3 SECRETS TO KILLING

ENDLESS DISCUSSIONS

Get Tangible Outcomes In Your Meetings

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INTRODUCTION

This is a guide to help you kill endless discussions.
The assumption is that you will use this guide in a professional working environment because there the tricks were tested and worked 100% in all cases, but feel free to try it out in other environments as well and let us know how it was for you.

It might be that you have encountered situations like:

- No tangible outcomes are produced and yet another meeting is scheduled
- The loudest, most extrovert, or the most senior team members dominate the conversation and the other ones stay quiet
- Discussions are spiraling out of control

Then this guide will help you to run meetings where:

- Decisions are done
- All voices are heard
- Discussions are sequenced and visualized

Take a pen and a paper and get ready to do things differently!

SECRET 1

Visual thinking has been described as seeing words as a series of pictures. It is common in approximately 60–65% of the general population*

SECRET NO 1:

DISCUSSIONS ARE VISUALIZED
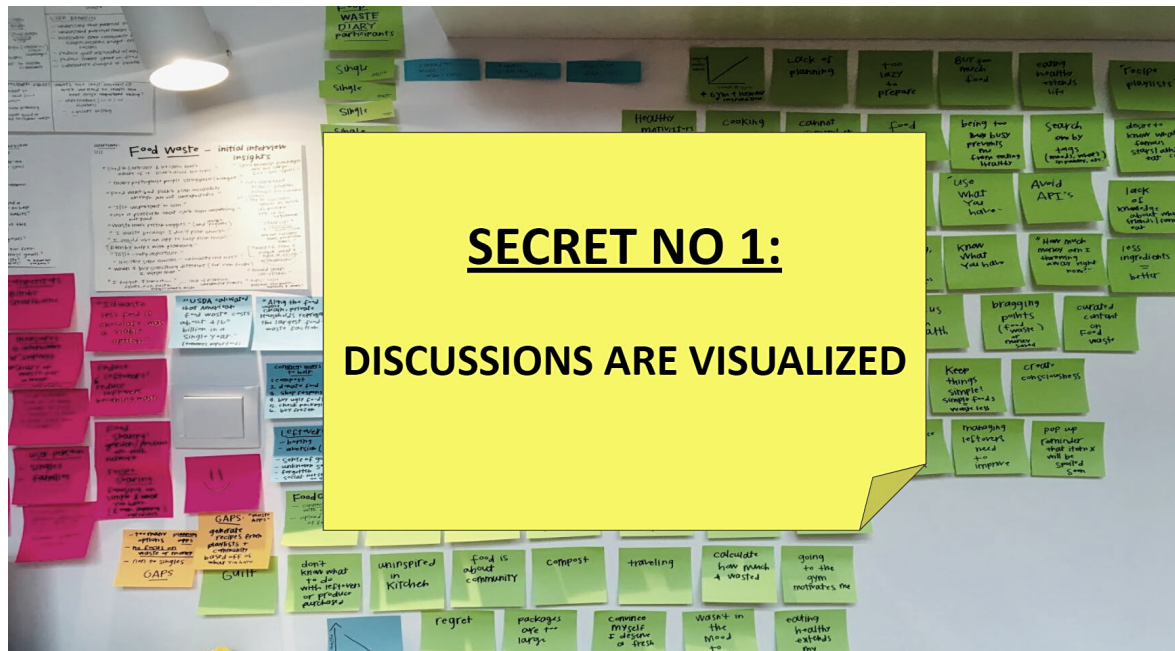
LET'S TRY AN EXPERIMENT

I want you to take a pen and paper and prepare for an experiment.
In the next page you will see a picture where words are written.
The experiment must be done in the **exact** steps and **no cheating** otherwise you do not see the WHY behind this first Secret!

STEP 1
Take a phone and set the timer for 12 seconds

STEP 2
Go to the next page of this guide, start the timer and look at the words on the page. DO NOT USE PEN AND PAPER to write anything!

STEP 3
Go to page number *06* and check the final steps.

SECRET 1

Visual thinking has been described as seeing words as a series of pictures. It is common in approximately 60–65% of the general population*

Cat

Fish

Flower

Tape

Tree

Door

King

Key

Head

Shoe

Hammer

Ball

Square

Box

Ball

House

Milk

Apple

SECRET 1

Visual thinking has been described as seeing words as a series of pictures. It is common in approximately 60–65% of the general population*

EXPERIMENT – CONTINUE HERE

STEP 4
Set the timer for 20 seconds.

STEP 5
Start the timer. Write on your paper as many words as you remember. Stop writing after the timer is up.
DO NOT CHEAT, do not go back to the page with words while writing.

STEP 6
Go to page number x and check how many words you remembered.

Results – experiment and results are inspired from "George Miller's Magical Number of Immediate Memory in Retrospect" study
- less than 5 words remembered: you were not really attentive
- between 5 and 9 words remembered: average at this experiment
- more than 9 words remembered: you are closed to genius people :)

Whats does this have to do with endless discussions?
The George Miller study contained one part that is related to how much can an average person remember and this is related to what happens in meetings.
How? Turn the page to find out...

SECRET 1

Do not rely on memory to make decisions in a meeting!
Instead, make decisions based on data that is visualized around you!
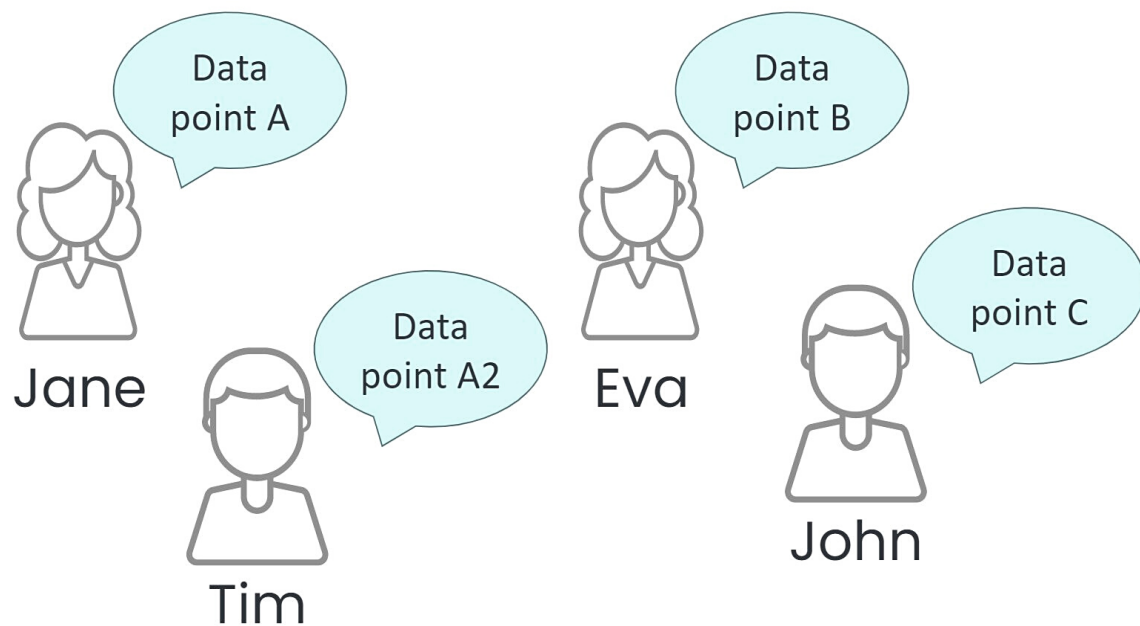
Imagine you are in a meeting where Jane, Eva, Tim, and John are taking part. They need to share information and take decisions.
They have a conversation about one topic and things happen like this:
- Jane tells her opinion and mentions "Data Point A"
- Tim steps in, agree with Jane, and adds an idea to what Jane said, creating "Data point A2"
- Eva stops them and says that actually "Data point B" is more relevant for their topic and she talks for a while about it
- John says "What about Data point C?"
- ...and things are continuing in this way

You have a tone of information in the room, no decision has been taken and some of the people collect the information in their way with maybe different handwritten notes, but nobody remembers what's going on.
Some studies say that people generally remember the first part of a data set and the last part so what is in the middle they do not remember so much or not at all.
Our brains are not made to process the amount of data that happens in meetings.

Go to the next page to figure out what to do differently!

SECRET 1

Visualize and standardize the conversation on the walls or on a virtual board

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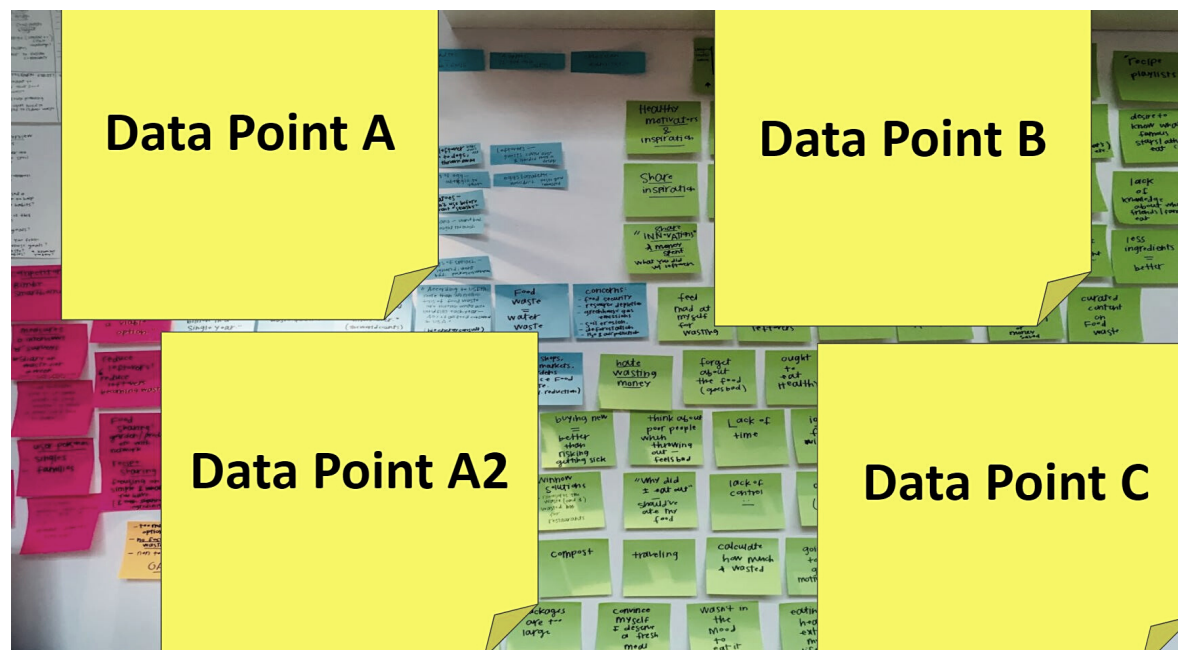
So here is where SECRET 1 comes in place: visualize and standardize the conversation on the walls or a virtual board

Benefits: this takes away the needs of the individuals in the meeting to remember the data that has been processed by that group in the meeting.

When to use this: a group of 3-4 people that need to sit together, share opinions and make a decision in a few hours

How to do it:
- You propose at the beginning of the meeting that you will take notes in a standardized way by writing each idea on a sticky note on the wall or the virtual board if the meeting takes place online.
- Everybody looks at the notes before deciding before the meeting is ending.
- For in-person meetings use rectangular or square sticky notes (preferable same color) and sharpies and place them on a whiteboard, walls, windows, any wall that you have available that is seen by all participants of the meeting.
- For online meetings you can use virtual boards which are a lot on the market. Some examples are miro.com, mural.com, etc. Free accounts can be created and they are easy to use.

SECRET 1

Visualize and standardize the conversation on the walls or on a virtual board

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Short activity:

Now take 1 minute and write down on your paper ideas to which kind of meetings you could apply this first trick and circle one of them that you are going to try out to make it differently next time.

Write down which meeting, time, and why you want to try this out. Put this paper somewhere visible at your workplace that you do not forget about it.

SECRET 2

SECRET NO 2:

ALL VOICES ARE HEARD

Both Round Robin and Together but Alone methods are used in meetings for all persons to participate in the conversation in a structured way and all voices to be heard.

Round Robin rules:
- You explain to the participants that you offer to structure the conversation and you might interrupt them and tell them who will talk and who not – ask them to agree if that is fine in order to achieve the wanted outcome of that meeting – setting expectations is an important aspect!
- You keep track of who spoke and who did not and stop the ones who are interfering when it's not their turn. Every person has his turn like in most of the games…
- You can use different methods to take turns like make a circle, send a physical or virtual ball to each participant or they send it to each other, use numbers and the creativity is highly welcomed here…
- It's ok to pass when your turn comes – any participant may refuse to add something by showing a card that all did at the beginning with "PASS" written or making a funny sign that you all agreed at the beginning.
- The most senior person/manager / the one who decides things is speaking, at last, to avoid participants being intimidated by his or her opinion.

SECRET 2

Structure the conversation using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods

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Together but Alone rules:
- It is a **silent exercise**, without talking. This might be uncomfortable for some people and you can tell them from the beginning to expect this.
- You ask everybody to use sticky notes to write down their opinions, ideas, etc about a specific topic you are discussing. They will use physical ones for in-person meetings or virtual ones for online meetings (in virtual boards).
- Everybody has the same color of sticky notes.
- You can restrict the number of sticky notes per person if you have a higher number of participants or very little time for taking a decision. You can do this by asking that they write as many sticky notes as they want and then select only 2 and place them on the board.
- Each participant gets his voice heard through the sticky notes while not talking.
- To make the uncomfortable silence less you can play music (instrumental is better) for a nice background that does not disturb the thinking process.

SECRET 2

Structure the conversation using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods

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Benefits of using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods:
- All voices are heard
- Conversation is structured
- There are rules, participants know them and follow them. There is someone who is making sure the rules are followed. In this way, the wanted outcome is achieved.
- The discussion is efficient, not turning in circles.
- Also the introverts are heard, not only the loud voices like usual. Especially in the Together but Alone Method, introverts are feeling more comfortable expressing their opinions.
- Everybody is feeling involved, listened and understood in a psychologically safe created environment.
- Sticky notes are an anonymous way of sharing ideas and opinions and are very useful in taking non-bias decisions.

When to use what:
- It depends on the situation, environment, how well the participants know each other, which conflicts are existing, which types of personalities they have, etc.
- Round Robin gives better results than Together But Alone when you want the participants to hear each other opinions, they are talkative persons and you have more time than 2min per person to make the structured discussion.
- Together But Alone gives better results when you have very little time to catch opinions, ideas (i.e. 5 min) or/and the participants are introverts who do not like to talk or persons who like to think and then talk and not loud thinkers.

SECRET 2

Structure the conversation using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods

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What have you learned? Fact or Fiction?

Write down on your paper for each number marking the following statements as FACT or FICTION.
1. Start structuring the conversation by visualizing it even without setting expectations of the participants.
2. Round Robin is a good method for groups of participants when the majority are introverted persons and when you have less time for the activity.
3. Using both Round Robin and Together But Alone methods all voices are heard, participants feel included in the conversation.
4. Together But Alone is a good method to be used for loud thinkers and extroverted participants.

Now go to the following page and compare your answers with mine.

SECRET 2

Structure the conversation using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods

_____

Here are my answers:

1. *FICTION.* Start structuring the conversation by visualizing it even without setting expectations of the participants. *Setting expectations helps the participants to know what to expect during the activity, do not get upset when you interrupt them, let you do the facilitation while visualizing for them the discussion and they are focused on the content.*

2. *FICTION.* Round Robin is a good method for groups of participants when the majority are introverted persons and when you have less time for the activity. *Round Robin is a method that lets the participants express their opinions while talking so it helps more when the participants are extroverts but because it is a structured way of discussion also introverts feel heard. Give them the option to pass when their turn is coming so that the introverts feel also comfortable. You can use this method when you have a minimum of 2 minutes for each participant so it takes more time than Together But Alone usually.*

3. *FACT.* Using both Round Robin and Together But Alone methods all voices are heard, participants feel included in the conversation.

4. *FICTION.* Together But Alone is a good method to be used for loud thinkers and extroverted participants. *This method works great with both types of participants but helps especially introverts to easier express their ideas and also persons who like to think quiet.*

SECRET 3

SECRET NO 3:

TIMEBOXING

It simply happens very often to finish a meeting by setting up another meeting and no decision is taken. This happens because most of the time there is nobody taking care of the time and setting the structure of the meeting in a way that not only time for each activity is set but also for deciding at the end.

To avoid discussions spiraling out of control, allocate a certain time for each activity on your agenda, and stick to this schedule. For example, if you're defining a challenge, set 20–30 minutes for it, and after the time's up, move on to the next steps.
This approach forces you and the team to think more efficiently, and cut out circular discussions.

SECRET 3

SECRET NO 3:

TIMEBOXING

How to use the Timeboxing:
- Set up for each Round Robin / Together but Alone / any other activity used a time taking into consideration how much time you have in total for the whole meeting, several participants, etc.
- *Example 1*: when you want to collect ideas to find a solution take 5 min for a minimum of 5 sticky notes per person. This means if you have 5 persons you will collect a minimum of 25 ideas in 5 minutes for rapid brainstorming.
- *Example 2*: when you want to hear experts opinions take 2 minutes x number of persons for a Round Robin which means for 5 persons you will take 10 minutes for this activity
- When you calculate the total amount of time for an activity calculate additional 2-3 minutes that you need to explain that activity and 2-3 minutes buffer time for interruptions / unexpected things that you need to handle with participants
- Calculate a minimum of 15 minutes depending on the deepness of your topic for a decision to take at the end of the meeting. Speed up the steps before this to reach the wanted outcome if you see you are behind the time.

SECRET 3

Which new ideas you get from this secret?

Take out your three sticky notes again. Look them over. Now get three other sticky notes and add new answers to the three questions:
- **Card #1: What?** *What is one new idea you have gotten from timeboxing?*
- **Card #2: So What?** *Why is this new idea important to you and the work you do?*
- **Card #3: Now What?** *What is one way you could use this idea when you have a meeting / come into endless discussions situations?*

You will be writing again on your sticky notes as you read this guide, so be sure to put them by hand.

BONUS TRICKS

How to spice up more your meetings

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1 **USE DOT VOTING TO DECIDE**

After collecting ideas, opinions, etc. you want to have decisions. Use dot voting for this by using round red dots so that each participant votes with 2 votes for example the idea he/she likes most of the action step he/she believes is durable in the next 2 weeks.
Make it actionable and use voting dots whenever you need to choose out of several options, way forward, steps, etc. For in-person meetings use sticky red dots and for online ones use red circles in virtual boards.

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2 **GET A DECIDER TO EACH MEETING**

A Decider is a person who will not be over-ruled independent of what is decided in that meeting. This role helps to get out of the "agree to disagree" situations to move forward and get things running. The Decider will talk always at the end, will take into consideration all voices, and will explain his/her "WHY" behind a decision.
The Decider must be agreed before/beginning of a meeting and that all participants agree with this role.

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3 **TIMEBOXING SHOULD FEEL TIGHT**

The timings should always feel a little bit too tight, the brain creates more ideas and solutions in a restricted period. Explain to the participants that more time or more discussions will not get to a better outcome.
Use a visual timer for an in-person meeting or a virtual time for an online one so that participants are aware of how much time is left. The visual timer link is in the "References" chapter.

Cheat-sheet - follow it to kill endless discussions

1

Discussions are visualized

Visualize and standardize the conversation on the walls or on a virtual board

2

All voices are heard

Structure the conversation using Round Robin or Together But Alone Methods

3

Timeboxing

Set the time for each activity and stop it when time is over

4

Use dot voting to decide

Make it actionable and use voting dots whenever you need to chose out of several options, way forward, steps etc

5

Get a Decider to each meeting

A Decider is a person who will not be over-ruled independent of what is decided in that meeting.

CUT OFF ENDLESS DISCUSSIONS NOW!

REVISE

Have you been inspired so far?

Get three sticky notes. On the first, write "What?". On the second, write "So What?". On the third, write "Now What?". On each card respectively, write a short answer to the following three questions:

- **Card #1: What?** *What is one new idea you have gotten from this guide?*
- **Card #2: So What?** *Why is this new idea important to you and the work you do?*
- **Card #3: Now What?** *What is one way you could use this idea when you have a meeting / come into endless discussions situations?*

Make more sticky notes until you write all the ideas you want to remember and stick them in a place where you will see them daily for a couple of weeks: your computer, mirror, refrigerator, dashboard, or office shelf. They are tangible reminders of what you have learned out of this guide and are easy to use when you need them.

WHAT'S NEXT?

How will you apply what you read here in this guide?

Now you arrived at the end of this guide, great that you read it!
What to do now? How will you apply what you read here in your daily work?
It's not only about reading but it's also about putting it into practice.

Try to do these things or just one/some of them at the beginning and you will see the difference to the meetings you are used to so far:

- Take 5 minutes and write on a paper all the things you want to try out of what you read in this guide. You can come back to pages that took your attention to remember the steps.
- Circle ONE thing you want to try in your next meeting and what is the expected benefit of it.
- Try it out in your next meeting and come back to your paper, check what worked and whatnot. Write down your reflections.
- Go back to the list of things you want to try out and circle another ONE thing you want to try next and repeat the steps above until you tried out all the things you wanted.
- Every time write down reflections, what can be improved next time, and revise them each time before the next meeting where you want to try things.
- Take the cheat sheet as a pdf or printout with you to each meeting and in case you want try out one thing during that meeting.
- Ask the participants how was it for them to find out what works and what does not in different setups, different participants, and different approaches you try.

It's only in your hands to get the things started and make a difference to cut off endless discussions. Start now!

GREAT RESOURCES

Inspiration and materials

GEORGE MILLER'S MAGICAL NUMBER OF IMMEDIATE MEMORY IN RETROSPECT" STUDY
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4486516/

*Visual Thinking statistics – from Wikipedia

BOOKS THAT HELP TO GET PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED

Bowman, Sharon (2009). *Training from the BACK of the Room*. San Francisco CA: Pfeiffer Company
Bowman, Sharon (2005). *The Ten-Minute Trainer*. San Francisco CA: Pfeiffer Company
Bowman, Sharon (2011). *Using Brain Science to Make Training Stick*. Bowperson Publishing
Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan (2020).*Lola – Live Online Learning Activities* (second edition)
Edmonson Amy (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley
Rosenberg Marshall (2015). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (Nonviolent Communication Guides)*. Puddledancer Press
Courtney Jonathan (2020). *The Workshopper Playbook*. AJ&Smart

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MATERIALS

Square Sticky Notes (2 different colors, preferably recycled paper)
Rectangular Sticky Notes (Yellow, preferably recycled paper)
1.5 large black markers per participant (Sharpies or Neuland markers work great). Why 1.5? It's better to bring more than you need!
2 different colors of sticky dots for voting (red and greed are most used, red for all, green for Decider)
A block of plain printer paper
Adhesive Whiteboard Roll (we use Leitz brand "Magic Paper")
Whiteboard markers
A Time Timer clock – scan the code below:

MEET
THE AUTHOR

THE GRATEFUL MOMENTS COME
TO ME WHEN I CAN HELP OTHERS
TO GROW.

ANDRA STEFANESCU
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For more than 16 years I have worked in IT supporting several teams to grow and get valued outcomes fast.

What I love to do is design and facilitate customed workshops to help teams unlock their hidden potential, find meaning in their work, align upon their strategy and vision, etc.

I believe in experiments, in trying out ideas with real users of future products before implementing them because this saves time, energy, and money.

I am a Certified Workshopper Master being able to design and facilitate world-class workshops for any type of team at any type of company.

Do you want to ask me anything about facilitation, methods to engage your participants?
Do you need support in learning how to short up development times?
Do you need help in figuring out what is your team/project strategy/direction?
Do you want to enhance your team collaboration, find new ways of working together?

Then book a FREE call with me to get to know each other or simply write me:
contact@asinnovativeminds.com

CONTACT US

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