

# STYLIST

## MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR NEXT MEETING

Think business meetings are a total waste of time? In actual fact, they're the perfect opportunity to win over colleagues and impress your boss. Here's how...

**C**ast your mind back to your last meeting. Did you a) make a dramatic impact on your colleagues with some amazing ideas, taking one step closer to a seat on the board. Or b) idly doodle away and think about who's likely to win *MasterChef*. If we're honest, meetings can often fall somewhere between a mild distraction and a total waste of time. A Microsoft study found we spend five hours 40 minutes each week in meetings, but a massive 69% of us feel they're not productive. This matters because, as the University of North Carolina found, the level of "meeting effectiveness" is the single most powerful factor in job satisfaction.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, says personal brand consultant Liton Ali, with the right preparation meetings can help you make a swift and permanent impact. "They're a fantastic opportunity to get noticed, make yourself heard and get ahead. Nothing beats a real-life, face-to-face meeting." Here are five steps to making an impact at your next meeting:

### MAKE AN ENTRANCE

"Don't hurry into the room," says Elizabeth Kuhnke, an executive presence coach who has worked with CEOs from several FTSE 100 companies. "You'll miss a vital opportunity to make a good first

impression. When you enter, take in the scene. If there's anyone you don't know, introduce yourself." Don't forget to use your surname as well as your first name too. "Women often forget to do this, but just a single name can sound lightweight," says Dr Suzanne Doyle-Morris, author of *Beyond The Boys' Club*, who trains executive women. "If it's an external meeting and you're asked to introduce yourself, use both names again. Mention your job title and a big project you are (or were) involved with too, so that people can place you in the organisation."

### PICK YOUR SEAT WISELY

Don't just sit in the first chair you see. "If you want to be perceived as the most important person, always choose the middle of the shortest edge - in other words the 'head of the table,'" says Ali. "This is a perfect place for someone who wants to be seen as the voice of reason, you're between everyone and everyone's gaze will find you naturally."

Hoping to sell an idea, product or service? Research shows the best seat is to the right of the decision-maker, because the right side of the brain is creative and open to new ideas. "If that space is taken? "Sit across from the decision maker," advises Dr Alexandra Beauregard, researcher in organisational behaviour at LSE. Researchers at New York University call this the

'centre stage effect'. "People believe that the product in the middle of any display is the most popular which applies to people too. We evaluate people in central positions less stringently than we do people sitting to either side; mistakes don't get noticed as often."

### TRAVEL LIGHT

Find yourself carrying a raft of papers into a meeting. Don't. "Only bring to meetings what you absolutely need," says Ali. It stops colleagues getting distracted and restless while you are rustling around (attention spans for adults are between just 15 and 20 minutes in total) and it shows the person you are meeting that they have your undivided attention. "Carrying giant files with you suggests you lack focus." Be careful how you carry your pens and pads. "If you're carrying a notebook, pad, or laptop, hold it by your side, not in front of you - and especially not in the 'fig leaf' position," says Kuhnke. "Hiding behind your props makes you look defensive."

### BODY TALK

Researchers at UCLA have discovered that up to 93% of communication effectiveness is about visual clues and tone of voice, rather than the

words spoken. So, says Kuhnke, be aware how you are sitting and standing. "Women often relinquish power by

making themselves small. They tend to bring their shoulders forward and hold their arms close to their bodies." Research by Harvard Business School supports this, they found that adopting certain "power poses" can raise testosterone levels by 20% (making you feel more powerful) and lower levels of cortisone, the stress hormone.

Sit up. "Leaning back can make you look disengaged," says Dr Beauregard. "Occasionally resting your forearms on a desk is fine, but always maintain eye contact. You want to look as though you're leaning forward because you're engrossed, not because you are tired."

### FIND YOUR VOICE

"Research shows that women make 17% fewer comments and take 25% fewer 'turns' in meetings," says Dr Doyle-Morris. "They often wait until they feel they can offer the most original, innovative insight - and that opportunity never comes. Always contribute at least three comments. Don't get the reputation for being 'the quiet girl'. People will start to wonder why you are there." Worse still, when we do speak, we speak too quickly. US scientists have found that women take an average of 10 seconds to make a point, while men take 17 seconds. "Take your time. Speeding through makes you sound as if you don't think you deserve people's time," says Dr Doyle-Morris. Right. What's next on the agenda, then? 

