



By Joe Byerly

Have you ever been in a meeting and felt like a prisoner?

It's Friday afternoon, you are sitting in the last meeting of the week.

The final briefer begins to speak. They see the clock. They know there are only five minutes left but in their head, time does not exist. It's finally their turn to speak and they are going to say everything they planned to say.

They even say things they didn't plan to say.

They begin talking off the cuff, providing the person sitting at the head of the table with

unnecessary details. They go off on a few tangents. As they speak, you glance nervously at the clock as the minutes tick by.

Thirty minutes later they finally say those magical words you've been waiting to hear, "Pending any questions, that concludes my brief."

Not only did the meeting go over, but it derailed your tightly packed schedule and the schedules of everyone else sitting in the room.

In this case, your colleague lacks what I call "briefing empathy."

Briefing empathy is the ability to place yourself in the shoes of the other people in the room. Before you speak, you should think about the bandwidth, the schedules, and the moods of the people you are addressing. In doing so, you are much more likely to communicate a clear message that is positively received on the other end. And, your colleagues won't want to slash your tires at the conclusion of the meeting.

Respecting the principal

Every meeting has a principal. This person could be the meeting chair, the commander, another high-ranking leader in the chain of command, or even a guest from outside the organization.

When you are briefing them, it's important to understand a couple of things before you open your mouth.

First, what does their schedule look like? If they have back-to-back meetings prior to yours, it probably means they have spent hours consuming information. They might be tired, irritated, or running low on attention bandwidth.

When they come into the room, take a few minutes to try and read their body language or put yourself in their shoes. When we get the sense the principal is tired, it's helpful to tailor your talking points to address only those points necessary to communicate your message.

Next, is the purpose of your meeting to provide information, seek guidance, or request a decision? Based on that, what does the person you are briefing need to know? This question can help you focus your points to meet their information requirements.

It also helps you avoid unnecessary details. You might know 1000 details on the topic, but you have to ask yourself if telling the person sitting at the head of the table every single one of those details is necessary to achieve the intent of the meeting.

Therefore, it helps to know what is "above the line" or "below the line" in communication. Above the line is all the information the leader needs to know to make a decision or form a judgment about a topic. Below the line are all the details that aren't necessary. These two characterizations change as you rise in the organization.

Above the line information for a battalion commander is (hopefully) different than above the line information for a division commander. It's easy to lose the attention of many leaders by mixing the two and going into too much detail in meetings,

Finally, avoid acronyms. Even the most seasoned military veterans aren't able to rattle off every acronym in the lexicon. Not only do you run the risk of confusing the person we are briefing, but they may even quit paying attention as they try to decipher the acronym, missing our subsequent points.

As a briefer, we should always look to give time back to the principal and the other people in the room, so that brings us to the next point.

Remember that time is actually a thing

Most people are bad about packing too many events into a single day, therefore when one event goes beyond the allotted time; there is a cascading effect on the rest of the day's schedule.

While those who you are briefing are sitting in one conference room waiting for the meeting to conclude, there are probably fifteen other people waiting for them in another conference room so they can start their meeting, which will go over, as well. And the time problem keeps on rolling through the organization.

Therefore, it's helpful if you know how long it will take to say what you want to say and adjust as needed if the briefers before us go over in time.

Most people underestimate how long it takes to brief their points. While it's helpful to write out a list of topics you want to cover, it is even more helpful to be realistic about how long it will take to cover those topics.

A great tool for factoring your briefing time is a words to speech calculator. Speech calculators are used by speechwriters to help them figure out how long (or short) their speeches need to be and can be found on the Internet. I use one to see how long it will take me to say my main points. For instance, this section is over 200 words and would take about 2 minutes to brief. If needed, I could tailor it to less than a minute, but only because I know how long it would take for me to brief it in first place.

Which brings me to my final point...

Most of us suck at speaking off the cuff!

Quick history lesson: [Winston Churchill](#) is one of the most famous orators of the 20th Century. His speeches were powerful, moving, and he rehearsed them A LOT. After he

prepared his speech he would pace the floor of his room for days and sometimes weeks ensuring he got the timing and delivery down perfectly.

For whatever reason, most of us think we can deliver a brief like Churchill but without the practice. We think that when we get in front of a group of people the words will flow effortlessly. We think everyone in the room will understand our points and the message will be succinct and brilliant. But that is not the case for 99.9% of us.

For most of us, we add filler words like “um,” “like,” or “you know” when we speak. We also go off on tangents. My favorite tangent is the disappearing point. It’s when someone says they have three main points, and they go down a rabbit hole on point number two, never making it to three.

Therefore, it is helpful to practice. Practicing for even a few minutes before a meeting can prevent you from going over your allotted time or give you the confidence to adjust as necessary.

Briefing empathy goes a long way

In most organizations, the majority of its members spend a great deal of time each week in meetings which is a great place to practice empathy. Use meetings as an opportunity to get outside of your own head and think about the other people in the room. Be mindful of the time you take to cover your points. And rehearse what you need to say.

Your leaders will appreciate you more. Your colleagues will thank you. And you will get better at a skill that has application in all aspects of life—empathy.

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