

Lucid Facilitator's Guide

A PROTOCOL FOR CLEARING QUESTIONS AND RESPONDING TO COMPLAINTS

Surfacing and working through questions and complaints is part of having a great organization or relationship. While clearing and dealing with complaints are two separate processes, this template includes both since often a discussion will include both questions and complaints. Use of this protocol over time will create a culture of openness and safety.

Best For



Supervisors of any group

Managers leading large group Q & A sessions

Managers seeking higher levels of engagement from their workforce

Managers intending to improve employee survey scores on openness and transparency

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INTRODUCTION

Regarding clearing

Timothy Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Work* observed that anytime we are not at our best, there is usually a thought in the way. In sports, think about what the opposing team does if there is a critical foul shot or field goal to be made at the end of the game. The opposing coach calls time out, trying to make the athlete think about the shot, giving enough time to allow a non-supportive thought get in the way.

Effective people notice when they are annoyed or anxious — not at their best. Then they identify and deal with those thoughts. Gallwey taught people to clear before they were about to perform.

The fundamental clearing question is:

Is there anything at all about which you are curious, wondering, anxious, or concerned?

From an organizational perspective, it is important to continually give people permission to “clear” - to ask about anything. Think about it this way. Given a void in information, people will make something up to fill the void. Transparency can never be achieved unless people have the permission and safety to ask about everything. Without this freedom, they will be left “not knowing” or chasing rumors. People worry and anything you can do to provide clarity is beneficial.

In order to deal with change, people need clarity not certainty.

Most managers make the mistake of waiting for certainty before communicating with their people. Too late! Talk to your people before you know how it is all going to turn out. You can always tell them what you know right now, the process that is being followed, and when you will know more. That clarity will go a long way towards reducing the angst in the organization.

Effective supervisors routinely remind people that it’s okay to ask about anything. Then they reinforce this by once a month devoting 30-40 minutes to clear their group deliberately.

Regarding Complaints

At times, life stops working the way we want it to. Each of us has had complaints about a supervisor, our colleagues, or even family members. Good, loyal people complain.

In the work setting, good managers create an environment in which people feel safe to question, speak up, and, yes, even complain. In fact, people who are willing to speak up about something that is not working for them are a gift to the organization. If you become aware of a problem, you can do something about it.

No awareness means no access to resolving!

Behind Every Complaint is a Request

The key idea here is that behind every complaint is a request. The task is to hear people out, then ask what they want. What is the request at the heart of the issue they're complaining about?

For example:

COMPLAINT:

What happened as a result of the last employee survey? I know you want our input, but it doesn't seem as if the survey changes anything.

UNDERLYING REQUEST:

We would appreciate knowing the process for working with the results of the survey and getting a specific list of actions you intend to take as a result.

If people can clearly state a concern or complaint and what they feel will resolve it, then you can begin to address the issue.

The ability to listen and respond to complaints is a critical skill for supervisors — actually for anyone going through life!

THE PROTOCOL

This is what the protocol for responding to complaints looks like as a series of process steps.

- 1** **MANAGER**
“Thank you for bringing this issue to my attention.
Tell me your concerns.
- 2** **EMPLOYEE**
Expresses the concern fully.
- 3** **MANAGER**
Just listen. Ask questions only for clarity and understanding.
Then ask “Is there anything else?”
- 4** **MANAGER**
Once the complaint is expressed and understood, ask
“What will resolve this for you?” or “What is your request?”
- 5** **EMPLOYEE**
Asks for what he or she wants.
“Please do this for me” or “I just needed to express this.
Thanks for listening to me.”
- 6** **MANAGER**
Accept the request or make counter-offers until agreement
is reached.
- 7** **EMPLOYEE**
Thank the manager. “Thanks for supporting me.”

REMEMBER WHEN RESPONDING TO COMPLAINTS

Here are some reminders for when you respond to complaints.

- People take things personally, so go gently.
- Be supportive, even if the complaint seems unfounded or petty.
- Don't take the complaint personally or resist what they're saying.
- Don't justify or explain unless you are asked for an explanation.
- Go slowly (speak, listen, then listen some more) and trust that the conversation will work out.

If you think about it, most of the problems people have with one another are actually complaints.

For example, you can probably think of times when your supervisor or a member of your team did something that didn't work for you, and you were frustrated, maybe even offended, by their demeanor. If you can express your concern (complaint) clearly and work through it as soon as possible (and not let it fester), then the concern will be addressed before it becomes a larger issue.



It's often a matter of deciding to pay now by having that difficult conversation in a timely manner rather than pay a lot more later after the concern has grown or the parties have dug in their heels.

THE AGENDA

MEETING TITLE

Clearing questions and handling complaints

MEETING GOAL

Surface and address all questions and complaints that exist for members of the group.

① Introduction

② Background

③ Questions and Answers

- What would you like to know, or ask about?
- What are you worried about?
- What complaints do you have?
- What is it that you want me to know or get?

④ Closing

- Confirm Commitments, Completion, Alignment, and Value

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

Before the meeting

Remind people that a clearing session will be part of the agenda for the meeting. Ask them to make note of anything about which they would like to ask. Ask them to reflect and see if they have any complaints that need to be expressed. Remind them that with each complaint, they will be asked for their requests.

Adjust the meeting agenda. You can use this agenda to run a meeting focused just on clearing, or extend it to cover additional topics. If the meeting has no other agenda items, let the group know that this will be a Q&A session devoted to answering all of their questions.

Learn and practice the protocol for responding to complaints.

If this is your first time using the protocol, you will benefit from practicing a few times before the meeting.

Adjust the meeting duration to fit your team.

During this meeting, each person needs an opportunity to ask questions and share observations. When meeting with groups of 15 or fewer, **allow at least 2 minutes per attendee for questions.** For larger groups, schedule up to 45 minutes for questions.

Be sure to schedule your meeting and send invitations **at least 1 week in advance**, and turn reminders on.

During the meeting

1

Introduction

Use this item to connect everyone to each other and to the topic.

First, make sure everyone understands the meeting purpose and goal.

Then, run a quick go-around to check in with everyone.

For example, you might say:

“ Let’s quickly take a moment to check-in with where everyone is at today. Anyone have anything you need to say or ask before we begin? ”

After this check-in, **click “Next >”** to move to the next item.

2

Background

This is your opportunity to set the stage for the discussion, and demonstrate your interest in talking openly. Share a personal story about the power of being in a group or working with a supervisor where it was easy to bring things up—to talk about anything—to ask about anything.

Then, share your intentions for the session. Why now? Why this group? Express your appreciation for people’s willingness to be candid and thoughtful.

Finally, remind people that they can always bring questions and complaints to you away from the meeting if that is more appropriate but that you also want this openness to be a norm in the group. Plus, others in the group often have similar questions or your question will be a springboard for theirs.

When you’re ready, **click “Next >”** to begin the clearing session.

3

Questions and Answers

Ask the clearing question aloud to the group.



If you are meeting in person, write the starting question(s) on the board.

Is there anything at all about which you are curious, wondering, anxious or concerned?

or

- What would you like to know, or ask about?
- What are you worried about?
- What complaints do you have?
- What is it that you want me to know or get?



If you are meeting on-line, you'll see these questions in the agenda.

Then, simply open it up to the group and wait quietly.

Don't say anything if the questions come slowly. Especially in the beginning of introducing this protocol, there may be some hesitancy in surfacing questions or concerns. Don't make any remarks about the slowness. Just take your time and know that over time the capacity to talk about anything will build in the group.

If you don't know the answer to a question, give the person a specific day and time when you will get back to them. If it's something the group would like to know, establish how you will communicate to the entire group.

After answering a question, check back with the person to see if they are complete with their question.

Don't rush this discussion. Allow plenty of time for the discussion to evolve. People will be thinking during the session and a relaxing pace will surface new questions.

If you identify additional changes or actions that need to be taken after the meeting based on the discussion, capture these as action items and assign an owner.

Once you've answered all questions and responded to all complaints, **click "Next >"** to begin closing the session.

Closing

You will start the closing with a minute of silent individual reflection. Giving everyone a minute to reflect individually before sharing ideas will help ensure all perspectives get shared, and no one voice dominates this part of the discussion.

Ask the group to silently reflect on these questions.

- **Review Commitments:** What are we going to do as a result of this discussion?
- **Check Completion:** Is there anything else that needs to be said or asked on this topic?
- **Ensure Alignment:** Is everyone OK with where we ended up? If not, what would make this work for you?
- **See Value:** What are we taking away from this conversation?

Once the silent minute has passed, ask for a volunteer to share their responses. Then, ask the other participants to share their responses in turn.

Answer any questions you can, and lead the group through a discussion of any remaining questions or concerns.

Then, thank your group and **click "End Meeting"**. You're done!

AFTER THE MEETING: ADOPTION OF THE PROTOCOL



Send out the follow-up email, which makes sure everyone gets a thank you and a full report in their email.

Train all leaders to use the protocol for responding to complaints.

Teach new managers and leaders how to welcome and respond to complaints as part of your on-boarding process.



The ability to openly voice complaints and the consistent application of this protocol to quickly resolve them is a foundational practice for healthy relationships across your organization.

Review and discuss the protocol as a team every 6 to 9 months.

The power of the protocol comes when you use it to resolve issues before they fester. Over time, those who respond to complaints regularly will become more adept at resolving the most common issues in your organization, and can share what they've learned with the group.

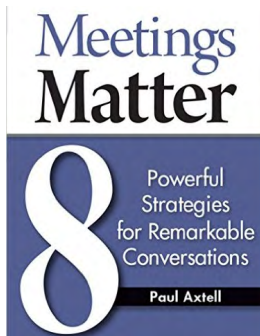
And, for those who have grown lax in their acceptance of complaints, revisiting this protocol acts as a reminder.

RESOURCES FOR ACHIEVING MEETING MASTERY



On the Web

Ask Paul: Paul Axtell's Blog
<http://paulaxtell.com/blog/>



Books

Paul Axtell,
"Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations" 2015
<http://paulaxtell.com/books/meetings-matter/>

W. Timothy Gallwey,
"The Inner Game of Work: Focus, Learning, Pleasure, and Mobility in the Workplace" 2001
<http://www.amazon.com/The-Inner-Game-Work-Workplace/dp/0375758178>



On the Lucid Meetings Blog

"A Protocol for Clearing Questions and Responding to Complaints"
<http://blog.lucidmeetings.com/blog/a-protocol-for-clearing-questions-and-handling-complaints>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This template was designed by Paul Axtell.

Paul Axtell provides consulting and personal effectiveness training to a wide variety of clients, from Fortune 500 companies and universities to nonprofit organizations and government agencies. A large focus of his work is how to run effective and productive meetings—to turn them from dreaded calendar items into vital, productive sessions with measurable results.



He is the author of the award-winning book *Meetings Matter: 8 Powerful Strategies for Remarkable Conversations, Being Remarkable, and Ten Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids: Creating the Relationship You Want with the Most Important People in Your Life*, which applies the concepts of his work to the special relationships between parents and children of all ages.

Learn more at PaulAxtell.com

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