Everything you always wanted to know about running Silent Meetings but were too afraid to ask

What are Silent Meetings? “Silent Meetings” are meetings where most of the time is spent working and not talking. When done correctly most of the meeting is spent silently working together. Is it 100% silent? Not really… A rule of thumb is a silent meeting is where more than 50% of the time is spent silently and the time that is not silent is spent on topics that can’t be resolved through comments in a doc (e.g. coordination problems, difficult conversations). Where did they start? I’m not sure… but my lineage goes back to Amazon via Square and now Twitter.

UPDATE: I expanded this post into a much more detailed guide called “Silent Meeting Manifesto v1”: https://medium.com/swlh/the-silent-meeting-manifesto-v1-189e9e3487eb Go there if you want to learn more.

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Stakeholder(s):

**Larger Work Groups:**
When should you use Silent Meetings? I’m not sure. I’m still learning but here is my rule of thumb:

- More than 10 people? Absolutely
- More than 6 people? Yes
- 4–6: Maybe
- <4: Maybe?

Vision

More productive meetings

Mission

To outline how to conduct silent meetings
1. Preparation

*Document the agenda in advance*

So how does one have a Silent Meeting? Before the meeting you’ll need a Google Doc with: An agenda that includes [the information required to address the following objectives] ... The “pre-read” — The subject matter to be discussed that fits in $\frac{1}{2}$–$\frac{2}{3}$ of the allotted time A good rule of thumb is it should take less than 10 minutes to read in a 30 minute meeting. An x-minute pre-read can grow to 2x if there are lots of comments, so 10 minutes becomes 10 very easily (especially if it’s a controversial topic or if it’s an area that is new to the commenters) Note 1: “pre-read” is a misnomer since this is read in the meeting. This is the case because most people don’t have time to pre-read — this also ensures everyone operates from the same base of information. (I believe this is a Jeff Bezos nuance) Note 2: Try to include any information needed in the pre-read itself (i.e., avoid using the Appendix, or clicking out to other docs as much as possible since there is leakage)

1.1. Outcomes

*Include a meeting outcome statement*

i.e., what do you want the meeting to achieve?

1.2. Process

*Outline the process to be used*

“Read doc 20 minutes silently and then discuss for 10”

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Facilitators**

**Very Large Work Groups:**

*Note 3: If a meeting is very large consider breaking up into sections to read-comment, I think optimal reading size per piece is ~20 mins. I’ve done 1 hour*

1.3. Facilitator

*Name the facilitator assigned to manage the process*
2. Conduct

Start the meeting

Stakeholder(s)

Facilitators: 
Note: The role of the Facilitator is super important because they need to sort through the comments and guide the discussion. There is such a thing as a skilled facilitator.

Then, start the meeting by:

2.1. Pre-Reading
   Pre-read for the amount of time determined

   Stakeholder(s):
   Work Group Participants

   Facilitators:
   Mention that attendees should “Read entire doc before commenting. Often times answers to questions are found later in doc.”

2.2. Commenting
   Comment in the document

   Stakeholder(s):
   Work Group Participants

2.3. Replies
   Read the comments and reply

   Stakeholder(s):
   Work Group Participants:
   Readers should then go back to the beginning after finishing to read the comments and reply.

2.4. Review & Follow-Up
   Review the comments as they occur and then identify topics that require in-person discussion

   While everyone is reading, the facilitator should: Review the comments as they occur and then identify topics that require in person discussion (e.g., identify controversial topics or areas of disagreement and call them out up front if possible)

   Stakeholder(s):
   Facilitators

2.5. Guidance
   Call an end to the silent reading when time is up and guide the discussions to the areas identified
2.6. Actions & Assignments

Identify next actions 5 minutes prior to end of meeting and have clear people assigned to each.