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It was getting close to lunch time and the people seated around the table — the CEO and seven of his direct reports — were clearly getting antsy. But it wasn't because they were hungry. In fact, they'd been eating snacks all morning, mostly out of boredom.

The COO was at the front of the room, talking through slides projected on a screen. The conversation was primarily one way, with the COO explaining and, when necessary, defending his work.

Finally, when we broke for lunch, the CEO took me aside and told me what we all already knew: "This is a waste of time."

When you bring a senior leadership group together in a room, it's a massive commitment of resources. The hotel and food are the least of it. Even the consultant, if you're using one, is a negligible cost compared to the investment of monopolizing the focus of seven or eight highly compensated, time-starved leaders.

Yet how often do those meetings consist of one presentation after the next, while the executives listen numbly or answer emails under the table? How often does the conversation involve everything *but* the big issues that need executive attention?

With all that brainpower around the table, the focus of a senior meeting needs to be conversation, controversy, even conflict — not updates. Leaders should never sit and read together. They should be engaging and struggling with the organization's most critical and difficult-to-solve issues.

So how do you get there? By creating an environment in which leaders are real, vulnerable, and brave with each other. An environment in which they can expose their weaknesses, break through silos, and engage one another with challenging questions, thinking, and decisions.

My first rule for these meetings is no slide decks. As soon as someone projects slides onto a screen, the entire focus of the room shifts from each other to a single person (at best) or their smartphones (at worst). Neither is useful.

Once the no slide deck rule is established, the team needs to choose where to focus their attention. Which brings me to my second rule. When [I run senior leadership meetings](#), I make sure we focus on four things:

1. Decisions that move the needle. Don't waste energy talking about expense reports when you should be talking about mergers and acquisitions or a new business line or a reorganization. Incremental improvements are the purview of lower levels of management. One of my clients, the CEO of a company with revenues of a billion dollars, likes to measure this by the number of zeros involved. Are we talking about a \$500,000 decision or a \$5,000,000 decision? If there aren't enough zeros, the decision isn't strategic enough and shouldn't absorb senior leadership time. Senior leadership should be focused on fundamentals, not incrementals.

2. The big arrow. Think of your company as one big arrow that contains lots of little arrows – projects, businesses, clients, business deals. The big arrow is your company's culture, strategic direction, core competencies, and core values. The CEO and his or her leadership team own that big arrow. The problem is that, often, the little arrows point in different directions as people solidify their silos, bicker amongst themselves, and neglect the larger mission. Senior leaders have the responsibility to make decisions and act in ways that [break through silos](#) and align everyone with the strategic and cultural direction of the company. That's how they can ensure all the arrows will be shooting in the same direction.

3. The next level of leadership. One of the most important roles of the most senior leaders is to engage the up-and-coming leaders, fostering their leadership and decision-making. That's how a company grows. Talking about the next level of leadership, developing succession plans, pushing decisions to that level, including them in strategic discussions – those efforts are high return.

4. Undiscussables. Talking about the thing that no one is talking about is an almost foolproof way to improve company performance. Maybe it concerns another leader or maybe it has to do with the performance of a certain division. Maybe it's about the CEO's leadership style or a lack of trust among the senior team. Whatever it is, the mere fact that it's important and not being discussed is a solid indication that it's holding the organization back.

Dealing with whatever comes across your desk leaves the control in other people's hands. CEOs and other senior leaders can't afford to be that passive. Every single thing you do as a leader needs to

have an impact. Your job is to think big. If the topic is outside the rubric of these four things, then it should be dealt with at a more junior level of the organization.

During lunch, I shared these four points of focus with the CEO and we agreed that the most critical one, for his team, was the way his direct reports were working together. Or rather *weren't* working together. That had been an undiscussable for some time.

By the time the team got back to the room, the slide projector was gone. At first, people were off-balance. What about the work they had put into their presentations? What about the safety they felt hiding behind slides?

“Your brains are too valuable to sit through presentations,” the CEO said, “Your brains need to think together.”

Then he threw a zinger on the table: “Look around the room. Who’s not getting along with each other? Let’s talk about that!”

Silence ensued.

To the CEO’s credit, he did nothing to dispel the awkwardness. He tossed the ball and it was their turn to step up and run with it.

Finally, after what felt like forever, one of his direct reports spoke up, admitting what everyone else in the room already knew but never talked about: He and another person in the room were having a hard time working together.

And for the next three hours of lively, engaged, sometimes difficult conversation, not a single person looked at their email under the table.

Peter Bregman is the CEO of [Bregman Partners](#), a company that helps successful people become better leaders, create more effective teams, and inspire their organizations to produce great results. Best-selling author of *18 Minutes*, his most recent book is *Leading with Emotional Courage*. He is also the host of the [Bregman Leadership Podcast](#). To identify your leadership gap, take Peter’s [free assessment](#).
