Rose Coaching
www.RoseCoaching.info
Life_Is_Fun@RoseCoaching.info
LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info

The Parking Lot Method

for easy flowing conversations and meetings.

By Laura Rose, **CTACC**
Certified Life Coach

Have you ever been in a meeting or conversation in which the conversation starts to stray off course? Have you ever left a meeting wondering what you have actually accomplished in that hour? Or intended to talk to someone about specific plans on one topic, and ran out of time without really discussing it? The Parking Lot technique comes in handy for those types of scenarios.

Sometimes people get something in their heads that they cannot let go until they tell you about it. Sometimes they cannot listen to what you have to say, until they feel their needs or ideas have been dealt with. The Parking Lot method allows you to quickly acknowledge and validate someone's desire to discuss something -- while at the same time, keeps you on target. Here's how it works.

This can be used in either formal or informal meetings. Once you have established and agreed upon the goal, agenda and time length of the meeting, we often go into the body of the meeting. Lots of time, we develop new ideas during the natural conversation. Although these ideas are very valuable and significant, they do not directly support our original goal for this particular meeting. These ideas have the risk of carrying the entire meeting into a different direction or into a dangerous "rat hole", because not everyone at the meeting is either interested or authorized to make a decision on this different topic.

Once you realize that you are now off on a tangent, quickly decide if this new topic is worth investigating later. If it is, agree to “park it” on the side for now – and return to it before the meeting ends. Actually write it down in full view of everyone on a separate board or sheet of paper. Making it visible allows the participants see that it is of value and will be discussed later.

The parking lot technique is a great way to acknowledge the value of the idea, while at the same time keep us on track with the original goal of the meeting. This allows us to successfully accomplish the meeting goals – and still take advantage of the great brainstorming that was naturally inspired by the collaboration.

If you have time before the end of the meeting to discuss it further, you can do it. If not, take a moment at end to decide who needs to be involved in further discussions of this new topic, and make plans to call another meeting with everyone “needed” to move forward on the “next step” for that parking lot item.

This technique can also be used in informal conversation. If you only have 15 minutes to discuss an important topic with "Joe", make sure Joe is aware of your time limit and your goal up front. Once you're engaged and Joe strays off topic, acknowledge the value of this new idea with the promise to re-visit after you've completed your original topic. Once you've completed your original topic and before your leave, make plans to get together to talk about his new topic.

A typical meeting strategy for “official/formal” meetings is below. Informal meetings can use a “lite” version of these steps.

Not all meeting have to follow this template. But you may want to know about all the pieces, so that you can deliberately pick and choose the parts that you want to include in your meeting. Can you change the type of meeting or goal in mid-meeting? Sure you can. You just need to do it knowingly, deliberately and with purpose.

1) Before the meeting - Tell people the goal and what you want to accomplish at the meeting.

   a. This way the people enter the meeting with the right set of expectations and attitude

   b. This way the right people to accomplish your goal will attend, and those not interested will not attend. Having the wrong people in your meeting will take you off into the weeds every time, because they have their own agenda to accomplish. If you don’t tell folks the purpose of the meeting before they come – it’s your fault that they’re talking apples when the topic is oranges.

2) Before the meeting - Tell people what type of meeting this will be and what you expect from them.

   a. If you don’t tell folks ahead of time what you expect them to bring (data, information, signed contracts, snacks, music, etc) – it’s your fault if they come empty handed and ill-prepared.

3) There are many types of meeting:.

   a. Informational meeting (1-way report on status of things)

   b. Status meeting (2-way dialogue to gather data)

   c. Workshop – or an actual “working meeting”

   d. Combination of above.

**It’s helpful to identify which type of meeting you want this to be upfront – before the meeting actually takes place. Informational meetings (1-way communication meetings) can be very short. If you state upfront that you’re just here to give information on XXX, people will be in the right mindset upfront to accept your current status and not offer any of their different opinions or different issues. You can also tell your audience that they don’t need to prepare anything for the meeting. If you want this to be a gathering data type meeting (2-way status meeting) – you need to tell folks exactly what they need to bring to the meeting – so that the meeting is efficient and effective. If you want this to be a working meeting, you need to be clear on what your teams will be working on – so they can properly prepare for it.

4) At the start of the meeting: Review of goal of meeting, and what you want to accomplish. Clarify exactly what you want to have in your hand when you walk out of the meeting.

   a. Review and get consensus on “why we are here”

b. Review time limit as well

c. Announce the type of meeting this will be – before hand.

d. Ask if everyone is prepared for this meeting

i. If not everyone is prepared for this meeting or you don't have a critical player at the meeting – this would be a good time to discuss a different agenda or type of meeting.

ii. If you have the right people for a different type of meeting or goal, it's fine to deliberately change this into a different meeting. Just make sure you have everyone's consensus on the goal of this new meeting.

iii. You just don't want to waste time having a meeting that you have no hope of successfully accomplishing its goal. This is why we do this type of review up front.

iv. If this is the right audience for any other meeting – dismiss and don't waste any more time. Include an action item to reconvene with the proper folks

5) Body of meeting will flow in various ways. Some more formal meetings have time limits on each agenda topic. You place some buffer time between some items to cover any incidental conversation as well. Often you will hit some topics that don't fit the current goal, but are important. This is when you place them on the Parking Lot, and return to the agenda

6) End the meeting about 5-10 minutes before the allocated time. This time is used to review the action items that were covered in your discussions. This summary is important because it makes sure everyone heard the same thing and agrees to follow-up with the things you think they agreed to follow-up on.

a. Review all the action items that were discovered in the meeting, along with the Who and When

b. Review the parking lot items to see what you want done with them

i. Some may require a separate meeting with different people

ii. Some may just require some minimum research

iii. Some may just need to be placed in your project plan for later "flushing out the details"

c. Agree upon when/where the next meeting should take place (if you need a next meeting).

7) In formal meetings, it's always a good habit to follow-up with the meeting notes. The meeting notes would just outline the goal of the meeting (and who attended) and include any action items and next meeting info (the summary piece). If you do follow-up with meeting notes, send them to all the participants as well as stakeholder that could not attend.

Once again - Not all meeting have to follow this template. But you want to know about all the pieces, so that you can deliberately pick and choose the parts that you want to include in your meeting.

Some nice resources to have in your more formal meetings are: the Facilitator (normally the person calling the meeting), a Timekeeper (to watch the clock on specific topics) and a Note keeper (to take notes of the action items and parking lot items as the meeting freely flows).

Let me know which tip you tried at your next conversation and meeting.

About the author

Laura is a certified personal life coach. She is also the Time Management Advisor for National electronic magazine: eXaminer.com. Read more of her time management articles http://www.examiner.com/x-16459-Raleigh-Time-Management-Examiner
She has been in the software and testing industry for over 20 years. She's worked with such companies as IBM, Ericsson, Staples, Fidelity Investments and Sogeti in various client advocacy and project management roles. The techniques she uses in her business coaching and client advocacy work saved these companies both time and money, which resulted in on-time, quality product delivery with higher client satisfaction.
Laura now uses her client focus, project, quality and people management skills in her personal life coaching career. As a personal life coach, she helps people integrate their goals and dreams into their everyday lives. Laura uses creative and practical tools to help her clients realize what really matters to them. They then follow-through with project and time management techniques to create the reality they really want.
Laura authors many articles and workshops on time management and strategic scheduling. She is also the founder of the electronic magazine the Rose Garden: the Art of Becoming.
Laura offers one-on-one career and life coaching, small group coaching, seminars and workshops. You can learn more about her at www.RoseCoaching.info and contact her at LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info