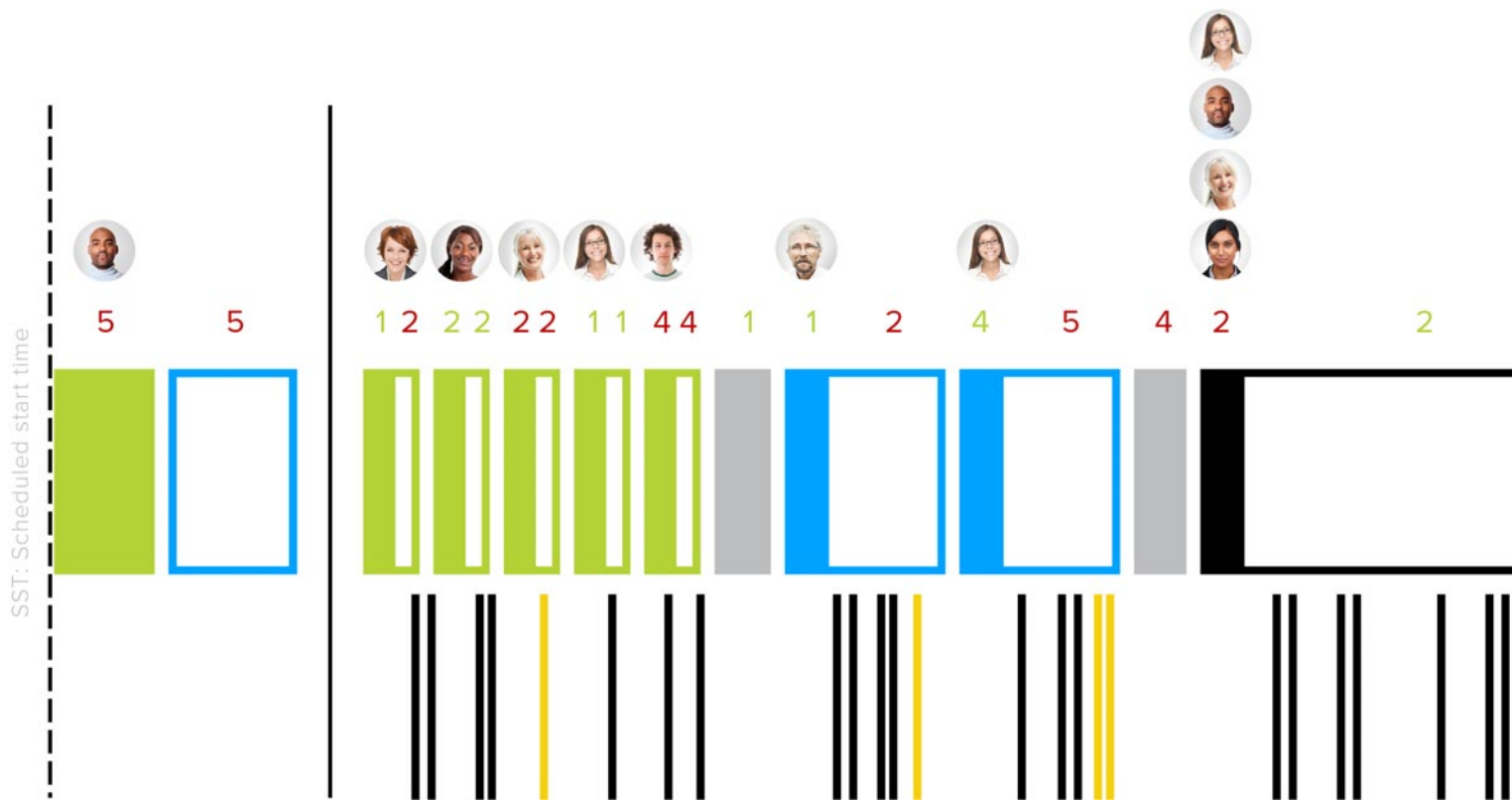


Transforming the way we meet



Dr Nick Udall



‘Change the way we meet and we can change the world.’

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by Dr Nick Udall, CEO nowhere

Organisations have unwittingly become slaves to outdated, ineffective, inefficient, life-draining meeting cultures.

Change the way we meet and we can change the world.

Most organisations have unwittingly become slaves to outdated, ineffective, inefficient, life-draining meeting cultures. Let me share a few, real examples.

Let's start with the **back to back, one-hour meeting culture** where people typically turn up six minutes late – the time it takes to walk from their last meeting to the next.

The arbitrary "Outlook" hour means time is often tight, so people jump straight into the meeting, with no set-up, often without even knowing what the meeting is about, or why they are there.

They then just about have time to orientate themselves to the meeting ie. extract themselves energetically from their last meeting, before they quite soon thereafter start thinking about their next meeting.

Then all of a sudden the hour has gone. A follow-up meeting is scheduled and pretty much the same conversation is had again.

This becomes a repeating pattern,

which mean topics move forward slowly, and people becoming increasingly frustrated and ever more entrenched, resulting in compromised solutions, loss of energy, and sometimes an impasse where we agree to disagree.

Then there's the **stakeholder management meeting culture**, with its obsession with getting everyone 'on-board'. Stakeholders are tackled individually off-line, often several times, through a series of bilateral negotiations to iron out issues and create alignment before a meeting. This wastes an inordinate amount of time and energy, fuels rumours and plays into the politics of the system.

You could argue there's no point to the meeting when it eventually happens, as it should be nothing more than a hollow ratification exercise. I've even seen an extreme version of this when the minutes of the meeting were published before it had even taken place.

The problem with this meeting culture is that no real conversation ever takes place, and over time the organisation forgets how to have robust, creative, real-time exchanges – destroying any potential for collective insight and breakthrough.

Here, the leader sees themselves as much more important than everyone else in the room – symbolised of course by where they sit in the room.

Worse still is when someone speaks out of turn in the meeting, unravelling the perceived alignment, creating conflict and a sense of betrayal and mistrust that damages relationships going forward.

All of this drives a culture that becomes wholly risk averse (ironically increasing the likelihood of mistakes and accidents occurring), and where success is reduced to simply getting my work approved, rather than challenging each other's thinking, joining the dots, and pushing ourselves and each other to the next level.

Next comes the **reactive meeting culture**, where meetings are driven by the needs of the leader and more often than not their insecurities.

These meetings are all about dealing with the latest crisis or issue, or 'shiny new thing', and are very reactive in nature.

Strategy has nothing to do with it, and certainly doesn't lead the way. Agendas keep changing, people keep getting pulled all over the place and meetings are set up at the last minute with no thought for the knock-on consequences.

Then, when you get to the meeting it's schizophrenic in nature ie. either the leader dominates and doesn't shut up, or they abdicate their leadership, expecting everyone else to solve the problem. Flipping between both behaviours is also highly likely.

This type of culture is driven by a leader at the top, who has lost their centre, and is reacting to every last thing – dragging everyone else into their drama. This kills the rhythms of productivity and is invidious and infectious ie. it's common for people to unconsciously replicate this behaviour with their own people.

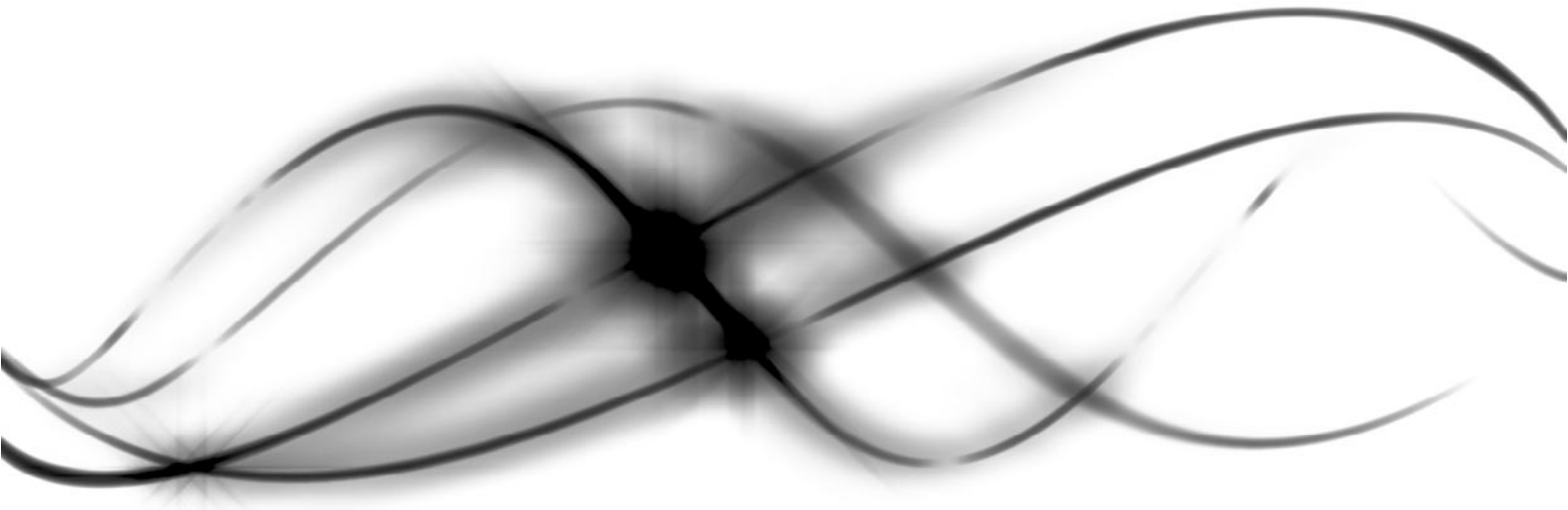
One of my recent favourites is the **ego-maniac meeting culture**, especially prevalent in the new wave of large, high tech, 'hip' companies, and also in marketing-driven companies.

Here, the leader sees themselves as much more important than everyone else in the room – symbolised of course by where they sit in the room (more on this later).

They can't help name drop who they are meeting for lunch, or that so-and-so might call so they may have to step out.

They then espouse how brilliant they and their company are, how cutting edge they are, and then, through some massive dose of wilful blindness, they spend the whole meeting talking over everyone else.

At the end of the meeting they say, 'Well that was a great meeting, thanks everyone' – while everyone else looks around at each other thinking (and then subsequently saying in the corridor), 'Hold on a minute, but they didn't listen to what anyone else said, and most of us never had the chance to even speak'.



This is itself a fantastic example of the schism between the massive progress in technology and the complete lack of progress in the consciousness of leaders and the human operating system of organisations.

Now let me bring this back to a more familiar norm – **the ‘classic’ team meeting culture**. These are, more often than not, driven by long agendas, manifesting in hours of slow, torturous, death by Powerpoint. People sit around long tables with their laptops out, mobile phones in hand, looking up occasionally when it has something to do with them, or to make it look like they are listening.

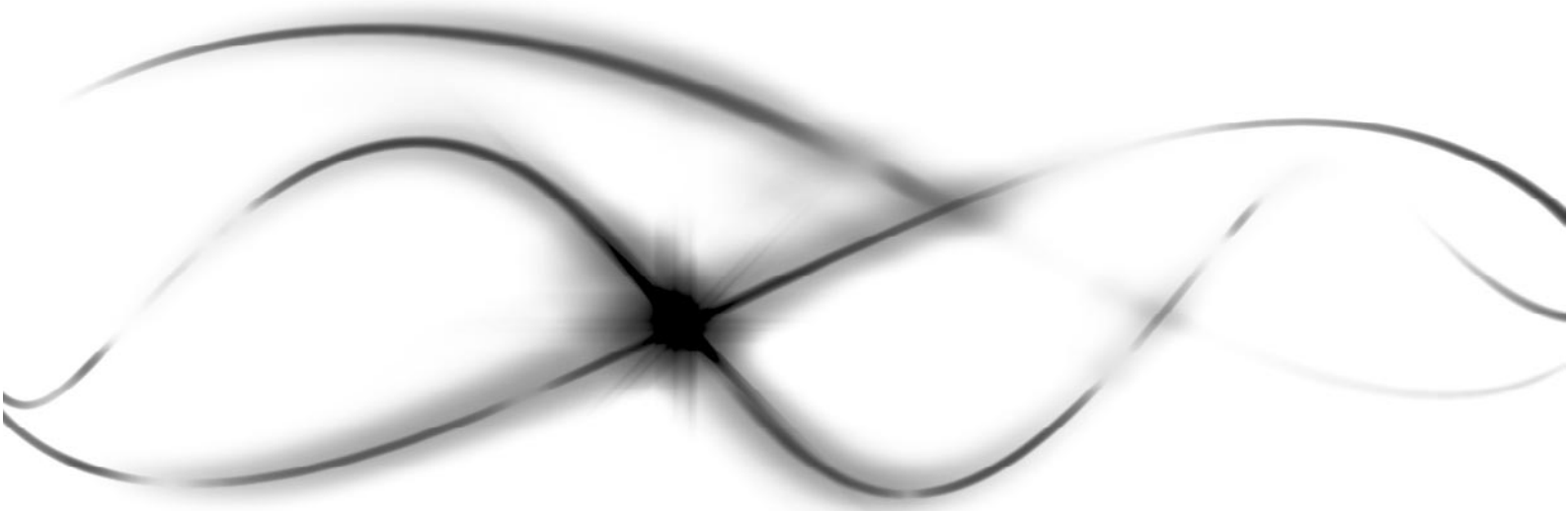
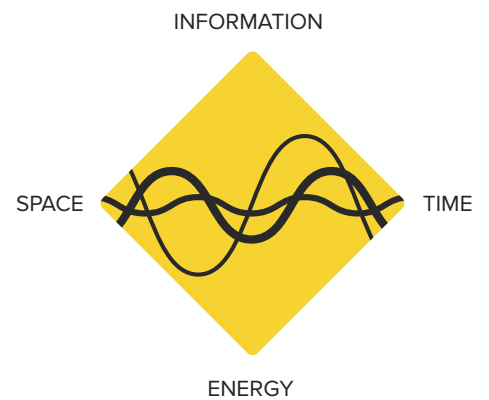
The majority of time is spent receiving poorly thought through presentations, where it’s not clear what the presenter is trying to say or what they want from you as the listener (in truth many often just want to get it over with).

Poor inputs generally create poor exchanges, reducing the conversation, should there be any, to the ping-pong of opinion rather than the creation of new thought – which is the only way of generating new and better action (not just more action).

Hierarchy, official or not, massively influences the dynamic in the room with everyone taking cues from the key leaders about whether to agree or not with any given issue.

Scarily, all of these examples are real. And, they are of course not mutually exclusive. No doubt we can identify many more. The point here is to highlight some of the fundamental flaws in how we meet, especially in organisational life.

The problem is that all of these ways of meeting undermine the very purpose of meeting – to think together – so we can bring the new to mind, and then build the energy and coherence needed to move forward together like a flock of birds and bring newness to the world.



This is why most cultures are time poor. It is because they misunderstand how to work with time, especially in meetings, which themselves take up most of people's time, or at least most of a leader's time.

Unfortunately, most meeting cultures close down space, reject difference, limit conversation and drain energy.

With over twenty-five years working at the highest levels in global corporations, I now believe the vast majority of organisations are stuck in a mass delusion ie. the ineffectiveness of the way they meet, unable to change the damage they do and the time they waste.

To break-free of this collective trance, we need a different way of thinking about, designing and catalysing meetings. It starts by using Time, Space, Information and Energy differently.

Time

Whether the pattern is one-hour meetings (driven by a diary management system), or a leader only liking to take short meetings (fifteen or twenty-minutes), or only having time to hear presentation after presentation at the expense of having any quality time to think together ... these are all indicators that you are ironically (and seemingly counter-intuitively) a slave to time, not a master of time.

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It all starts with a fight for time. Controlling the agenda ie. who gets on the agenda, and for how long, is itself often a big power-play – creating the weird phenomenon of people wanting to 'get time on the agenda' regardless of whether it is really needed or not. The 'more time I can get' the better, as this is seen as an acknowledgement of the importance of my bit of the business (and by extension an acknowledgment of my importance).

Rarely are the real questions asked: What's the intent of your session? How do you want us to listen ie. are you

giving an update for shared understanding, are you sharing something for feedback, are we exploring something, or are we deciding on something? For only with this level of clarity can we really allocate the right amount of time for the 'input' and the appropriate 'exchange'.

Different types of inputs require different lengths of time. For example, updates should be short, just a few minutes. We only need to know what's changed – not the whole backstory again – so we can work through any implications or consequences. Strategic questions and issues meanwhile take time, as they are messy and complex. They require us to wander together and call upon our pattern recognitions skills. This will often take more than an hour, and sometimes multiple hours, over multiple sessions.

Each type of input also requires a different type of exchange. Again, different exchanges require different lengths of time. Therefore, time allocated to a session should be based on what type of input and exchange is needed to think together.

It is also useful to stop thinking that time is just linear. Of course, physically it is, but phenomenologically it isn't. This is important because a meeting is not a mechanical thing, it is a human thing, and you can shift people's experience of time by design ie. speed it up or slow it down. By attending to the human process dimensions of how we meet, we can unlock different and more productive ways of thinking together.

Ultimately, the way we make meaning and generate insight is non-linear. You can't command insight to arise in line with the symmetry of a half-hour or one-hour meeting block. So why force ourselves to work this way?

Trying to over-control a meeting by obsessing about time is the biggest mistake we see. This is why sticking rigidly to tightly choreographed

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agendas, broken up into multiple short sessions, with minimal time to think together, must stop being at the core of our mental model of meetings.

Instead we need to be clear on our intent (type of input and exchange of every session and sub-session), learn to create space in our meetings, and then be ready to shift the flow of the meeting to follow the emerging energy and needs.

One example of this is deliberately slowing down at the beginning of a meeting, to get clear on context, establish intent, and create relationship; and then again at the end, to agree and align on what has emerged and what next actions are needed. Particularly how we start a meeting determines the success of the meeting.

Understanding more about the nature-specific time requirements of different meetings, or different types of sessions within meetings, is the key to reaching a whole new level of productivity. This includes learning how to speed up and slow down psychological time, and how to think differently about physical time. This is the first paradigm shift we need to make.

Space

Perhaps one of the most limiting dimensions of meetings is how space is used. When did meetings move to sitting around a long table? A long table doesn't facilitate the meeting of minds; rather it is a symbol and mechanism of hierarchy. The leader either sits at the end or in the middle, and the subsequent levels of hierarchy fan out from there. Everyone's chair symbolises their 'place', such that predetermined places (and arguably predetermined mental positions) significantly undermine the creation of new thought and action.

Even worse is the U-shaped set up, where the leader sits at the bottom of the U and the underlings sit at the ends of the U. The poor presenter then stands

at the front, in the mouth of the U, in a gladiatorial ritual that requires them to 'demonstrate their worth'. This format increases fear and limits productive exchange. Success is then reduced to simply surviving unscathed.

Fear driven spaces and formats also increase the danger that the 'real story' isn't shared. Anything deemed problematic is more likely to be hidden from the leader, making them blind to potential risks, and therefore less able to see and address them.

In short, tables often dominate meeting rooms. Sometimes, it's as if the table came first, and the room second. Interestingly human beings are way more productive when they sit in circles – ideally with no tables or barriers between them – as this massively enhances our ability to connect with one another, tap into the space between each other and allow new patterns of collective thought, and then action, to emerge.

Which brings me to another dimension of space ie. the leader's ability to hold space, rather than take up space. Taking up space is easy. We do this either through our brilliance and speed, and/or with our ego and insecurities. Both close down and collapse space, crippling a group's ability to think together, linger in the unknown together, make new meaning together, and find the optimal way forward together.

Shift the consciousness of key leaders, and their ability to 'hold space', and you transform the way people meet. Whether they are team meetings, one-to-one meetings, informal meetings, ad-hoc meetings, huddles, scrums, sprints, town halls or conferences, they will all shift to a higher order and a more creative frequency. Unfortunately, the leader is nearly always the determining factor.

Attending to both physical and psychological space can fundamentally shift our experience of meetings. We therefore need to design meeting

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spaces differently, and to learn how to create, hold and use space differently.

Information

We next need to learn how to charge these spaces with the right information so we can sit around the 'information' (ie. the topic, need, challenge, question), play with it, explore it and move with it, so we can move ourselves forward.

Transforming how we communicate, and how we think about communication is vital. How many times in presentations are the key messages unclear and the logic confused, so that as the listener we have to work hard to work out what they are trying to say, or what they want from us? If we and they are unclear on the intent or need, it is all too easy to get into an unproductive and unsatisfactory mess, where listeners just 'check out' and switch off.

The communicator must be clear on the intent of their inputs. Once we are all clear on the intent of the input, we can craft it in ways that helps the listeners be useful and productive – otherwise why are they there?

To do this, we need to get clear on what they, the listeners, need to know. The listeners don't need to know everything I know, or for me to prove to them I know more than them on any given subject. What the listener needs is simply the information required to help them to respond and contribute in line with the shared intent of the session.

It is therefore the communicator's responsibility to make it easy for the listener. Whether that's having a clear beginning, middle and end (the simple arc of a story), or setting a good context, or revealing the thinking behind the thinking of a big idea, or bringing the content 'physically' or 'experientially' into the room. All of these are ways of priming the field in order to fuel powerful exchanges.

Another thing to realise is that information is not just about words or images on a page or Powerpoint slide, or what comes out of someone's mouth. Information also arises from intuitions, emotions and physical sensations. Learning to pay attention to a wider range of senses increases our ability to access subtler information.

Information should as much be co-created in a meeting, as brought into a meeting, for example in the form of ideas, insights, questions, decisions and next actions. We're not that good or sophisticated at seeing or capturing this emerging information.

For example, insights are fleeting and fragile, but they are also the greatest catalysts of new thought and new action, particularly when it's a collective phenomenon.

Insights are often accompanied by a subtle shift in energy in our bodies. Creating minutes and next actions is just too simplistic and one-dimensional.

And finally, another dimension of information we need to learn to work more consciously with is tacit knowledge. This is never written down as it is held in the 'collective mind and memory' of the organisation. Tacit knowledge is a key source of competitive advantage. It is the 'magic', the indefinable ingredient, in the what and how of our work, that can't easily be copied by competitors.

Energy

Last, but by no means least, is energy. In fact, it's probably true that however well we set up our space, plan our time and work with information, it's actually the quality of our individual and collective energy that determines the quality of our outputs and outcomes.

We're probably not off to a good start with 'energy' when we have packed agendas, meet in windowless rooms, receive painfully bad presentations, where we are not sure what the key

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messages are, or how we need to respond, or know why we are there, other than we are in a room with other people who report to the same person, and where the agenda is based on their needs and not mine, and they don't stop talking throughout the meeting, unless they step out to take a phone call from someone more important, or get distracted by messages on their phone.

Add to this the long list of bad behaviours and poor disciplines that dominate most meeting cultures, and we are really in trouble.

So, let me come back to something I mentioned earlier. Meetings are all about how we come together to think together.

Thinking together uses and generates energy. Paying attention to this ebb and flow of energy is critical if we are to ride the highs and lows of the creative process, to different degrees and for varying lengths of time.

It means we need to see every meeting as a journey not just a destination. And, we need to pay way more attention to the human processes of meetings, including working with more subtle layers of information, and the disciplines and skills of working in the moment.

Then we can move meetings, and the way we meet, to a whole new level of productivity and creativity.

Transforming our meetings

When we come to realise that great meetings are the marriage of great content with great human process, we come to see how meetings can move to a totally new order of impact and magnitude.

We need to unlearn what has become the norm, and we need to see with fresh eyes how we can use time, space, information and energy differently in the way we meet.

This is how meetings stop being a huge waste of time, and start being a great time to shape and make the unmade future.

This is the fifth of the hidden series of **nowhere** articles by Dr Nick Udall.

About nowhere

Since the mid-nineties, **nowhere** has been working behind the scenes and at the highest levels, with multi-national companies all over the world, tuning the creative frequency at which their cultures operate.

Our 'practice' is born from a unique blend of insight traditions, creative and organisational disciplines and doctoral research, and has over twenty years of development and refinement with some of the biggest brands and most inspiring leaders.

We share our practice in three ways:

1. High end catalysis – designing, catalysing and choreographing business breakthroughs and multi-year transformational journeys, including co-creating breakthrough strategies and innovations, and building eco-systems and cultures of innovation.

2. The simple things – introducing the simple disciplines and practices that make the difference between a conventional culture (that can only turn the handle faster and more aggressively), and an advanced culture (that has learned to transform the way it relates, thinks, leads and organises ie. what we call Meeting Craft®).

3. Going deeper – working with leaders, teams and change agents to help them learn to see and work with the invisible, the unconscious and the implicate ie. the keys to shifting organisational energy and creativity.

About Dr Nick Udall

Dr Nick Udall is a co-founder and the CEO of **nowhere**, and was a co-founder and the former Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership.

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