

6 tips to get out of a challenging meeting moment



I'm sure you can picture it clearly. You've about made it through your meeting agenda, you have offered for anyone present to have a last minute word or thought, and someone tosses a seemingly pre-planned wrench onto the table. This person proudly speaks up, "I have one last thing..." or "Just a quick question..." and "Sorry to spring this on you at the end of the meeting but..." What do you do when you are ambushed and things begin to go south?

Don't get frustrated and head down the rabbit hole like a bad imitation of Alice in Wonderland. Instead, try this:

1. **Stay professional and polite.** Let the person air their thoughts on the issue. Take them seriously and with complete respect even if it seems like a small issue to you. They obviously thought this was serious enough to bring up in front of the entire group so you must treat it as serious.
2. **Request to look at the data.** This diffuses the emotion from the situation. Refer to data or ask for more information with data to support what it is they are bringing to your attention. "Did you bring data to support your concern or situation?" "Let's pull that report..." If it's employee-related, one bad shift may color that person's impression. Data may help determine if this is a "one-off" situation or something that is a pattern.
3. **Buy yourself some time.** Even if you think you have all the necessary information to address the issue immediately, it may be wise to buy yourself some time. Use this time to gather all the facts on the situation. This cooling off period also allows you to distance yourself from any emotionally charged dialogue that may have occurred if addressed on the spot. You could do this by saying, "You raise good points. I need to look into this further. Let's put this on our agenda for next meeting."
4. **Set up a subcommittee.** Offering to set up a small committee to review the situation ensures that the issue gets attention and everyone involved has the opportunity to review data and make the best decision.
5. **Offer to meet briefly after the meeting to discuss specifics.** Offering to meet immediately after the meeting with the person privately eliminates the audience. This often makes it easier to get to the root of the issue, with minimal grandstanding. Use this time to gently explain that you take the matter very

seriously and wish the matter had been brought up to you prior to the meeting so that it could have already been addressed.

6. **Add the topic to the next meeting agenda.** If you are successful in moving the topic from the immediate conversation, include follow-up on the next meeting agenda. This shows you respect the situation and take the matter serious enough to get back to the entire group. It may be enough at the next meeting to simply state that the issue was addressed to everyone's satisfaction or you may want to provide data and an action plan. Be sure to do your homework and come prepared.

Don't hit the mental panic button or lose your cool when someone ambushes your meeting. These tips can help you stay in control of the meeting, respecting everyone's time, while ensuring all feel heard. All communication, even ambush communication, is important. Using this situation as an opportunity to show you are open and interested in everyone's concerns will help reduce the number of rabbit holes that open up during your meetings.

As President and CEO of Steward Norwood Hospital in Massachusetts, Kim Bassett is a strong believer in the "can-do" attitude, focusing on team-building, communication and creativity to find the "win-win" in every situation.