

How to Stand Out in Meetings

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Meetings can seem like an ordinary part of your workday, but, if you approach them strategically, they can also give your career a boost.

When you speak up at meetings, “you’re creating visibility, you’re showing that you’re a thought leader,” said Joel Garfinkle, an executive coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*. “You’re showing that you’re comfortable in that environment.”

Keep in mind that, though you may not be as seasoned as some of the other employees at your organization, your thoughts and opinions are still valuable.

Young CPAs “have good ideas,” said Michael Silvio, CPA, director of tax services at Hall & Company in Irvine, Calif., who loves to mentor junior staffers. “We want to know what they are thinking.”

There is, however, an art to speaking up. Bosses want to see someone demonstrating constructive thinking, sparks of leadership, and the ability to speak eloquently. But that may not come naturally. Here are some tips on how and when to make your voice heard:

Practice makes perfect: The best time to start speaking up is actually long before the meeting. Practice in front of a mirror or test out your skills on colleagues or friends. Be careful not to interrupt, talk over others, or let your voice trail off as you speak. Be confident and avoid using too many “ums,” and “likes,” which can become distracting. Speak clearly, confidently, and loud enough to be heard without yelling.

“Once you start talking, be conscious of time. Don’t start rambling or go off on a tangent,” said Garfinkle, who is based in Oakland, Calif. “The longer-winded you are, the less credibility you create.”

Some organizations will even pay for public speaking classes or membership fees for groups like Toastmasters where you can practice and improve. Some employers consider it “a small investment” that can yield big results for staffers, Silvio said.

Do your homework: Silvio said younger accountants are more likely to make the mistake of not rehearsing what they will say. “I have seen situations where they try to speak up and they don’t get their point across because you can tell it’s just a thought in their head. It hasn’t been formulated,” he said.

To sparkle during meetings, preparation is key, said Joel Lanz, CPA/CITP/CFF, CGMA, founder and principal of Joel Lanz, CPA P.C. in Jericho, N.Y. “There are so many things you can’t control; what you need to focus on is things you can,” said Lanz, who also worked at PwC. Read about clients before a client meeting, for example. If possible, get the agenda ahead of time, and find at least one area where you can add value. Jot down notes or develop a quick script.

Speak up early: Garfinkle advises that CPAs who are nervous about participating speak up early—within the first 10 minutes, if possible—to avoid letting self-doubt creep in and make them nervous. “Have a game plan” for what you’re going to say, he said, adding that it doesn’t have to be complicated or intense. It can be as short as “I agree with Bob. I want to add to that.”

Be attentive: Pay close attention to make sure what you share remains accurate, relevant, and original. Look interested, and avoid peeking at your phone under the table. “Make sure to be attentive. If you’re feeling a little drowsy, definitely bring in a little caffeine. Give everyone the respect that you would expect from them,” said Jenna Chupurdy, CPA, a Hall & Company senior tax associate who trained under Silvio.

Disagree tactfully: If you disagree with someone during a meeting, do so in a diplomatic way. Bring up an opposing opinion “as a question rather than a challenge,” said Lisa Barrington, a workplace strategist and speaker based in Phoenix. “For example, rather than say ‘I disagree’ or ‘I wouldn’t do it that way’, say ‘I hadn’t thought of it that way, could you tell me more?’ followed up by ‘That makes sense, but have you considered...?’” she suggested.

Assess the setting: While your input is welcome, some meetings may not be the time or the place for expressing it. If senior leaders are discussing big news or if you’re attending a high-level client meeting, it may make sense to simply observe. Chupurdy said she speaks less at client meetings, which at her firm are more of a learning environment for junior employees. But staff and team meetings are more hands-on. “During in-house meetings I feel it’s really important to get my opinions heard,” she said.

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