

Check-in, Check-out:
A Tool for “Real” Conversations

by Fred Kofman

“So many times we start a meeting and we don’t realize that two-thirds of the people have no idea why they are there. Of course, we have no time to ask them, so we just go through the motions. When everyone leaves, we assume they understood everything that we talked about. It’s a disaster. And we even thought that meetings like that were great meetings. As a matter of fact, we started out thinking that the less questions, the better. If there were no questions, it must mean that everybody understood.”

-Fortune 10 corporation manager

Your daughter was sick last night and you didn’t get much sleep. Tony’s car was rear-ended on the way to the office. Vivian has to finish a report by noon. Bart just found out his wife is pregnant.

In a normal meeting we hear none of this, yet such issues are often foremost in everyone’s minds. We might discuss the new advertising campaign, next month’s budget, or the status of a project, but no one knows what is *really* going on with the others in the room. And by ignoring these undertones, we prevent ourselves from being fully present with each other.

As managers spend more and more time in increasingly unproductive meetings, it is becoming critical that we create environments for more productive conversations. The check-in process is a quality tool for good communication that can create such an environment. Although the mechanics are extremely simple and require little time, the check-in process can dramatically increase the effectiveness of any meeting.

The check-in process is an invitation to share what is most present in participants’ minds. Each person is asked to respond to the questions, “What is on your mind right now?”

The purpose of this process is to bring concerns and issues into the open so there are no unspoken thoughts or distractions from the meeting. The check-in is an invitation to be fully present – not just present with the “official story,” but with whatever is on our minds. We are legitimately allowed into the meeting with our whole array of concerns and interests (see “The Check-in Process”).

Empathic listening is an integral part of the check-in process. Empathic listening implies adopting an open, non-judgmental stance toward the speaker and positioning ourselves in

his/her situation. It means asking ourselves questions such as, “What is going on with me that encourages me to pay attention to some things and disregard others?” “How is my attitude filtering out thoughts and feelings?” “How is the speaker expressing his or her truth?” “What does this truth reveal about his or her mental models?” “What does my reaction reveal about my mental models?”

Benefits of the Process

Any time we go into a meeting, we approach it with expectations – about what the agenda is, who will say what, how the process will evolve, etc. These expectations bias our listening, so we pay selective attention to what fits our ideas and ignore what doesn't. If we don't put a check on this bias, we will end up in a situation where each person talks and listens to his or her own projection of who the other person is. The conversation becomes a hall of mirrors where everybody interacts with their own self-fulfilling expectations.

It is only when we speak from our hearts have we become fuller than the frozen models and presuppositions that others hold about us. It is only when we begin to listen without judgment that we open the door for a deeper understanding and dialogue.

The check-in process opens up that space for understanding and fuller communications by allowing us to bring concerns into the group. Once we acknowledge that something is on our mind, it is much easier to focus on the meeting. When we repress our concerns, we might place them out of sight, but we also place them out of control. When we express our concerns, we can actively choose to let them rest or deal with them openly. That brings our mind fully to the present experience.

For example, in one check-in, one member of the group shared that she was under a lot of stress and felt that her other commitments were more important than the meeting. At the end of the check-in, the group discussed whether it was really necessary for her to participate. Through this conversation, she understood much better why she was there and decided to stay – in spite of the group's permission for her to leave.

In another check-in, several people said that they did not understand the purpose of the meeting and why they had been invited. At the end of the check-in, the leader explained what he believed was the objective of the meeting and the group discussed whether it made sense to continue. They agreed that there were some critical players missing and decided to postpone the meeting until those members could attend. Afterward, the leader commented that without the check-in process they would probably have wasted three hours in the meeting, without anybody understanding why there were there.

The check-in process can also be helpful for the many people who have trouble speaking in groups. For them, the process provides an opportunity to express themselves. Having their voice heard right from the start reduces any anxiety they might feel and can help them become more comfortably participating

Nothing encourages people to share their views more than the knowledge that they will be listened to with empathy. We jump in and out of tasks so frantically that we often have little time left to create the field of appreciation that enables full self-expression. This type of listening can extend beyond the check-in process. Once people begin listening to each other with empathy, they simply can't go back to their ordinary meeting style. Their empathy remains even as they advocate for their views, inquire into other views, and make decisions together.

One manager who tried the check-in process was shocked to see some people break down and cry as they spoke. "It's really sad to realize how much pain and suffering there is in organizations today," he commented later. "And the saddest thing is that no one has ever asked these people, 'Tell me about you. Tell me what's on your mind.'" Pain and suffering are not popular topics, but they are pervasive in corporate life. Dealing with them is a necessary step in the healing process that can lead to the creation of a learning organization.

Check-out

The meeting is over. You are unhappy with the outcome. Vivian is upset because the meeting ran over; she will not finish her report.... In fact, that is where the real issues come out. How can we bring that reflection and processing time *into* the meeting, where the participants can benefit from it?

The check-in process can improve the quality of meetings by bringing closure. At the end of most meetings everyone rushes out in order to get to their next meeting. Who has the time to reflect on the process? Or to check that there is a common understanding of the situation and that the commitments are clear? Even if the final two minutes in the agenda are reserved for concluding remarks, that time is usually spent on a summary blanket statement. No space is made to include individual perspectives, to reflect on what worked or what didn't work for each participant, or to know where each person stands. There may be issues needing further consideration, or doubts requiring further inquiry. There may be the need to talk some more.

The check-out process allows each person to say what they want, and be appreciated and celebrated by the group. They might ponder the process, consider the content, ask questions, or even make request for further conversation.



The Native American people had a simple rule for their check-ins and check-outs (they called them “council rounds”): be brief, and speak from the heart. How would our business meetings change if we took a little time to bring ourselves fully into them? What is meetings began with everyone’s minds as present as their body? What if they finished with a note of reflection and appreciation for the time shared?

What if, in your next meeting, you shared this article with your colleagues, asked them to take a few seconds to breathe and become aware of their thoughts, and, well, you know how the process goes

The Check-in Process

Check-in:

1. Sit in a circle so everyone can see each other’s face. Agree on the time you’d like to devote to the activity.
2. Take two or three minutes to “center.” Sit comfortably, in silence, breathing deeply and letting your eyes soften (or close if you prefer) while you become aware of the thoughts in your mind. You can play some music to create a common sound environment.
3. Someone volunteers to start the process. The speaker may hold a talking stick, a stone, or some other object that physically symbolizes the “right to speak.”
4. The speaker takes some time to say whatever he or she wants, with no constraints. If the speaker does not want to speak, he or she can just say “I pass,” reserving the right to speak at the end of the circle or to not speak at all.
5. While the speaker is holding the talking object, no one interrupts or responds to his or her statements. Someone may, however, choose to say something related to what has already been said, when it is their turn.
6. When the speaker is done, he or she says, “I’m in.”
7. The speaker passes the talking object to the person on his or her left. The process is repeated until everyone has had a chance to speak.

Check-out:

The check-out follows the same process. The only difference is that each person finishes by saying, “I’m out.”