Design Storyboards

Idea In Short

When a meeting feels busy but does not produce progress, redesign its interaction from the purpose outward. Design Storyboards helps a team clarify why it is meeting, who needs to contribute, what first steps will move the work, and which Liberating Structures could support those steps. Invite people who plan or participate in the meeting. Use a visible storyboard to map the sequence and test whether each activity serves the purpose. The output should show how the meeting begins, how participation unfolds, and what endpoint it should reach. Use the structure for recurring meetings or important working sessions, then review the design after it has been tried.

Many meetings inherit an agenda from the previous meeting, even when the work has changed. Participants review updates, discuss familiar topics, and leave without knowing what decision or action the gathering was meant to produce. Design Storyboards helps a team design a meeting from its purpose outward. Participants clarify why the meeting matters, identify who has a stake in the work, list possible first steps, and select interaction formats that support progress. The practice is grounded in the Liberating Structures principle “Include and Unleash Everyone.” Its central question is direct: what should happen in the meeting so the people involved can move the work forward?

Clarify the purpose before the agenda

The first step is to define the meeting’s purpose. A group can use 9 Whys or another Liberating Structure to move from a broad topic to a more useful statement. “Discuss the product launch” says what the meeting is about; “decide how we will resolve the three launch risks that could affect the customer date” identifies work to be done. A precise purpose helps participants determine whether they need to attend and what contribution is expected from them.

The team then identifies stakeholders: people who will be affected by the meeting’s topic,

who have relevant knowledge, or who will carry out the resulting decisions. The more diverse the set of perspectives, the more likely the meeting is to surface dependencies and implementation concerns. A stakeholder list is not an invitation to include everyone in every meeting. It is a prompt to test whether important knowledge or authority is missing and whether some people can contribute asynchronously.

Build a sequence from first steps

Each participant lists possible first steps and shares the list with a partner. The group then brings forward the ideas that seem most useful and selects one to begin the meeting. This short sequence prevents the loudest person from defining the agenda before others have thought. It can surface a step that is not a discussion at all: reviewing a customer experience, mapping a handoff, or hearing from a colleague who owns a critical dependency.

The storyboard becomes a visual map of how the meeting will unfold. The team can use the Liberating Structures Selection Matchmaker to choose practices suited to each step. A meeting about understanding stakeholder perspectives may use Impromptu Networking or Simple Ethnography. A session to generate options may use 1-2-4-All. A meeting that needs a clear next move can close with 15% Solutions. These examples are starting points, not a required sequence. The selected structures should serve the purpose, not decorate the agenda.

Design for contribution

A strong storyboard makes participation visible. It shows when people think individually, when they work in pairs or groups, and when the whole group needs to hear or decide something. A process that gives everyone a chance to contribute before plenary discussion can reduce the tendency for a few people to dominate. The team should also decide what materials, space, timing, and facilitation roles are needed.

Design Storyboards can be used by one person or a meeting design team, but broader participation often improves the plan. Invite people with different roles and different experiences of the current meeting. A senior leader may know what decision needs to be made, while a frontline colleague knows which operational constraint will make the proposed agenda unrealistic. Including both perspectives helps the team build a format that

can work in practice.

Define the endpoint

A meeting should have a meaningful endpoint. It may be a decision, a shared understanding, a prioritized set of experiments, or a plan with owners and dates. The storyboard should make that endpoint visible and show which steps lead toward it. If the meeting needs a decision but the people with authority are not present, the design should acknowledge that constraint and identify how the decision will happen. Otherwise, participants can spend time discussing an issue without a path to resolution.

Before finalizing the storyboard, the team can walk through the sequence from the participant's point of view. Is the invitation clear? Does each step produce something needed by a later step? Is there enough time to hear relevant perspectives? Where might the group get stuck? The point is not to predict every interaction but to check whether the design supports the work. The host can adjust the plan if the meeting's purpose changes or new information appears.

Learn from the meeting you designed

The storyboard should be treated as a hypothesis about how the meeting will work. After the session, review whether the right people contributed, whether the sequence supported the purpose, and whether the group reached the intended endpoint. Ask participants which parts helped and which created friction. Use that feedback to refine recurring meetings rather than allowing an inherited agenda to become permanent by default.

Design Storyboards is especially useful for meetings that consume substantial time, bring together multiple functions, or need to produce a decision. It also helps teams redesign recurring forums that have drifted away from their purpose. Research on meeting effectiveness and team decision processes emphasizes preparation, clear outcomes, and participation. The Center for Creative Leadership offers guidance on making meetings effective; MIT Sloan Management Review has examined how meeting design affects collaboration; and Atlassian's team playbook provides practical methods for clarifying meeting goals. 1, 2, 3

A storyboard can also reveal that a meeting should not happen. If the purpose is simply to

distribute information, a short written update may serve participants better. If the purpose needs only two decision makers, a large gathering may be unnecessary. Designing the interaction first gives the team permission to change the format itself. When a meeting is needed, the storyboard helps make every step purposeful and gives participants a clearer path from arrival to action.

- 1Meeting effectiveness
- 2Why your meetings are a mess
- 3Atlassian Team Playbook

Summary

Design Storyboards turns meeting design into shared work. Participants name the purpose, identify stakeholders, map first steps, and choose interaction formats that fit the task. A visible sequence makes it easier to spot missing voices, redundant agenda items, or a gap between discussion and decision. The meeting team should use the storyboard as a working hypothesis, not a rigid script. After the session, compare the intended endpoint with what actually happened and adjust the sequence. A well-designed meeting makes the next contribution clear and gives people a reason to be there. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.