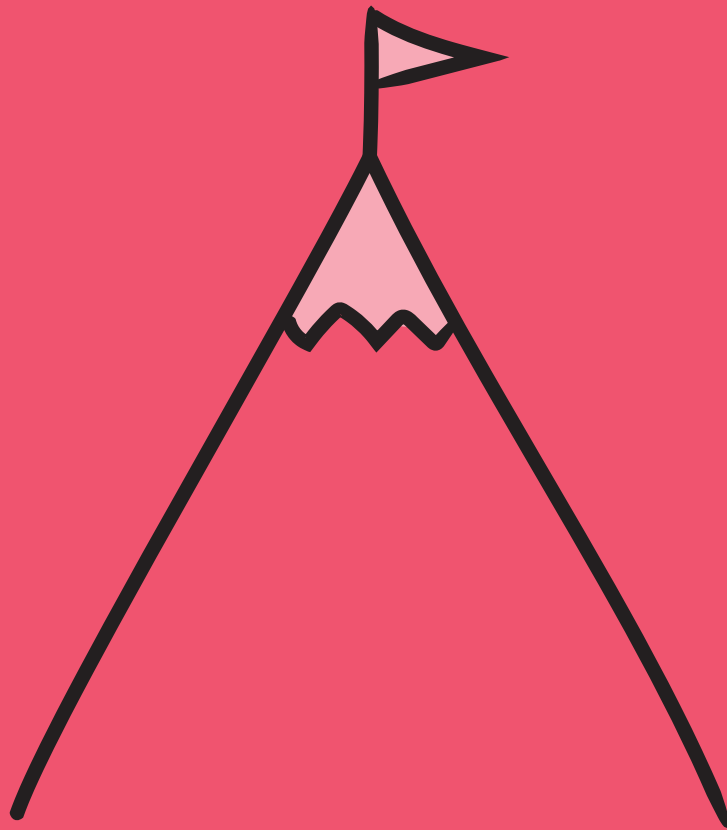
3
Agree
on the
ground rules

4 Activate the whole person

5
'Lightly
deeply'
wins the day

6
Inclusion is
an active
process

7 Design your ending



1

Start
with purpose

If there is only one thing you take away from this guide, let it be this: purpose is your north star. Everything begins with purpose.

It should be at the heart of all pieces of work: Why are we meeting right now? What is the purpose of this meeting? What do we want to accomplish together?

Think of it this way. Purpose is like claiming your summit point and putting a flag in the middle of the table and saying 'this is why we are here today, this is why it is meaningful to us, and this is what we will have achieved'. So, if your purpose is not clear, ask questions until it is clear.

To work and be beneficial, purpose must be declared in advance and presented at the start of the session. Only then can every participant align their individual and functional knowledge. It's not difficult to set a purpose for a meeting, yet it rarely happens. It's one of the most common reasons we see cross functional meetings descend into confusion.

It's an imperative of high performing organisations. They recognise that purpose guides structure, agenda and membership of the meeting and without it we lack focus and waste time and energy. Interestingly, despite many of us knowing this we still let an aimless format take over.

TIP N° 1

Include the purpose of every meeting in the invite, and confirm it at the beginning of the meeting: "The purpose for today's meeting is _____, does that work for everyone?"

By answering the question of purpose we can make cascading decisions that are smart. Who needs to be in the room? What preparation is required? What level of decision making do these people need to have about the process, the time span, the format, the venue etc.

It challenges everyone to consider other options too. Do we really need face to face or video communications, or will an email, a phone call, or a collaboration platform like Slack, Asana or Trello get the job done? Simple, effective and not over engineered is always a good option.



2

Human first,
agenda second

Human first, agenda second is the next guiding principle. Think of it as the need to slow down to speed up. So, having established a clear, aligned and meaningful purpose, we should turn our attention to the people in the process.

Whether in a virtual or physical setting, how often do you ask 'what condition are people in?'. Are they in a good state to proceed? They may physically be in the room but where are their minds? How are they feeling and how will this help or hinder our agenda? How can I support the team to optimise their performance in the time we have together or, in other words, be our best selves focused on the purpose at hand.

It requires people to be proactive and get their 'whole person' in the room, be present aware and connected to the group and the purpose of the meeting.

But the intent is always the same. Checking-in primes everyone for the session, acknowledging life is happening and we are human in our reactions. The role of the facilitator can be rotated amongst the team.

TIP N° 2

If you are concerned about time, allocate a set amount of time to each person and use a timer. It's simple yet effective.

TIP N° 3

Remember to check-in when online as well. It can be easy to just sign in and go straight to the task. Pause to connect with the human behind the screen and take a few moments to check in with each other.

Have a 'check-in' before the agenda starts. It can be something quick and fun or more deep and meaningful depending on the nature of the meeting.

Check-in Process

Choose 1-3 powerful questions.

Ask each participant to take their turn to answer them.

Actively listen, with no interruption and no need to respond.

Examples of check-in questions:



What is on my mind and keeping me from being fully present here today?



How is the current situation impacting me, my family, my community, my work?



What are my hopes and fears about this project / this workshop / meeting?



What was the highlight and the lowlight of my week?



What am I deeply grateful for right now?



Who on the team would I like to acknowledge?



What will I contribute to make our session a success?



What's the most fun I had this week?



3

Agree on the
ground rules

It's very easy to slip into a pattern of behaviour and habits that define how meetings run. What we need is an explicit agreement on what behaviours will support us to make how we work together in meetings productive and fun.

It's not enough to bring great minds together, set a problem and expect them to come up with the answer. Collective intelligence doesn't work like that.

It needs a strong foundation of safety and trust, and it has to be explicitly created and over time reviewed. Any teams will have a framework to base this on, typically they are the core values of the organisation. That's a helpful place to start.

TIP N° 4

Be transparent and upfront about it. If people need to take a call, deal with a client or family request, encourage an upfront declaration before the meeting gets going. Help people have the confidence to do this.

TIP N° 5

Reflect and review after a few months on how behaviours have changed. It is a living and learning agreement. Ask the questions 'how is your experience? What are you enjoying? What would you suggest to do differently?'. Align on what to change and work on, and the next review date.

For instance, how do you feel about multi-tasking in a meeting? For most people, the answer would be that it's not ok, yet it happens. If our goal is to be present and have our whole person focused on the purpose then it's not helpful.

You cannot be present to the group and be checking your phone. Indeed, The State of Meetings Report 2019 found that 55% of employees consider people checking their phones during meetings the biggest annoyance.

It's also disrespectful. How many times have you stayed up late, made personal sacrifices to finish a presentation or report for a meeting only to be faced with people on their devices doing 'more important' work while you present?

This behaviour is even more exaggerated online in video calls.

How do ground rules help set positive behaviour?

It's important to avoid setting a precedent for behaviours that can negatively impact the speed at which collective intelligence gathers pace. Arriving late, lack of preparation, taking over the meeting with opinion and politics all hinder progress. They can be best summed up as 'defend, attack, retreat' behaviours and a form of fight, flight and freeze related to how we think the meeting will go and how the personalities in the room will perform.

This preconception needs to be overturned. As a facilitative leader you need to actively change behaviour using rules, and help people realise the effect

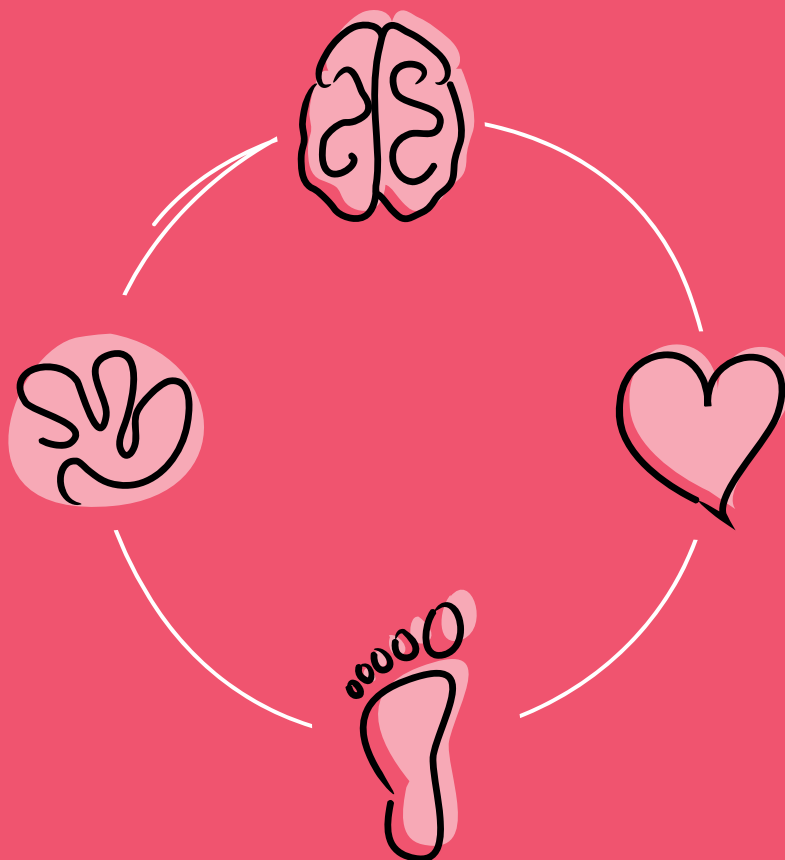
they have. Above all ask which behaviours will make the most of our allotted time and let everyone have a go at the answer. Helpful items to include are to listen, be present, one person speaks at a time, all tech (mobiles and laptops) in silent mode, no interrupting.

Aligning on how you work together is also crucial when working online. What behaviours will help us be more effective if we're all working remotely and having our meetings online? Mics on mute, one person speaks at a time, video always on or with a choice to decide when you are on or off screen.

TIP N° 6

Given that social perceptiveness is an important factor for collective intelligence, having the screen on is helpful. But in current times it can be exhausting to always be online as we work harder to focus on the visual cues. Close ups of people, tone, body language, sound, a sea of faces on the screen all must be processed.

Tune in to which parts of your online meeting are enhanced by having a visual element to them. Do some meetings go better when there isn't any video? Notice how the quality of your listening improves when there is no visual and you are present. Experiment with it.



4

Activate the
whole person

While it may often feel like our brain is the only part of us that is valued at work, it is useful to remember we are more than this. We have our heart, intuition, experience and imagination at our disposal too. We refer to this as our whole person.

But it takes a safe environment to freely express how you feel about something and share ideas, especially if it's different to the leader's opinion. Tuning into all of our internal resources is a skill and allows us to access and filter information in different ways and make decisions quickly. It's a skill to practice but well worth doing because when we all focus on an aligned purpose our collective intelligence as a team is amplified. It's a kind of magic.

TIP N° 7

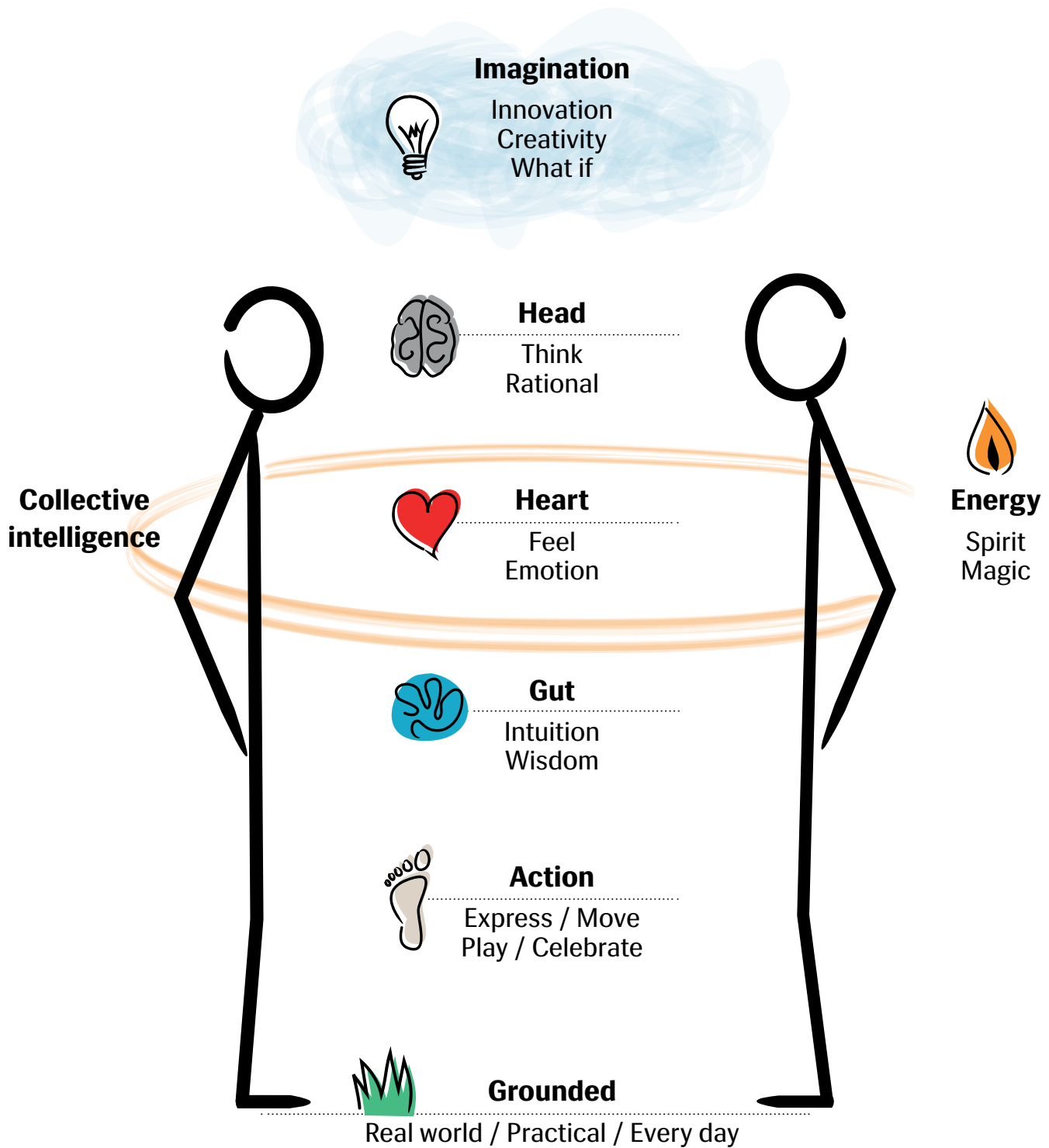
Here are some practical actions you can take to activate everyone's 'whole person' at your next team meeting:

Create space for people to think privately and capture their thoughts on post-its or assign pre-work. Some of us respond better if we are given time to reflect in advance.

Help people express how they feel about things. The action or decision may make logical sense but may not feel good, so ask the question "How do you feel about it?"

If having a longer session, plan frequent breaks and be aware of energy levels. Get the body moving with a back/shoulder stretch, dancing to music. Get outside. Inviting pairs to discuss the subject on a 15-minute walk outside is also a great way of getting people into action.

The Whole Person Model



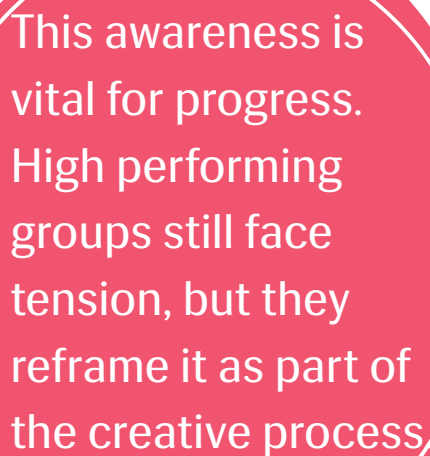


5

Lightly deeply
wins the day

Can you remember when you were last at your best and working with a group of people you really enjoyed working with? A team that had a purpose worth working on, with challenges coming from the left, right and center, and you loved it.

It's a great feeling and it's probably because you were energised by the experience and took responsibility for the energy you contributed too. In her TED talk in 2008, [Dr Jill Bolte Taylor](#), a Harvard trained Brain Scientist, said “be responsible for the energy you bring into the space”, an insight from her experience of having a stroke in 1996, which left her unable to speak as the left hemisphere of her brain shut down. Her experience of understanding her world through the energy of others led her to this insight.



This awareness is vital for progress. High performing groups still face tension, but they reframe it as part of the creative process.

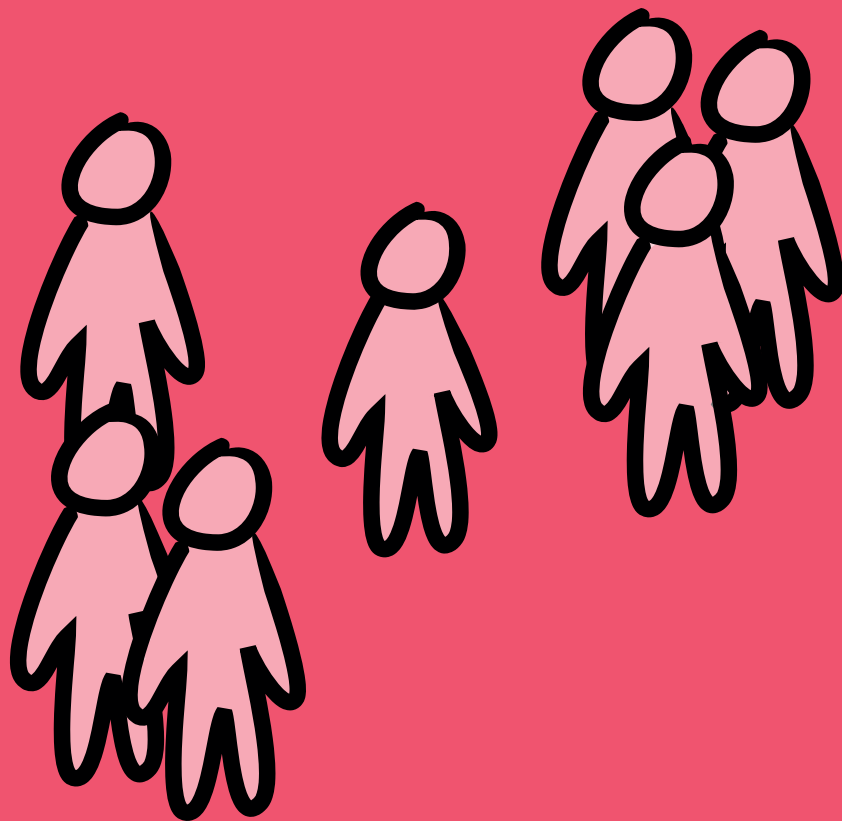
TIP N° 8

Notice when the discussions start to drift into this territory and bring them back to 'lightly deeply' to keep the collective intelligence and energy flowing.

Share with the group what you observe about the energy in the room, while keeping your own energy light, and with a smile.

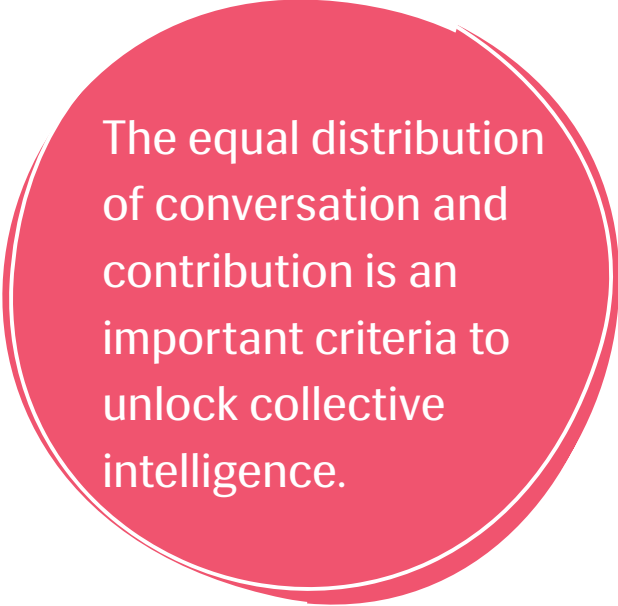
Invariably, people who are working well together don't take themselves too seriously. They take the project seriously but appreciate the spirit of collective working and keeping the atmosphere fun and focused.

This 'lightly deeply' approach means that we can keep things fluid and moving. When we are too serious it sucks the energy, things get stuck and judgment and criticism can float in.



6

Inclusion is an
active process



The equal distribution of conversation and contribution is an important criteria to unlock collective intelligence.

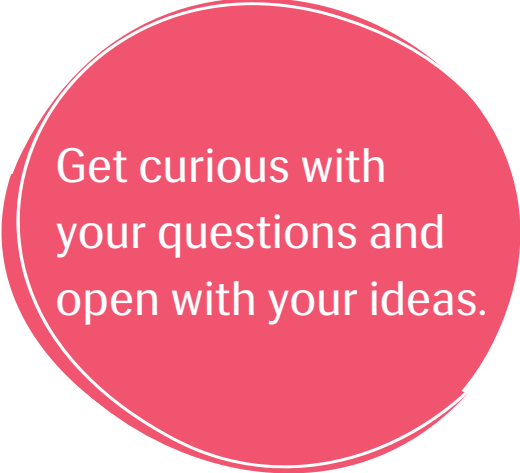
Too often we observe one or two personalities dominating the proceedings leaving little to no space for different perspectives or others to speak.

Experienced facilitators use collaborative processes to guide and overcome this. They are clear that they want to hear from everyone, and when online, they pay particular attention to this. It is easy to pass over someone by mistake or in the overwhelm of your own visual processing, so being alert to the need for inclusion is important.

In the world of collective intelligence active listening has a wider scope. Listen from your whole person, listen to what is not being said, listen beyond the words.

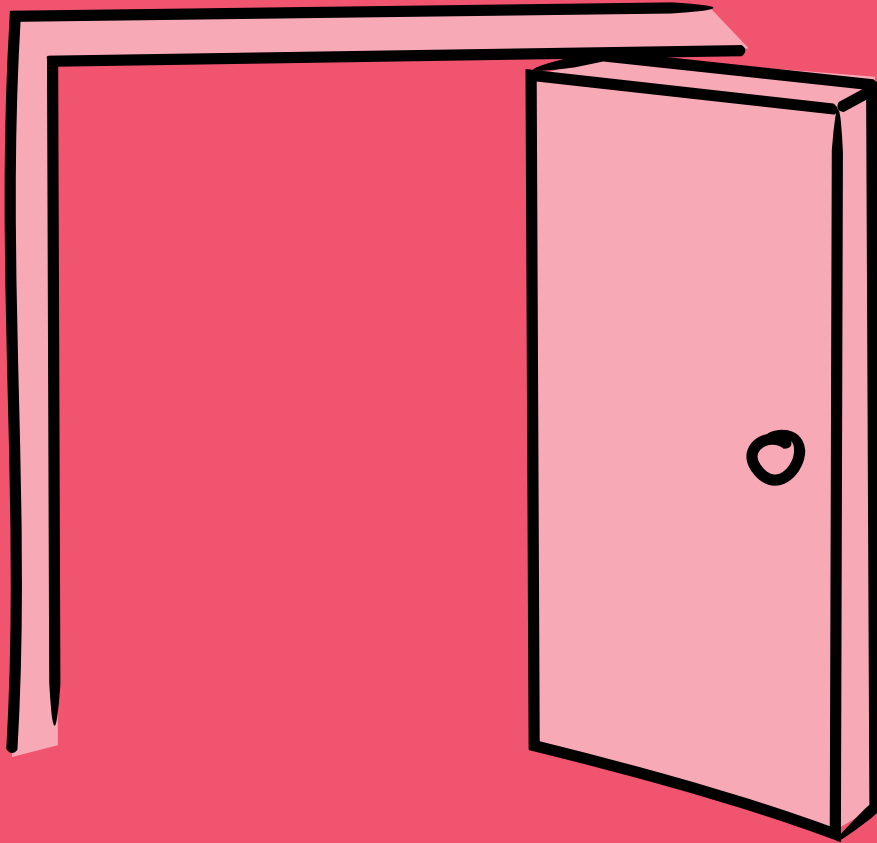
TIP N° 9

Deliberately ask: “Who haven't we heard from?” to give everyone the opportunity to be heard and contribute. But also consider using structured rounds where questions are answered to guide a discussion. They can be very useful to move a group forward and encourage inclusivity.



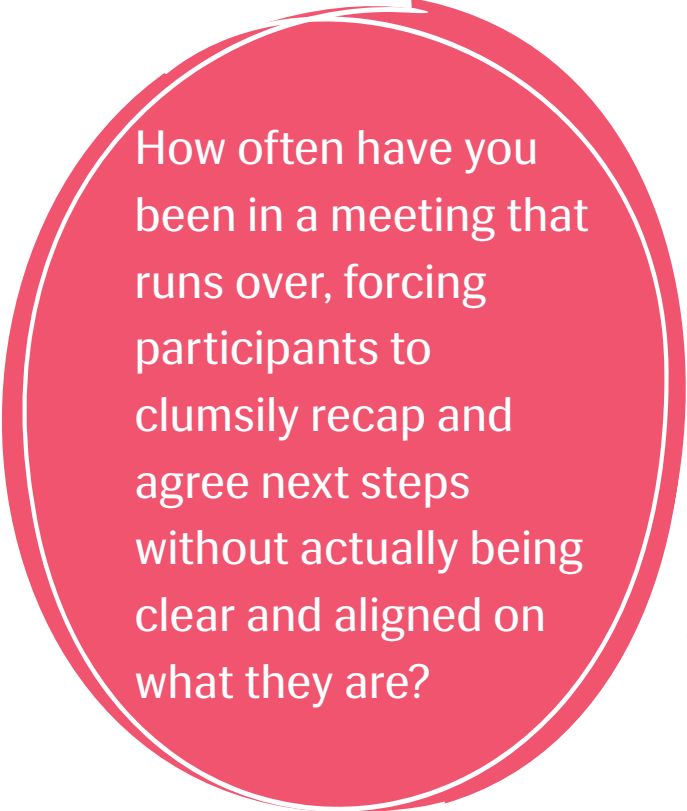
Get curious with your questions and open with your ideas.

There's no right or wrong when you're searching for a solution to a problem or pitching new ideas for a product.



7

Design
your ending



How often have you been in a meeting that runs over, forcing participants to clumsily recap and agree next steps without actually being clear and aligned on what they are?

You then rush to the next meeting, searching for the invite feeling flat, tired or frustrated. It's a common occurrence.

Yet it's doing us damage because in terms of our 'whole person' we are left incomplete. Our head wants clarity and our heart wants to express how we feel before we sign off, gather up our internal reserves, and head to the next meeting.

TIP N° 10

In the last 10 minutes of the meeting, even if the discussion is not complete, stop and agree on next steps. This feeds the 'heads' of everyone and their need for clarity and personal commitment.

Next feed the heart and ask people "What do you need to say to feel complete?". The answer can be a sentence or one word. It doesn't matter what people say, it's the act of expressing it that counts. And acknowledge that there may be some learnings in it for you. Celebrate the work done with physical motion - high fives, jazz hands or even a dance!

SUMMARY

We've explored seven guiding principles that act as keys to unlock collective intelligence, and looked at why they are so vital. Facilitative leadership is a powerful and accelerated way to design meetings and unlock the collective intelligence of your team. We believe it is a critical skill of our times.

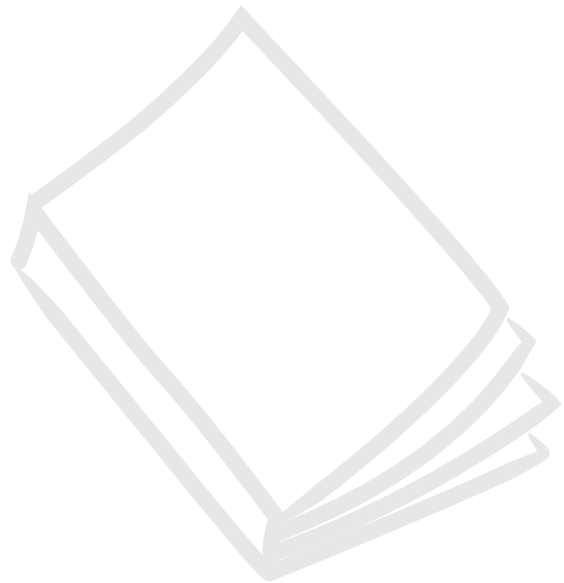
Behaviours that keep us safe, engaged and contributing our best, even in tough situations, is what we need more of right now. When we bring our whole self to work and have a clear purpose we can work collaboratively with confidence. We unlock collective intelligence and it flows. It becomes the fuel we need to succeed and thrive.

Organisations that use the seven keys every day can testify that it costs very little to make it happen. So, we invite you to invest some time to explore one or more of the seven keys described above to unlock your team's collective intelligence at your next meeting.

Reflect and refine as you go, but above all understand that any lasting, small change you make will pay major dividends to the individual and the organisation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We want to warmly acknowledge our mentor and friend Dr Dale Hunter and the Zenergy school of facilitation for their body of work, compiled over 25 years, in the field of whole person facilitation. Dale is a pioneer in her field, and the author of the international classic *The Art of Facilitation*.



At The Zone, our purpose is to make organisations more human.

For the last 20 years, across 35 different countries, we have been guiding leaders, teams and organisations to integrate head and heart, successfully redesign the way they work together and unlock collective intelligence to creatively solve their biggest challenges.

Through masterful facilitation, transformative coaching and using our unique toolkit, we tailor our approach to your specific needs.

If you would like to discuss how you can apply this to your organisation and get some specific help to unlock the collective intelligence of your team then get in touch!

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