



## 4 Distractions that Derail Meetings — and How to Handle Them

By Luis Velasquez

Meetings are critical for achieving goals, as they foster unity and facilitate communication, planning, and alignment — but only if they're run effectively. Poorly run meetings negatively affect a team's performance, cohesion, and ultimately its success in meeting its goals.

In a survey of senior managers, 71% said meetings are unproductive and inefficient. And a study of 20 organizations revealed that dysfunctional behaviors in meetings — like complaining or criticizing others — are associated with lower market share, less innovation, and lower employee engagement.

See if the following scenario sounds familiar: You receive a meeting invitation whose title is simply "Product Launch," with no further details. You attend the meeting because your team handles a launch component and you want to ensure you're not missing anything. Lisa, the team lead, introduces the new product line. However, within minutes, the conversation takes a turn when John, a senior marketing executive, starts complaining about the company's culture and lack of support from upper management. This sparks an unrelated, heated debate about the company's culture instead of the product launch. Everybody is confused and frustrated.

Over many years of working with teams and coaching team leaders, I've observed four dysfunctional behaviors that cause meetings to derail. To ensure productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness, managers need to know how to spot, prevent, and deal with these behaviors when they appear.

## Four Dysfunctional Meeting Behaviors

Four dysfunctional behaviors, or meeting derailers, tend to show up in meetings that lack focus and clarity and can be summarized using the acronym GAAS:

### Gravity problems

These occur when team members get sucked into discussing a challenge or issue that's fundamentally unsolvable at the team level, much like the force of gravity. Trying to solve a gravity problem diverts time, mental capacity, and motivation away from solvable issues, leading to team frustration. In the previous example, company culture and leadership support are gravity problems that are distracting from the solvable issue: the product launch.

### Assumption overload

This happens when team members make excessive or unverified assumptions about a specific issue, person, or even themselves. While some assumptions are necessary, relying on them too heavily and without validation can lead to decisions based on inaccurate or incomplete information.

This behavior also extends to team members making assumptions about each other, fostering an environment of mistrust and suspicion, which hampers collaboration and productivity. For example, Mark and Mary are working on a presentation for leadership. Mary suggests an approach, but Mark assumes she's trying to take control and claim the credit. Consequently, he withholds information from her. Had Mark addressed his assumption, their collaboration would have been more efficient and successful.

It's also common for team members to unconsciously assume that others have the same background knowledge or understanding as they do. Even worse, they believe they can solve their peers' problems without adequate context. Both scenarios lead to frustration and mistrust.

## Annoying negative thoughts

Common "cognitive distortions," or the unproductive thinking patterns I refer to as "annoying negative thoughts" (ANTs), can affect meeting outcomes as well. Here's how they might show up:

**All-or-nothing thinking:** A graphic designer dismisses an entire product line as a failure because they believe the packaging design isn't perfect. Their pessimism makes it difficult for the team to come up with constructive solutions and dampens the overall mood of the meeting.

**Overgeneralization:** A team member sees a single negative customer review and concludes that everyone dislikes the product. Their overgeneralization derails the conversation, causing the team to focus on defending the product rather than identifying areas for improvement.

**Catastrophizing:** A team member learns about a minor budget cut. They claim it will result in layoffs and massive project delays. Their alarmism distracts the team from discussing practical solutions for managing the reduced budget.

**Emotional reasoning:** A team member interprets her colleague's lack of enthusiasm about her idea as a sign that her contributions are terrible. The team then wastes time reassuring her instead of discussing the merits of the idea.

## Squirrel chasing

Some team members have difficulty staying focused on the purpose of the meeting and introduce unrelated tangents (i.e., squirrels). For example, in a team meeting focused on finalizing a sales pitch for a potential client, one team member keeps discussing the details of a separate project he's managing. Although relevant to the team's ongoing work, it's unrelated to the team meeting's focus. His interjections distract the team, preventing them from finalizing the sales pitch effectively and efficiently. When the team chases squirrels, it wastes time and frustrates other team members.

### Prevent Meeting Derailers

Good team meetings start before they actually take place. Thus, how you prepare and plan a meeting can significantly impact its efficiency and outcomes.

Focus and clarity are two different yet interconnected concepts that will help prevent GAAS behaviors. Without them, team members are usually confused and show up in a way that negatively affects the meeting — or they don't show up at all. For example:

Team members who are important to the meeting goal think their attendance is merely a formality and therefore don't feel they need to prepare, participate, or even attend.

Team members think their presence implies they have decision-making authority, relevance, and expertise on the discussion topics, even if that might not be the case.

Team members see these as networking opportunities to connect with colleagues they might not see often rather than focusing on the goal.

Team members assume no pre-meeting preparation is needed, which wastes time.

Here's how to keep your team's meetings on track:

Enhance your meeting focus.

Ensure team members stay on topic and address only the relevant issues without getting sidetracked. To achieve this, organizers must:

Determine the primary objective. Is the goal to make a decision, brainstorm, get people aligned, or something else? Keeping your eye on the overarching goal will help you develop a focused and clear agenda. For instance, in a decision-making meeting, the objective is to make a choice among different options. Thus, organizers must clearly understand the options, supporting data, decision-makers, and decision-making processes.

Reframe goals as inquiry-driven statements. For example, instead of listing "goal-setting" as a topic, frame the agenda item as, "What are our deliverables for project X?" By doing this, team members can start thinking about potential solutions even before they attend the meeting.

Invite only team members who have a direct role in achieving the meeting's objective. For example, in a brainstorming meeting, you want to invite individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives to stimulate diverse and innovative ideas. Conversely, in a decision-making meeting, attendees must clearly understand the options, relevant data, and have the appropriate decision-making authority. While inviting everyone connected to the topic is tempting, be aware that GAAS behaviors thrive in crowded, unfocused environments.

Communicate with clarity.

Clear communication reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and distractions, particularly from GAAS behaviors. To communicate the meeting's focus effectively, ensure invited team members clearly understand three key elements:

**Importance:** Explain why the meeting is needed and the potential impact of its outcomes. If this is clear, attendees will see the urgency and significance of the meeting and why their attendance is essential. For example, you could say, "This meeting will determine the marketing strategy for our upcoming product launch, which will impact our sales and brand recognition."

**Relevance:** Clearly communicate how the meeting's focus is directly related to invited team members' work or goals. For example, you could say, "As head of the design department, I need your input on the packaging design to determine our marketing strategy." This helps them see the direct connection between their responsibilities and the purpose of the meeting.

**Involvement:** Communicate the expectations for each participant, including any pre-work you need them to complete, to help ensure they come prepared.

Do not take shortcuts in drafting the invitation. Use straightforward, easy-to-understand language, and avoid jargon or overly technical terms that might create confusion. This helps attendees understand the message, especially when they have different levels of expertise.

## Handle Meeting Derailers

Introduce your team to the concept of GAAS behaviors by painting a mental picture of our natural response to the smell of gas: a) Identifying the source, b) shutting off the gas supply, and/or c) evacuating the building right away. Provide them with a simple sheet that lists each behavior and its description.

Encourage everyone to refer to these behaviors by name, such as “the gravity problem” or “the squirrel.” This helps the team recognize and address these behaviors quickly while keeping the atmosphere light and positive. Then, address GAAS behaviors in a non-threatening way when they show up. For example, if a team member goes off-topic or exhibits a GAAS behavior, call it out by name, saying something like, “That’s a squirrel, right?” This approach is less threatening than saying “you’re off topic” and can be a gentle reminder to stay focused.

A smile is the shortest distance between two people, so humor can help establish a connection and positive relationship between team members during meetings. Introducing some levity can create a comfortable environment where people feel more at ease to take risks and challenge each other. It can also build camaraderie and trust, lighten the mood, and make meetings more enjoyable.

In a meeting I recently attended, for example, a team member who was known for throwing out “squirrels” said, “Is it OK if I throw in a squirrel here?” The rest of the team laughed and gave permission; somebody else added, “It better be one squirrel worth chasing.” The team member threw the squirrel in, but instead of going after it, everyone remained focused and stayed on topic. This approach effectively kept the meeting on track while maintaining a lighthearted atmosphere. It was a fascinating experience to watch this approach in action.

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Understanding, preventing, and addressing GAAS behaviors will enhance your team’s productivity and turn your meetings from time-consuming, unproductive, and painful exercises into powerful instruments for success. Don’t let them get in the way of achieving your goals.

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