

# To Run a Good Meeting, Respect Your 3's

by Art Markman



I have spent much of the past 10 years splitting my time between doing basic research on reasoning, decision making, and motivation and trying to spread the word to the business community about how understanding the science of the mind can make them more effective thinkers.

One of the most powerful principles that can help everyone work more efficiently is also one of the simplest: It's called the Role of 3, and it reflects the fact that people remember roughly three distinct things from any event, lecture, meeting, book or article. This limitation arises because your memory wants to focus on interconnected facts, rather than distinct and independent pieces of information. There isn't really a good way around this principle — it is one of those rules that needs to be respected rather than corrected.

Happily, respecting this rule is easy. Just focus your meetings and presentations on about three things. It's OK if you occasionally go all the way up to four, but don't push it.

What that looks like in practice:

- **Start every meeting and presentation with a brief description of the three things you are going to cover.** This advance organizer gets everyone ready for what is going to happen. It prepares people to attach new information to what they already know, which is crucial for memory.
- **Focus the meeting on just those three items.** Resist the urge to add new topics or to go off on tangents. If something new gets raised in a meeting, or if a new thought occurs to you while giving a presentation, decide whether it is urgent enough to add it immediately. If it isn't, push it off until later.
- **Review the three key points.** Make sure that you remind everyone what it is you wanted them to remember.

I know that your first reaction is going to be to look at this advice and say it's common sense, that you already believe it to be true, and that you have heard it before.

But the real question is: Do you do it? I have lost count of the number of meetings I have attended in which the agenda is crammed until it is ready to burst. I frequently go to lectures — some of them by researchers who spend their lives studying human memory — in which the speaker makes eight different points in an hour and every person leaves the room with a different impression of what the talk was about.

Just respecting the power of the number 3 can make you and everyone around you smarter and more effective. Make sure that you seize control of what people remember about their encounters with you. Don't leave the collective memory of your organization up to chance.

*This guest post is by [Art Markman](#), a professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Texas at Austin, executive editor of the journal *Cognitive Science* and a member of the editorial board of *Cognitive Psychology*. Follow him on Twitter at [@abmarkman](#).*