

A Discussion Method for Challenging Times

A Brief Overview of the ToP[®] Focused Conversation Method with Examples to Use During COVID-19

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Introduction

How is it that some groups seem to have no problem having great, satisfying discussions? Yet with others, we seem unable to draw certain individuals into the conversation or get to the results we want.

Your first step to leading focused and productive discussions is to understand 3 things:



1. People appreciate structure. They do their best thinking together if you provide them structure for their discussions.
2. Everyone in the meeting needs several opportunities to add their ideas. This can be done verbally or in writing to the whole group or at least to one other person in the group.
3. You can help the group gain remarkable insights or produce enduring decisions in a short timeframe with the use of powerful, open-ended questions.

In the era of COVID-19, focused conversations are even more critical. In this handout, we will share a well known framework for crafting a good meeting discussion to have with groups and individuals: the ToP Focused Conversation (See resources section on page 17). We'll even share tips and resources to conduct these conversations online.

The Method

The ToP[®] Focused Conversation Method was developed by a not-for-profit organization called the Institute of Cultural Affairs (www.ica-usa.org is the USA office website; www.ica-associates.ca is the Canadian website). The Focused Conversation is the mega method underlying all of the Technology of Participation (ToP) methodologies.

This technique in a nutshell

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) asserts that there are 4 levels to our thinking. Typically, we precede exploring these 4 levels of thinking with some context setting. Typical context setting might include what you are going to talk about, how long you are going to talk about it, why you need the meeting discussion at this time, and an invitation to join you in the meeting discussion. You might also let the group know that you would like to ask them some questions to get started and to help you understand their perspectives on the subject. You then ask a series of open-ended questions that are sequenced into the 4 levels of thinking. At the end of the 4 levels of thinking questions, you may offer next steps and appreciations. The closing of a meeting discussion typically includes a “thank-you for sharing with me” and sometimes, scheduling a time to follow-up.

Why and when to use this technique

Music has discernible patterns; so does our thinking. Your job in creating meeting discussions is to follow a pattern. This Focused Discussion Method framework provides a structured way to help a group move smoothly from A-Z in their processing of a situation or problem. It is important to use this when you have a short timeframe, or the group culture will benefit from an insightful yet precise meeting discussion. It has hundreds, if not thousands of applications. It is one of the most versatile dialogue tools I have used.

BONUS!! This method can be used in many situations: interviews; a structure for written evaluations; reports; speeches; group problem-solving; evaluating a product or services; family meeting discussions; vacation planning; resolving conflict; or reflecting on an event or situation. Its structure can be used to design an entire workshop and/or be used as individual segments within a meeting or workshop. This handout focuses specifically on its use as a discussion method.

Define the purpose of your conversation or agenda

Every meeting and conversation within a meeting needs to have a clear purpose. In the Focused Conversation method, we specify two purposes: The Rational Aims and Experiential Aims. The Rational Aim (RA) helps the facilitator be very clear on what product or understanding you want the group to have as a result of your conversation. For example, the rational aims might be “Help the group choose the top 3 priorities for the next staff retreat.” And, “Decide on location for the retreat.” You can see from these examples that we are creating tangible products that will require further action. Sometimes the rational aim is simply building understanding within the group such as “Understand the communication strategy we’ve chosen for informing the public about our COVID-19 policy.”

Somewhat unique to most methods, the Focused Conversation method is intentional about what the group needs to have as an experience when they go through a conversation. It is called the Experiential Aim (EA). For example, experiential aims around planning a staff retreat might be, “Gain enthusiasm for planning and attending the staff retreat.” And/or “Increase confidence in leadership’s approach to the staff retreat.” You can see from the examples above, the experiential aims are about creating a mood or feeling that will help ensure success for the rational aims.

Once you are clear on your rational and experiential aims, it becomes easier to create questions for the conversation. We explain more about the structure and order of the questions below.

An overview of the four levels of thinking

The beauty of ORID is that it follows the general way the mind works when its allowed to process something in an uncluttered way. For example, when you hear an alarm clock or device waking you up in the morning your general thought process is: What is that noise? You react to the noise, favorably or unfavorably; you bargain with yourself whether you have to get up or not and what alternatives you have; and finally, you arrive at a conclusion by hitting the snooze button or getting up. That is the order of thinking that ORID uses.

ICA describes the 4 levels or phases of a meeting discussion as follows. The short form of this framework is called ORID for each of the 4 levels: Objective – Reflective – Interpretive – Decisional. They encourage different types of open-ended questions at each level to achieve the results you (and others) want from the meeting discussion.

Objective Level (O)

Gathering or stating the facts, data and perspectives to bring all parties to a common starting point. Typical questions to solve a problem for example, might include (choose 1-3 questions):

- What do we know about this situation or problem?
- What did you hear and see that you would like to share with me or others about the problem?
- What are some of the events that led up to this problem/situation?
- What happened last time we had a similar problem?

Reflective Level (R)

Personal responses, feelings, associations, images. Emotional responses are acknowledged and accounted for in the decision. The reflective level can also bring out memories associated with a similar past situation or event. Typical questions to solve a problem might include (choose 2-3 at most):

- What are the high points of the situation? Low points?
- What concerns do you have about the issue?

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- What excites you about solving this problem?
 - What was your first response when you heard the news that...?
 - How does this situation/event remind you of anything you have experienced before?

Interpretive Level (I)

Analysis, meaning and impact of the topic, significance and implications to the group. Judgements are based upon much more data and taking into account the wide array of perspectives that surface in the previous two levels. Typically, more time is spent at this level of the meeting discussion. Examples of questions at this level to e.g. solve a problem are: (use as many as are needed)

- What have we learned from this information/situation...?
- Why did this happen?
- What are some of the root issues here?
- What are the implications of this happening?
- What is the value of solving this? What is the value of not solving it?
- How will we be different as a group/company/family if we make these changes?

Decisional Level (D)

Designed to help the group identify actions or decisions. It allows the group to name their relationship & responses to their situation. You may not actually reach a decision but you come to some resolution or end point that brings closure to the topic at this time. Examples of questions to solve a problem:

- What are some ways we can resolve this problem?
- What will you do differently as a result of this situation?
- What is the highest priority?
- What are we committed to do?
- What are our next steps?
- When will we evaluate our progress?

Template Conversations

Below are four conversations that are versatile in terms of who you have them with. They include the four levels of thinking. These are conversations that my colleagues around the world have suggested need to happen or are happening in their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although our four templates are based on COVID-19 situations, you can likely see how to adapt these conversations for any topic you choose.

I have deliberately included a lot of questions in these conversations because they are complex topics. You judge which questions apply to your conversation. You might only use 2-5 questions in each of the O-R-I-D sections, i.e. a total of 8-20 questions. I've also taken the liberty of showing you a few different ways to insert other processes into the middle of an ORID conversation, e.g. using small groups, drawings, self-reflection writing, several round robins (i.e., ask everyone to answer if they choose), consensus building, etc. As much as possible, I have tried to keep the framework intact and the process relatively simple. Please note all of these conversations are designed for you to have online given the COVID-19 situation. The original method was designed for face-to-face and telephone conversations, so of course they can be done face to face as well. Here are the four topics:

1. How might we sustain any positive changes that we have experienced during COVID-19 in our work and personal lives?
2. What questions do we need to address before we all go back to work in our physical workspace?
3. How can we use the digital space to guide important decision-making going forward in the next phase of COVID-19?
4. What are all our perspectives on the safest way to open up our economy and/or our business?

1. How might we sustain any positive changes that we have experienced during COVID-19 in our work and personal lives?

Reminder: you only need to choose 1-3 questions for each thinking level. Depending on the purpose of your conversation you may want to emphasize one level more than another (i.e. ask more questions at that level).

RA: Build on any positive behaviors, attitudes, knowledge gained in the first stages of COVID-19 and apply those to the next stage.

EA: Be amazed and pleasantly surprised by the hopefulness and ingenuity of our organization/family/community during these challenging times.

Assumption: There has been agility, resilience, thoughtfulness, generosity, and kindness witnessed in our world and sometimes we lose sight of this when we are under stress. This conversation is meant to be for a small or large group as a way of ensuring we capitalize on “the silver linings”, i.e. all the positives that arise out of a negative situation, of COVID-19.

Check-In: Brief check-in as you normally would before a meeting.

Opening: Welcome everyone to this very important conversation. We’d like to take 30-60 minutes to really notice some of the good things that are happening as a result of the COVID-19 response. We want to encourage ourselves to hold on to these good things and turn them into the new normal wherever they make sense to do so. We are going to invite each of you to think in the large and small groups about how we can sustain and increase any positive changes. We are deliberately taking an appreciative approach to this conversation. We will not be asking you about unskillful behaviors or actions related to COVID-19.

Objective Level (O)

- (First round robin question) What’s one good thing you have noticed going on in our family/work team/community/organization since the full impact of COVID-19 began to be felt? (no right or wrong answers, and feel free to pass, or we can come back to you at the end of this first round)
- (Second round robin question) Let’s do another round of specifically good behaviors you have seen in people, different than the ones we’ve named so far.
- Let’s do one last round of positive policies or decisions you have observed by any organization, family or community in response to COVID-19.

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- (This is deliberately the last O level question because it may start to move people into R level thinking). What are we noticing now that is positive that you may have never noticed before?

Reflective Level (R)

- In pairs, move into virtual breakout rooms and each share two stories of positive stories that you have heard/ seen experienced to respond to COVID-19. It could be an act of generosity, kindness, a personality/ habit change in yourself, a personal goal you've set, a work ethic, etc. Be sure to share one thing when you come back to the large group. (Note: Below – we share a video on how to do Zoom breakout rooms in the Resources section; it can also be done with Microsoft Teams)
- Once back in large group, let's hear a total 3-4 examples of positive experiences or stories that you shared in your small groups.
- As you've heard these stories, what else comes to mind in terms of a positive experience that astonished you in terms of its magnitude of change or generosity.
- What else has been inspiring about these positive shifts?

Interpretive Level (I)

- What are the positive lessons we have learned from COVID-19 in our work or our community?
- Take 3 minutes on your own and write down 5 behaviors or decisions/guidelines you'd like to be sure to continue in yourself or the organization/community. Star your top 2.
- Meet in small groups of 4 if there are enough people in the room. In the small groups, each share your top 2 positive changes that you want to see sustained in the next phase of COVID-19.
- Back in the large group, let's review all of the ideas and read them out loud. Which of these ideas are related to each other?
- If we were to merge some of the ideas and describe them as a general strategy or policy, how would you phrase them? Let's choose a "ing" verb to start the phrase, e.g., Identifying; envisioning, welcoming, encouraging, etc.
- As we review our draft final list of strategies or positive attitudes we wish to sustain, what would you be most proud to take forward to the rest of our organization/community/team/family?

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- Who will most benefit if we enact any of these changes? Just to be sure, who might not benefit from these changes? And what does this suggest we add, if anything?
 - How might these positive changes move some of us out of “coping” behaviours into thriving behaviours?
 - How will our personal and professional health change if we are successful?

Decisional Level (D)

- What is a creative and/or artistic way we could communicate these positive behaviors that we wish to sustain?
- Who would be willing to make a first draft of these statements in a visual way? E.g. prepare a PowerPoint slide with appropriate images/simple photos to go with our work. Who can support this person?
- How shall we review and finalize this draft?
- How can we ensure and encourage these new behaviors moving forward?

Confirm Results: Have someone from your meeting summarize any action steps or decisions from this conversation.

Closing: In summary, please think about which of these behaviors stand out to you as new and transformative for the way we want to go forward. Feel free to share very briefly. Thank you very much for taking the time to reflect on all the good that has come out of this difficult situation.



2. What questions do we need to address before we all go back to work in our physical workspace?

Reminder: you only need to choose 1-3 questions for each thinking level. Depending on the purpose of your conversation you may want to emphasize one level more than another (i.e. ask more questions at that level).

RA: Gain clarity in the actions and attitude shifts that need to take place before we return to our physical workspaces.

EA: Feel excited and relieved that we've gained agreement on how to optimize the transition back to work.

Assumption: This conversation is for a single work team within a larger workforce or between the senior leadership team of an organization as they contemplate the move back to work.

Check-In: Brief check-in as you normally would before a meeting.

Opening: Today we are going to take 60-90 minutes to think deeply about when and how we might begin the transition to have people return to this physical workspace. Let's start with some factual questions and eventually we'll get to a plan about how to transition back the workforce/ team.

Objective Level (O)

- What percentage of our team or workforce is currently not working on site?
- Go around: What have we heard employees who are working onsite say about their current situation? What about those working from home about their current situation?
- What data do we need to consider about our production levels / markets as we think about the transition?
- What guidelines are we currently following for the safety of our employees and clients?
- What are the dimensions of our physical space?

Reflective Level (R)

- What has surprised us about the way we have worked thus far since the COVID-19 shutdown began for us?
- What has been most frustrating for any of our teams or workforce members?

Interpretive Level (I)

- What are the values we want to hold as we invite people back into the physical workspace?
- What do we need to be sure to tell about our colleagues and clients about reopening?
- What would be the impact of allowing any employees who want to continue to work from home to do so?
- What will be the impact on those who have had to remain at work in our factory/shop floor to have more employees entering the building/workspace?
- How might we ensure the safety of vulnerable populations within our workforce?
- How shall we organize our office space given that we need to have 6 ft (1.5m) between us?
- What are the first things we have to do to communicate our intentions?
- Who do we need to inform first?
- What information do we need to gather before we take any concrete steps?
- What is one final question we need to address before we begin this process of opening up?

Decisional Level (D)

- What is the earliest we think we can begin to have people return to work?
- If we were to give this project of reopening a name, what would it be?
- Who will lead which parts of this project?
- When shall we meet again to review progress?

Confirm Results: Have someone from your meeting summarize any action steps or decisions from this conversation.

Closing: Please take a minute to share a word of appreciation for this team and the work that we have done to make things go well so far.



3. How can we use the digital space to guide important decision making going forward in the next phase of COVID-19?

Reminder: you only need to choose 1-3 questions for each thinking level. Depending on the purpose of your conversation you may want to emphasize one level more than another (i.e. ask more questions at that level).

RA: Identify specific IT platforms and communication guidelines to ensure everyone affected by a decision is involved and effectively engaged.

EA: Confident that we have a way of engaging all our stakeholders in this digital environment.

Assumptions: Most people in organizations will continue to work remotely for many months to come. This could be a conversation for a small workplace team or even families about how to make decisions from different geographical locations. The word digital means virtual or remote.

Check-In: Brief check-in as you normally would before a meeting.

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Opening: We'd like to have the ability to involve all the right people in some important decisions that we need to make over the next few months. Some people have more technological challenges in participating in our conversations and meetings around these decisions. By the end of our meeting, we'd like to be confident that we will be able to involve everyone in meaningful ways in digital workspaces.

Objective Level (O)

- Let's each say a sentence or two about what digital meetings and/or conversations you've had in the last few weeks. Give 1-2 examples, especially where a decision had to be made.
- What are examples of "obvious to everyone" important decisions we have to make in the next few weeks?
- As you think back on previous decision-making conversations, who was not involved that should have been involved?
- What have you heard from people who are technologically under-resourced or challenged about how they are managing in the digital world?
- What have you heard from people adapting quickly/easily to digital platforms?
- What technological platforms have you experienced over the last few months?
- What are some other platforms you've heard other organizations use?

Reflective Level (R)

- What has been most challenging about operating in the digital space?
- What's been most enjoyable about operating in the digital space?
- If you were to draw a picture right now of what it feels like to be making important decisions in the virtual environment vs. the in-person environment, what images would you draw? Take a few minutes to sketch what comes to mind. Make sure your sketch is not aiming to be artistic. Who would be willing to share their sketch and what you've noticed going on emotionally for you and others?

Interpretive Level (I)

- What specifically have some people/groups done to make the decision making effective in the digital environments?
- What are some things we have not done that could make it more effective?
- What do we normally do in face-to-face meetings that helps us be effective in our decision making? How could we translate those strategies into the digital environment?
- How can we also make the decision making a more enjoyable fun process in our digital environment (since we tend to be serious in our digital meetings)?

Decisional Level (D)

- What is a first important decision we need to make in the near future that we could try to do better than in the past?
- How shall we plan this decision-making meeting more carefully than in the past?
- If we consider this to be a pilot project, who would be willing to lead this knowing this is an imperfect prototype?
- What support do you need to make this go well for you?
- What digital platforms shall we use for this pilot version of decision-making?
- Who do we need to invite to this meeting to ensure all perspectives are heard?
- What do we need to do to make everybody digitally ready for it so they can engage to the best of their abilities?
- When shall we meet again to test our prototype before the meeting?

Confirm Results: Have someone from your meeting summarize any action steps or decisions from this conversation.

Closing: Let's go around the room to share one word that expresses your experience of this meeting and/or your hopes for this pilot project. Feel free to pass.

4. What are all our perspectives on the safest way to open up our economy and/or our business?

Reminder: you only need to choose 1-3 questions for each thinking level. Depending on the purpose of your conversation you may want to emphasize one level more than another (i.e. ask more questions at that level).

RA: We understand there are many ways to proceed that can result in a balanced perspective between safety and economic prosperity.

EAs: Encouraged to open up to others way of thinking and surprised by the new breadth and depth that has been uncovered around this topic; Motivated and committed to be more curious and ask more questions of those with perspectives different from our own.

Assumptions: Depending on your generation, class, race, religion, gender identity and other constituency groups you belong to, each of us will have a very different, and often strong opinion about when and how to open up to our previous ways of operating. This set of questions is intended to help you begin to have these conversations with groups and family members that you regularly spend time with. Its intention is to also bring more harmony and less dissonance in the ways we move forward to open up the economy. We are assuming that this is a difficult, potential conflictual discussion that people are avoiding.

Check-In: Brief check-in as you normally would before a meeting.

Opening: I'm curious about what you've been thinking lately about opening up public spaces and businesses for this phase of the COVID-19 situation. Would you be willing to have a conversation with me so that we can better understand each other and perhaps find a way forward that honours and acknowledges all the perspectives in the room?

Objective Level (O)

- Everyone answer this. What is the current state of opening where you live? Let's each say one place or business that is newly opened in your country, city, county.
- What are some places that remain closed that you used to visit frequently?
- What are some places that have remained opened that you normally go?
- For the places that have closed, what have you done to replace this want or need?
- What information have you heard from various health authorities/scientists/disease specialists about how we should proceed as we move more out into the world?
- What information have you heard from economists, policy makers and key leaders about how we should proceed as we move more out into the world?

Reflective Level (R)

- As you think about the strategies you or others have used to deal with a loss of a favorite activity or outing, what surprised you about the way you or others have managed this new normal?
- What's frustrated you the most about the COVID-19 situation prior to any non-essential businesses opening?
- What behaviors have you noticed as businesses open up?
- What's been delightful about people's responses as places open?
- What's been most worrisome from a safety point of view?

Interpretive Level (I)

- If you were in the vulnerable population, i.e. elderly or health compromised, what would you want to have in place to ensure your safety as the economy opens up?
- If you were healthy and not vulnerable, what would you want to be sure happens for your own economic and personal well-being?
- What do these two lists of needs have in common?
- If you were a leader of this community or organization, what would you say is essential to keep opening the economy in a safe way from a health point of view?
- What is one new perspective you've gained from this conversation?

Decisional Level (D)

- What will you do differently as you think about having a conversation like this with someone you are scared to have the conversation with?
- What's a phrase to sum up what this conversation has been for you? What is a slogan to remind people of how to be towards one another knowing that each of us has different needs?
- What is one action or commitment you are willing to make right now that honours many perspectives as the economy opens up? Please write that phrase down and post it in the chat box or virtual sticky note provided.
- Have each person read their commitment if they are willing.

Confirm Results: Have someone from your meeting summarize any action steps or decisions from this conversation.

Closing: Thank you very much for staying respectful and open during this conversation. It's a difficult one we need to have at many levels in our society. I look forward to continuing the dialogue with you in the near future.

Resources

The Art of Focused Conversation Method by Brian Stanfield

This book is a must have. You can pick up used copies in most places. It contains not only a more detailed description than what we have in this handout, but also 100 sample conversations for almost every circumstance both in the workplace and home.

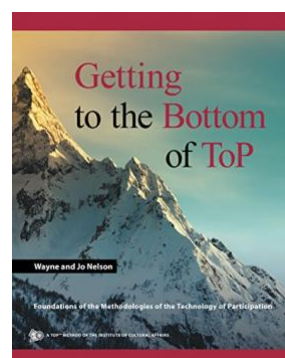
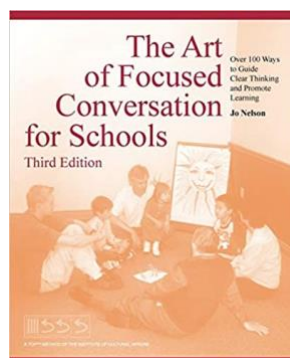
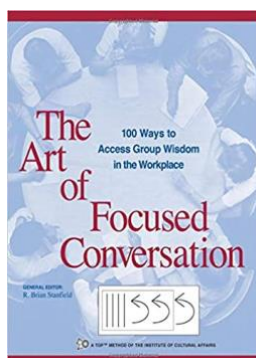
The Art of Focused Conversations in Schools by Jo Nelson

This book is similar to the generic one described above but focused entirely on the education section and is very useful to teachers and administrators at all levels of education.

Getting to the Bottom of ToP by Wayne & Jo Nelson

This is a more advanced description of the origin and philosophy of the Focused Conversation framework. It also includes a beautiful description of many of the other key ToP frameworks and what lies below each method, i.e. the foundation of each method. Reading this book carefully will help you become a master facilitator of these methods.

These resources are excellent whether you have access to formal training or not in these methods. You can generally find training for them throughout the world. More and more this training is being offered virtually as well. I highly recommend getting the training if at all possible.



Zoom Links for Managing Small Groups in Break Out Room

Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476313>

Managing-Breakout-Rooms

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476313-Managing-breakout-rooms>

Host and Co-Host roles – Note: only the host can set break out rooms!

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362603-Host-and-co-host-controls-in-a-meeting>



Online ToP Courses

ICA Associates Canada – open to anyone anywhere:

<https://www.ica-associates.ca/product/live-interactive-online-training-lio/>

ICA Taiwan – ask about their online versions of the course just starting:

<http://www.ica-international.org/top-facilitation/>

ICA – USA (inquire about dates or run a course in-house):

<https://www.top-training.net/w/courses/16-virtual-facilitation-online>

Author

Barbara MacKay, MS has been facilitating since 1981. She discovered ICA and the Technology of Participation (ToP®) approach in Canada in 1994, completing a 3 year ICA Canada Associate Program in 1999. She went on to certify as a ToP Facilitator and Assessor. Barbara founded her facilitation business, North Star Facilitators in 1995. She has designed and led thousands of facilitated meetings, conferences and workshops all over the world. She has spent the last 24 years researching and



practicing a variety of tools and approaches. Her core work is based on ToP® methods and this is supplemented with a rich infusion of neuroscience, cross cultural and Non-Violent Communication methodologies. Barbara offers multiple courses, including virtual training, in facilitation skills. She [blogs](#) extensively about facilitation on her website and has published over 45 lengthy articles on facilitation skills. Barbara is also a certified IAF Facilitator and Assessor. She was inducted into the IAF (International Association of Facilitators) Hall of Fame in 2018.

Barbara has a playful sense of humour and has been described as having a calm, wise, authentic presence. Barbara has a strong meditation and yoga practice and in her spare time gardens, makes mosaics, hikes and has global colleagues over to her house via Zoom or in-person when there is no pandemic.

www.NorthStarFacilitators.com



LUCID RESOURCES

This is one of more than 50 meeting guides available from Lucid Meetings, where we work to make it easy for teams to run successful meetings every day. Visit us at www.lucidmeetings.com to learn more.

Related Templates and Blog Posts

- [Meeting in Times of Rapid Change and Crisis](#)
- [How to Run a Strategic Pivot Meeting with Your Team](#)
- [Resources for Business Teams Coping with COVID-19](#)

Recommended Techniques Used in This Template

- [Go Around](#)
- [1-2-All](#)
- [Plenary](#) and [Breakouts](#)
- [KJ Technique](#)
- [Appreciations](#)

Learn How to Confidently Lead Engaging Meetings

To learn more about how to lead the meetings described in this template, including step-by-step instructions for leading great go-arounds and other meeting techniques, enroll in [Barbara Mackay's popular Meeting School Course](#).

**How To
Lead Engaging
Meetings**

*with
Barbara MacKay*