



Managing Crazy Meetings

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June 26, 2025

**Turn to the
person next to
you and give
your worst
story of dealing
with someone
at a meeting...**

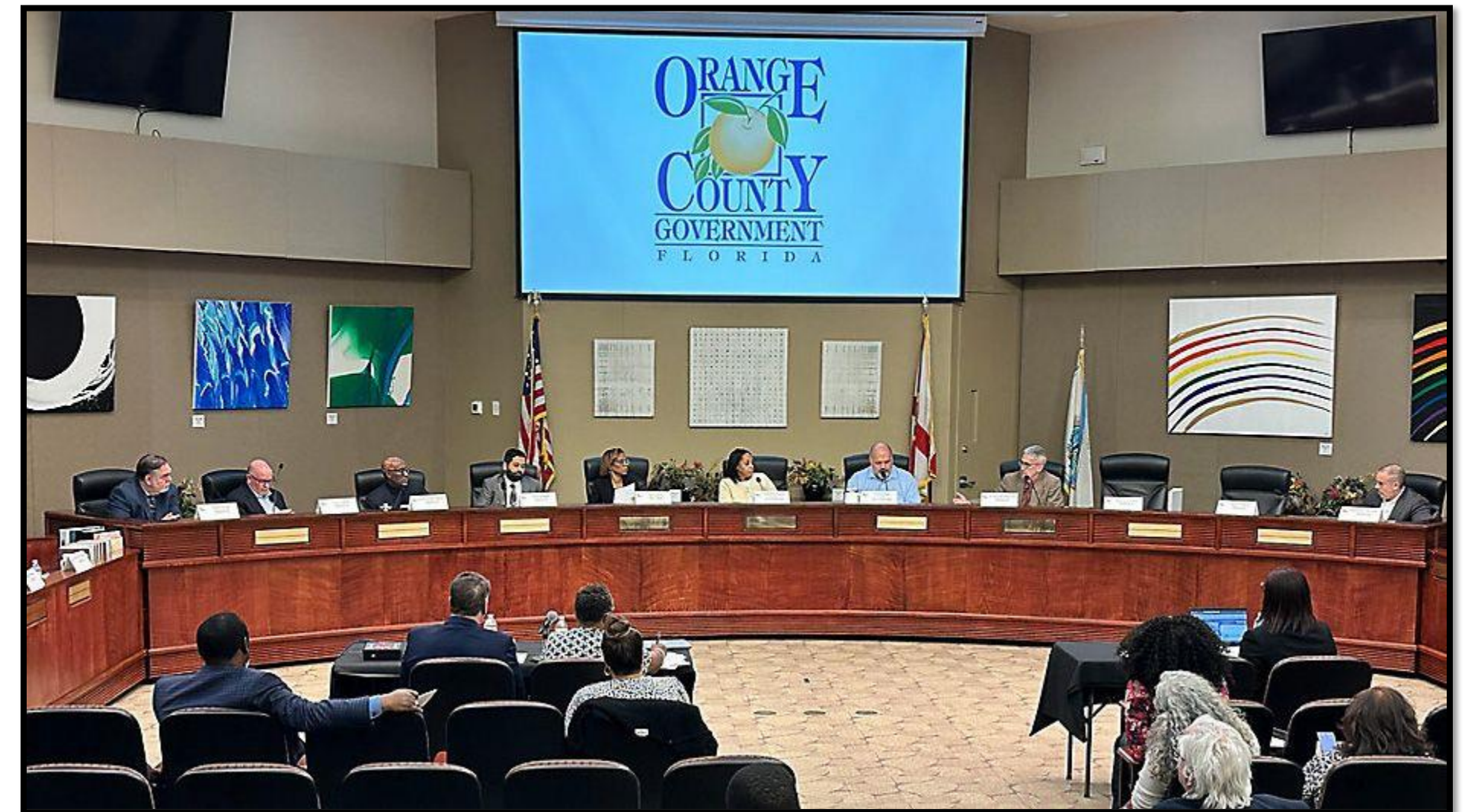
ICMA

INTERNATIONAL CITY/COUNTY
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

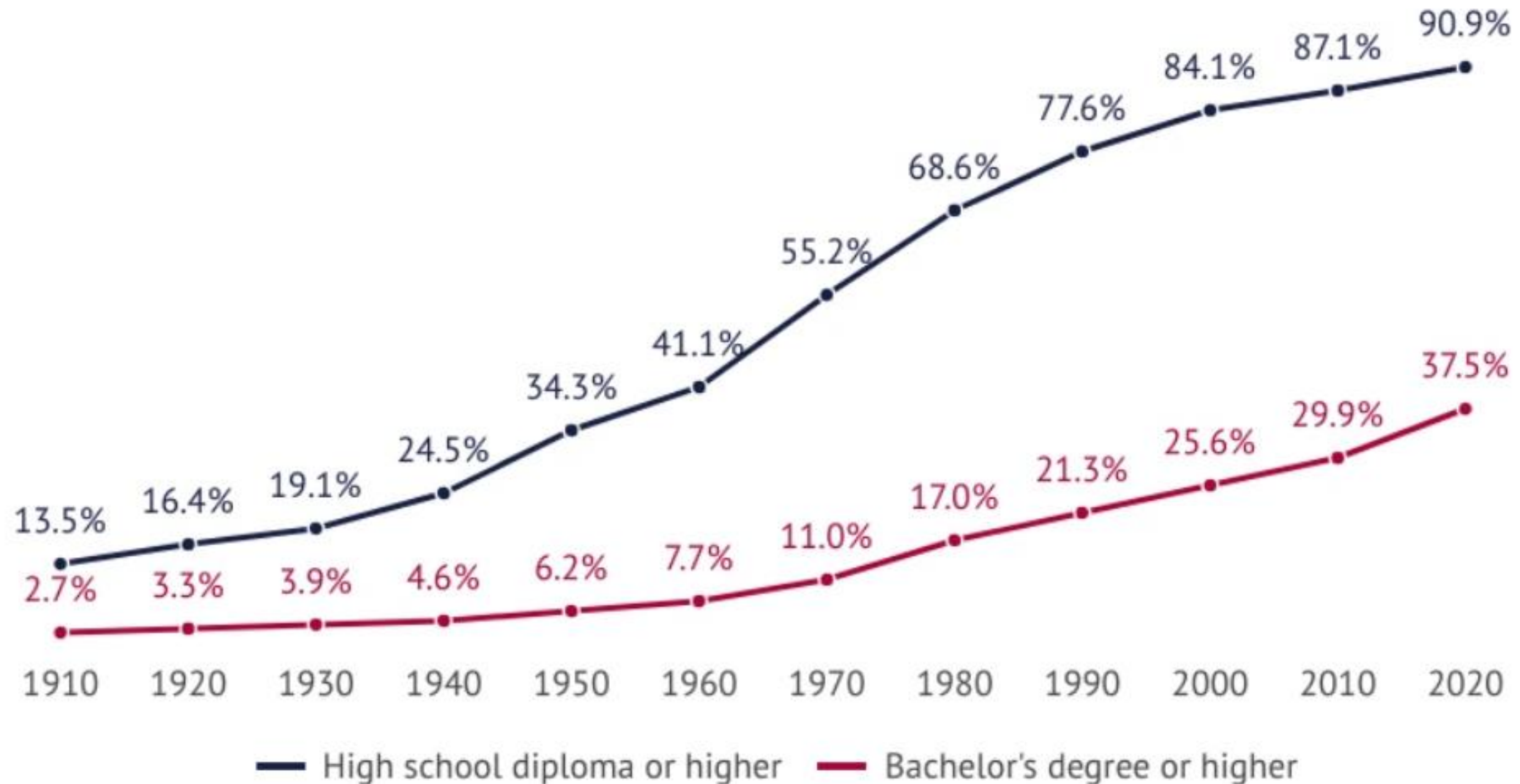


What People Say/Think About Meetings...

- “There’s a difference between being heard and being listened to...not just conceding to the most prominent voices in the room.”
- “When you are a community member, you’re sort of talking to straight faces who aren’t responsive. When you’re elected, you are hearing from people at the wrong moment in a project.”
- Meetings can be intimidating and uncomfortable if you don’t know the right way (or expected way) to communicate.”



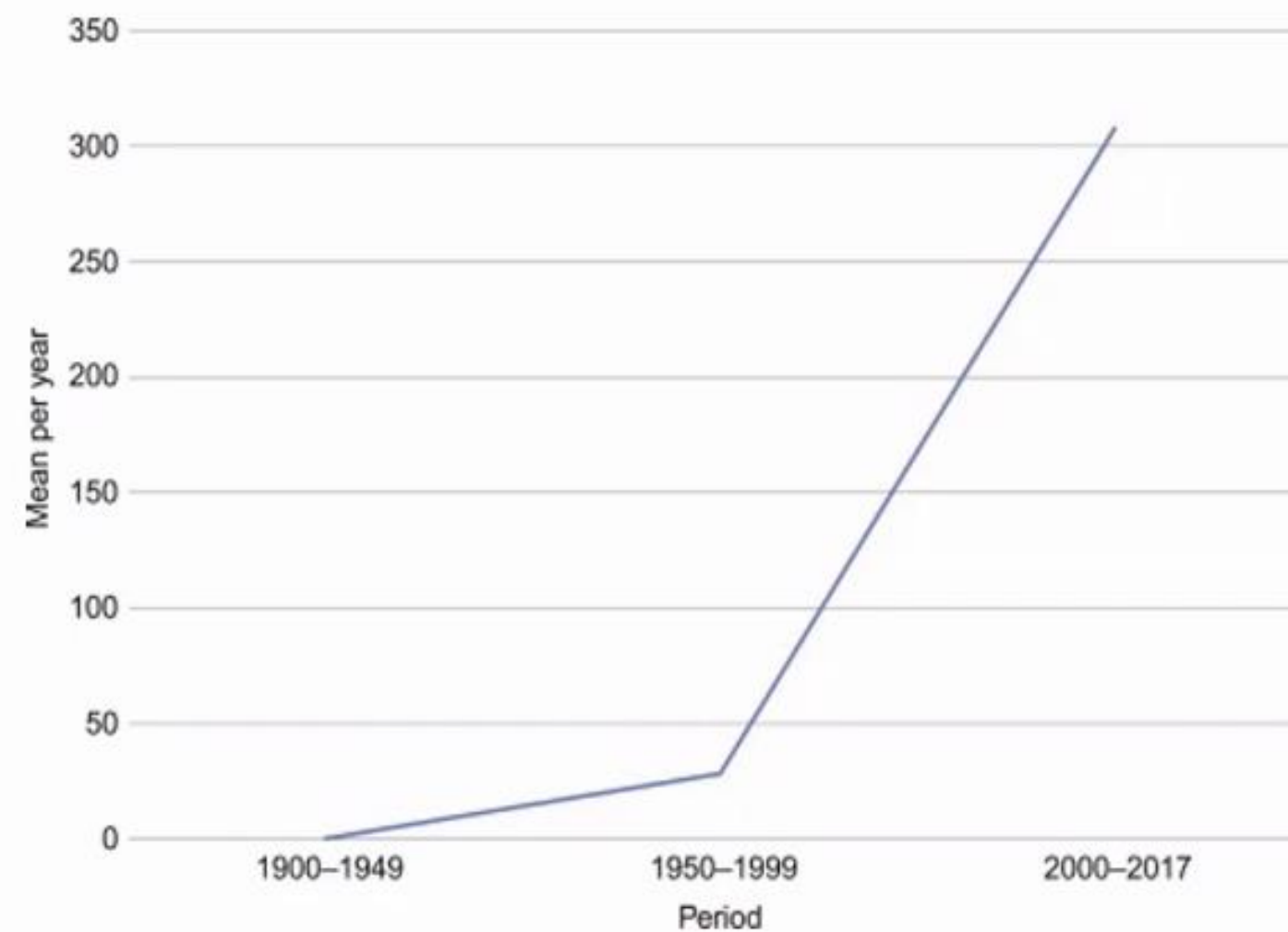
Education Attainment Among Americans*, Selected Years 1910-2020



Education Data Initiative source: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics

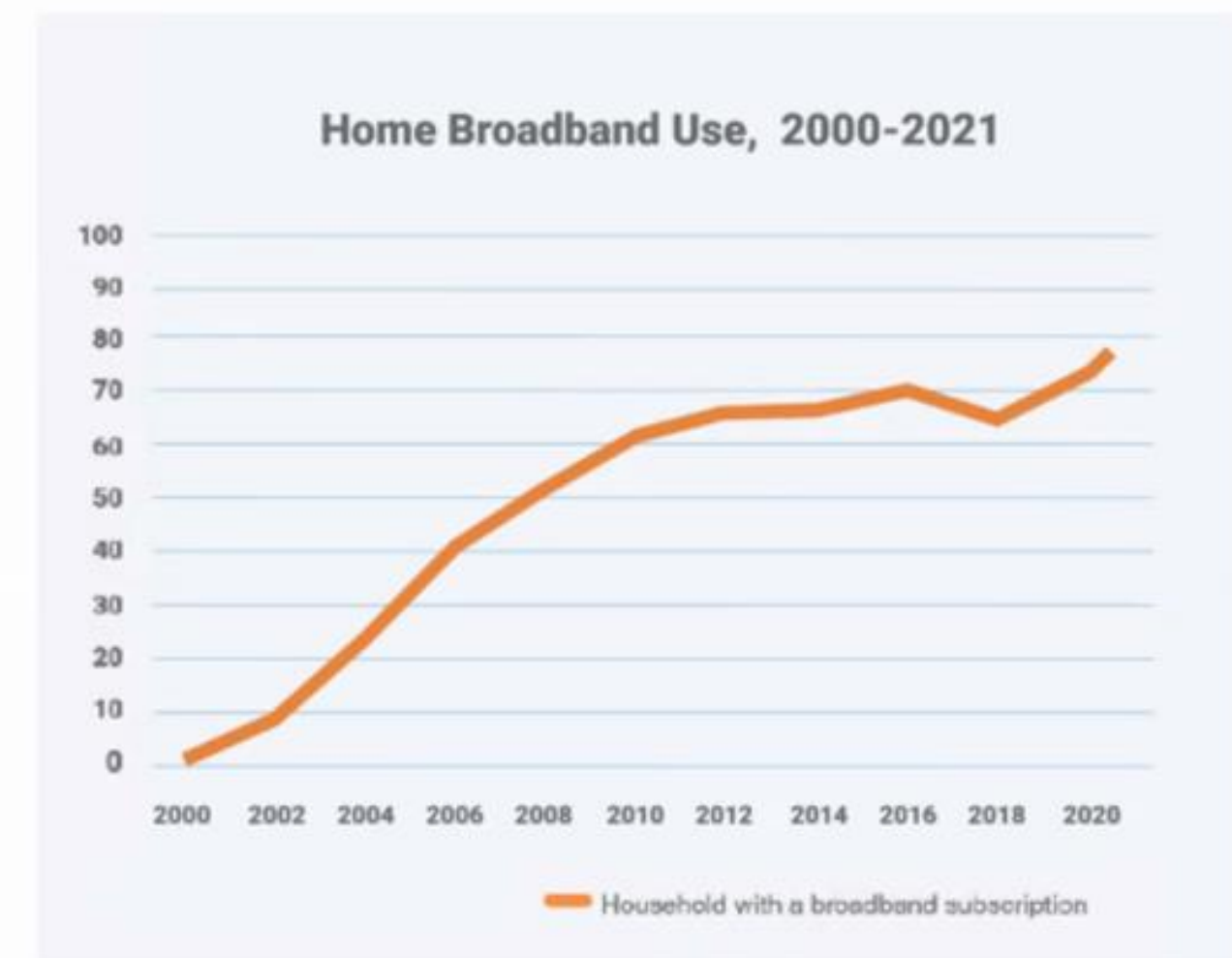
*Adults aged 25 years and older

Loneliness



<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0065260118300145>

Internet Use



<https://www.learning.com/blog/digital-divide-statistics/>



From: Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions

Daedalus. 2022;151(4):43-66. doi:10.1162/daed_a_01943

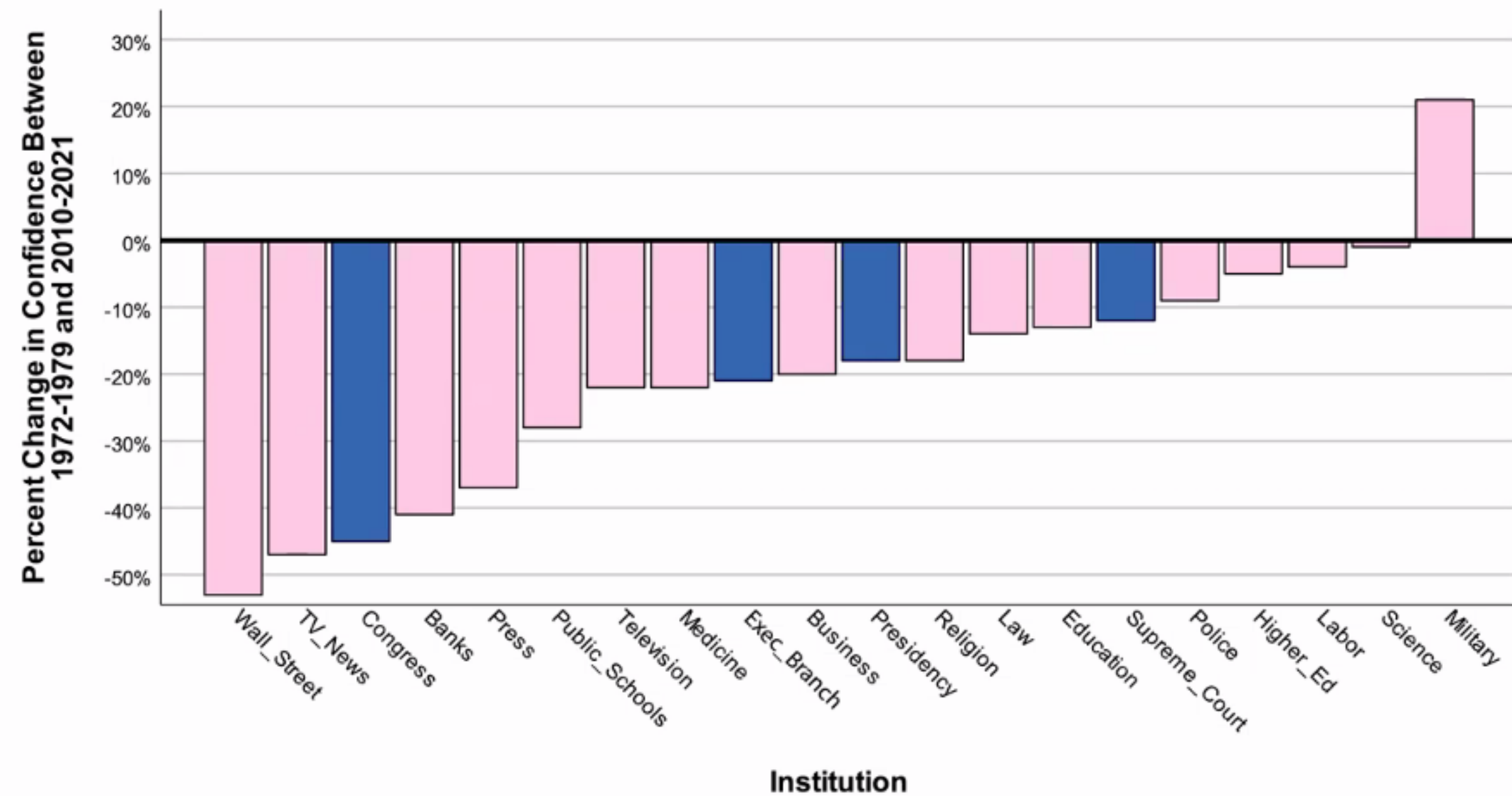


Figure Legend:

Changes in Confidence in Political and Nonpolitical Institutions between 1972–1979 and 2010–2021

**What Do I Tell Them When
They Ask, “What Do I When
_____ Happens?”**



When I Tell Them
They Ask "What Do We
Do When Things?"

The Goal...

**What Both Commissioners and the
Community Want**

**People want to feel heard,
have trust in and be treated
with fairness.**

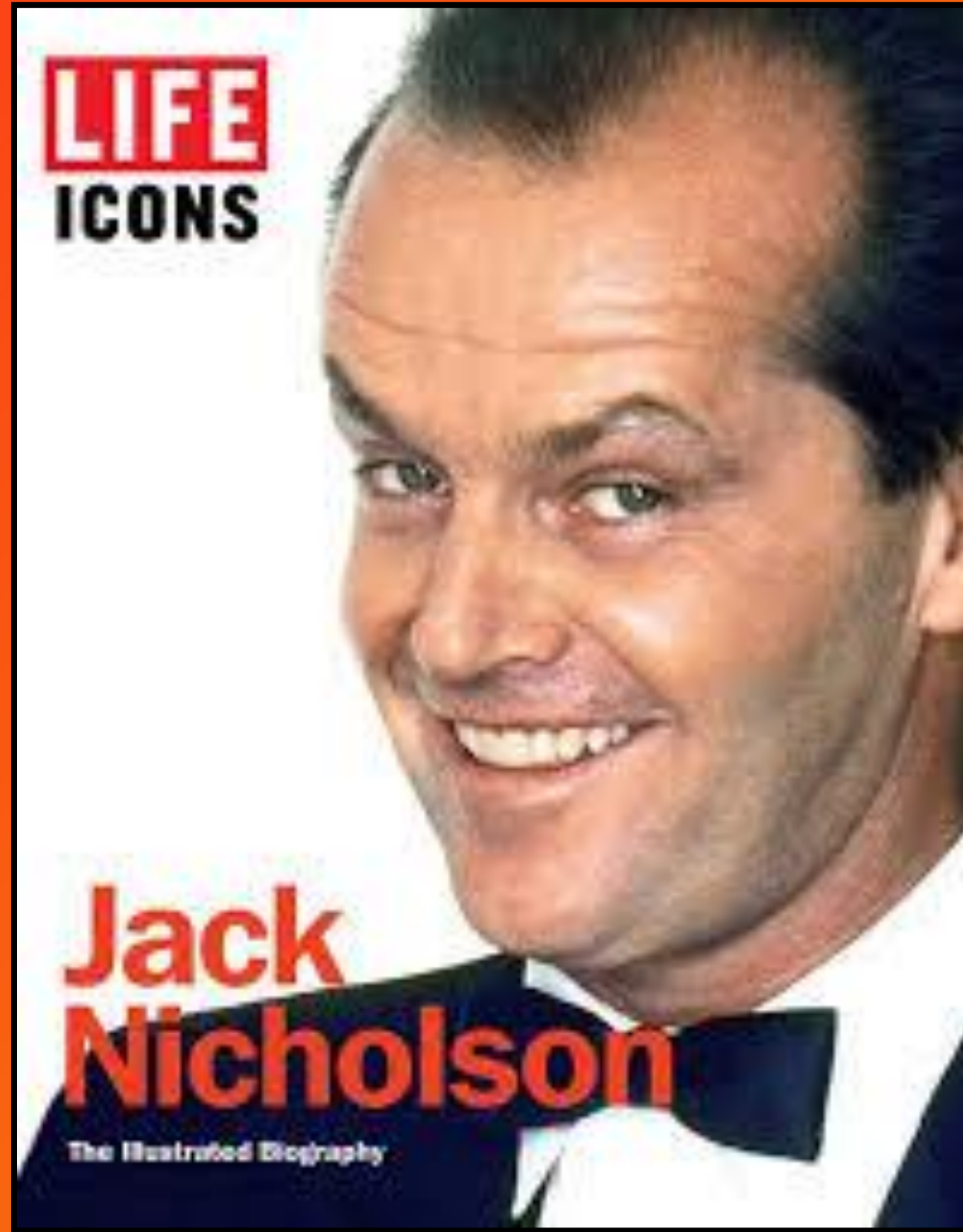


[Two Monkeys Were Paid Unequally: Excerpt from Frans de Waal's TED Talk](#)

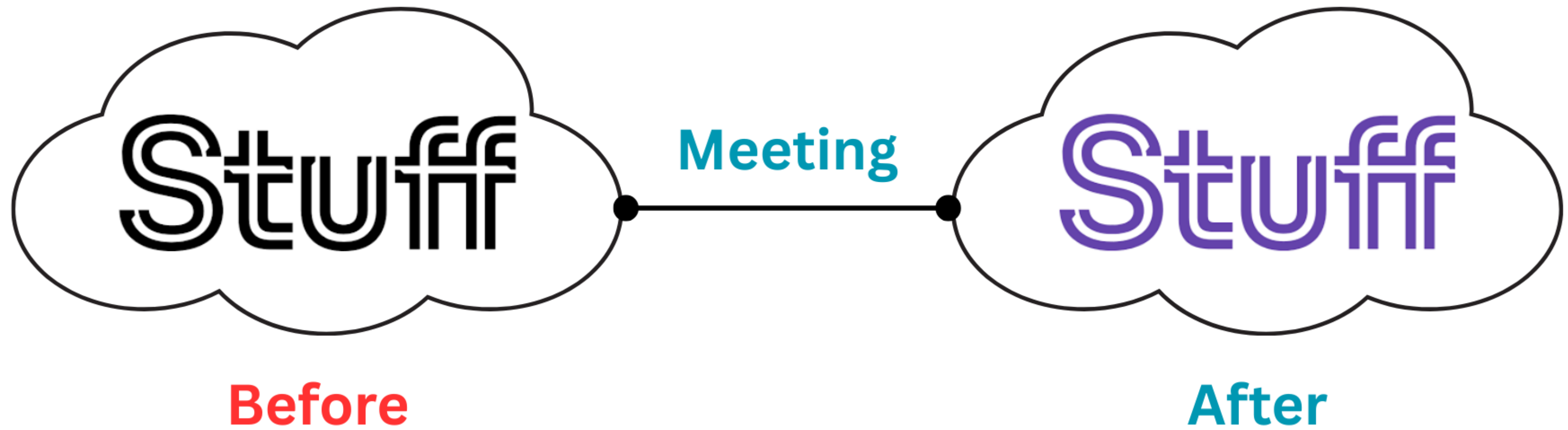
**What Does It
Take For People
To Feel/Be
Heard?**

**What Does It
Take For People
To Have Trust?**

**What Does It
Take For People
To Feel They Have
Been Treated
Fairly?**



Five Easy Pieces Diner Scene



**What Could Have
Happened in that
Situation Before to
Elevate This From
Happening...**

Before “the meeting”

Opportunities Before “the meeting” that help

Collectively as Commissioners Establish Rules, Processes and Expectations

- Clear description of process and expectations about roles
- Ground rules that are appropriate for the discussion

Before “the meeting”

Best Practices

- **Best Practice 1: Norming**

- Need to **know what the rules are even before you ever get in the chambers.**
- **Recommendation:** The Board once a year or so engage in Norming. (Going to the Doctors)

Norming is a way of talking about your rules (or acceptable norms that you establish for yourselves) that is inclusive, starts with what everyone wants (which is hopefully to have effective meetings), you discuss the structure you need to have in place to do that (and get Commissioners to agree).

- Commissioners agree and go on record about following the rules throughout the year.
- While a small thing, it makes it much harder to break your own rules (Of course, not impossible, but it's harder).



Before “the meeting”

Best Practice

Best Practice #2: Policies

- **Meeting Rules are written in policy**
- They should cover all the basics (attendance, quorum, voting, agenda rules, etc.)
 - Elevates the importance, shows consistency.
 - Amendments must be approved by a majority vote of the Board.
 - Agenda rules, or not having them, is a big source of problems.

Before “the meeting”

Some Rules and Policies That Help

1. Agenda Distribution. Rules should clearly say when agenda is to be distributed and it should be distributed early.

- No matter how big or small a county is, this is where problems happen and can be mitigated.

2. How items are placed on the agenda. Rules should clearly state how items get on the agenda. And that rule should be that a majority vote of the Board is required. Sounds easy.

- One of the most common (and predictable) reasons for commissioners to get upset at a meeting is when issues they wanted on the agenda didn't happen. Often times, a motion didn't happen.

3. Making Motions Mandatory is an important rule to enforce! Not simply good parliamentary procedure, it avoids big problems at future meetings:

Design of Agendas

Purposefully Design and Pre-Execute Agenda

- Decide, for each topic, what are you trying to achieve?
 - Decide who needs to be in the room? (initial exploration; initial input from public; weighing of options; council decision)
 - For each topic, design/use a process that suits and successfully accomplishes the goal
-
- **This also might be a great time to get thoughts, questions, & temperature (just remember not a representative sample)**

It is Important at this Point to Note...

Traditional County Commissioner Meetings,

- Three Minute Rule does not lend itself well to community members feeling heard
- Roberts Rules of Order do not lend themselves to community members feeling heard
- Space and Seating do not lend themselves to feeling heard or respected

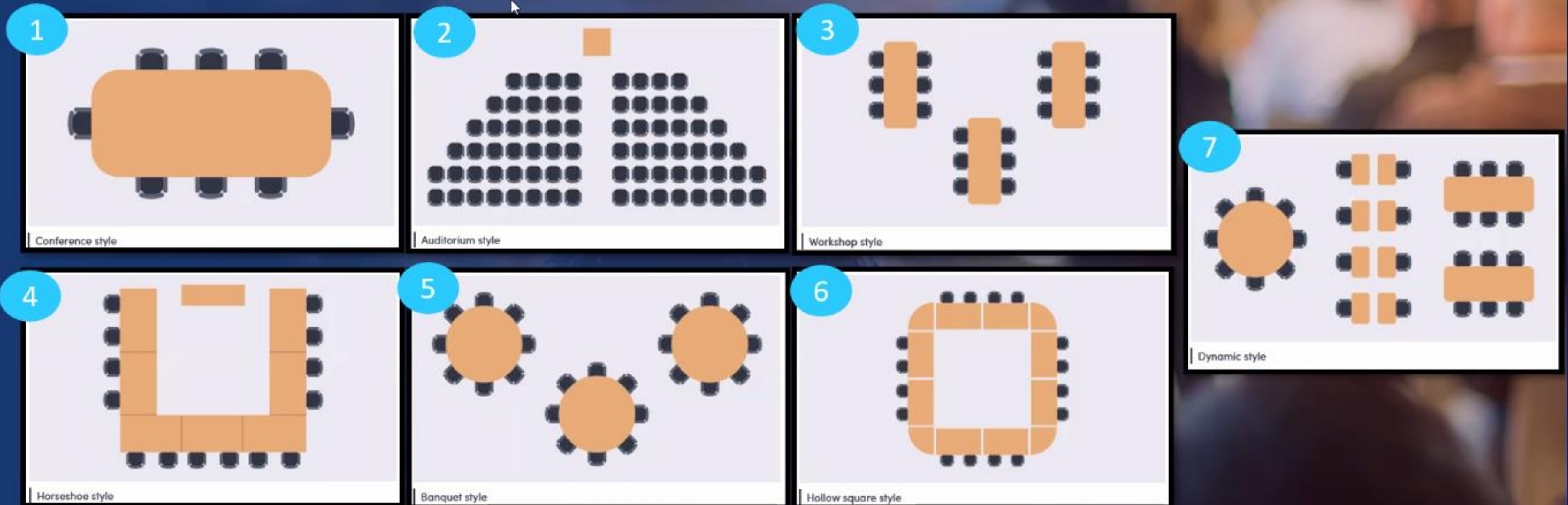
So, What Do You Do?

Well People Feel Heard when...

(and research suggests...)

- When they are face-to-face in a small group setting
- When they can see and/or know the input they are giving is displayed or written down
- When they encounter different views and info
- When there is some sort of response from officials/institutions

Which Meeting Layout Would You Choose, and Why?



Images from Envoy.com | Resource: <https://envoy.com/space-management/meeting-room-layouts>

Holding Different Types of Meetings

Meetings Are Changing...

- Started with study session
- Fishbowl format
- Some participants selected through civic lottery
- Youth speakers at meetings



Before “the meeting”

Opportunities Before “the meeting” that help

Small Group Deliberation

- Groups of 4-8
- Group agrees on ground rules
- Process for summarizing/sharing ideas (do it digitally –like online polling or texting-based platforms)

Sortition

- Can be used to select participants for study sessions, other meetings:
- Also used for citizen assemblies:
- 20 – 50 randomly selected people
- Meet 3-10 days over several months
- Hear testimony, learn together
- Issue recommendations
- Officials pledge to consider recommendations

Before “the meeting”

Opportunities Before “the meeting” that help

Outreach

Map networks of trust

Reach out to trusted people in the networks

Which people/networks are most affected by the issue/decision?

Different kinds of opportunities to participate

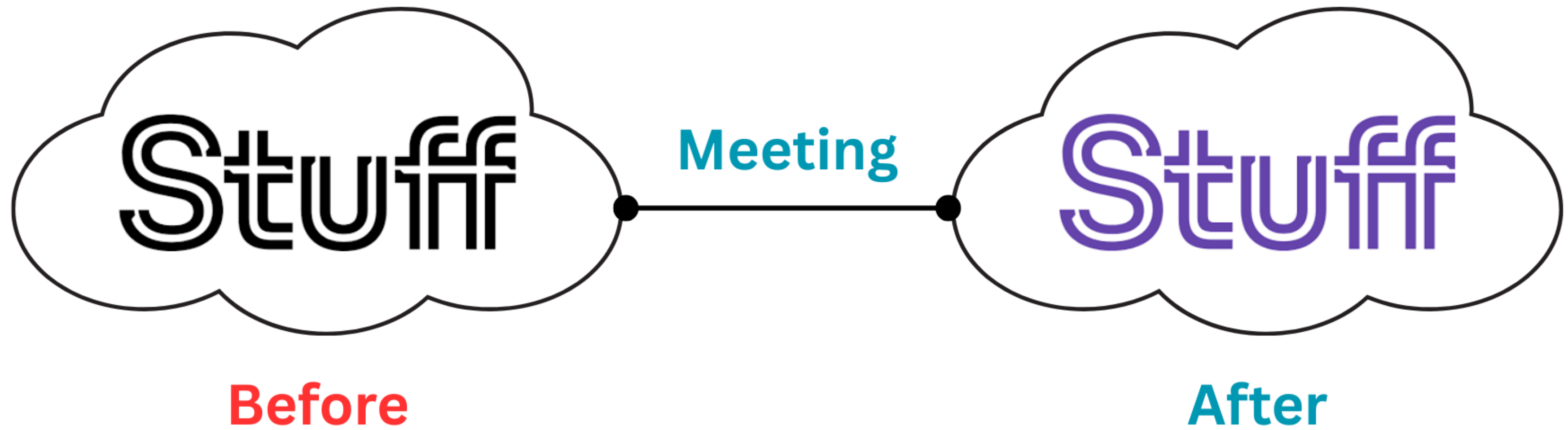
Before “the meeting”

Facilitation Techniques

- Get people to talk about the experience that informed their opinions – why do they care?
- Let the group develop, or at least approve, its own rules
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak
- Anticipate conflicts and be proactive – use dispute resolution processes before... saves from having to do it in public meetings
- Ask people to give feedback

Bob's Rules (Robert's kinder, gentler sibling)

- Respect other people, their ideas and opinions.
- Do not interrupt others.
- Try to say it in 25 words or less.
- Speak only to the topic at hand.
- No side conversations.
- When an idea has been stated previously and you agree, only speak when you have something new to add.
- Everyone gets a chance to share their opinion before someone speaks again.
- Speaking briefly and staying focused is everyone's responsibility. This will make the meeting run smoothly.
- These are everybody's rules and everyone is responsible for seeing that they are followed.



During “the meeting”

Even with the Planning

- Meetings themselves (whether they turn out good or bad) are almost identical meetings in terms of the place, the people involved, the structure, the content:
- The **same meeting agenda**, the **same issues**, **format**, **rules**, and yet meetings can go **drastically differently**. Right?
 - An “easy meeting” (and boy that’s a trap, with a lot of routine items on the agenda) **go terribly bad** and
 - A potentially “terrible meeting” (agenda loaded with controversial issues) **go great!**

During “the meeting”

Set The Tone (Utilizing Emotional Intelligence)

- Setting the mood, sets the stage for an effective commission meeting, because it:
 - Establishes a tone, Sets the energy, Maybe even assuages concerns of commissioners (who might walk in the room ready for battle)
 - If you miss the opportunity to set the mood, the mood will still be set, but it will be set by the issues on the agenda, or events or personalities in the moment.
- While the chairman has an opportunity to **set the “thermostat”** at the beginning of the meeting it is all the commissioner’s responsibility to keep it regulated
- If you wait until things go wrong, it is like setting the thermostat during a fire.

During “the meeting”

Set The Tone

- In fact, some might set a negative tone without even knowing or intending to do it.
- In the worst-case scenario:
 - The Gavel Is Banged
 - The Meeting Is Called to order
 - And the first message is telling people not to act out at the meeting (Like telling someone to “calm down”)

What Is A Small Change to Set The Tone

- One way to start a meeting- Like walking into a social setting and wanting to engage people.
- Find Commonalities - *Common Interests*

“Good afternoon everyone. As I call the meeting to order, let me thank you commissioners for all for you hard work we did together at the budget workshop this afternoon. Like this afternoon, we have a lot of important issues on tonight’s agenda that I am sure members of the community and commissioners feel strongly about. And I know we are all up to the task. But, if you’re like me you may need another cup of coffee. Mr. Administrator, please introduce item one...”

- You Just Set The Tone...
 - **Connected with the Board on a similar experience (budget workshop)**
 - **Let everyone know it is a team**
 - **Gave them permission and made it safe to have strong feelings**
 - **Told them that they would be heard (even if it meant another cup of coffee).**
- If there was a pressure release valve you just hit it.
- And you just made it **harder** for people to not play nice.

During “the meeting”

Perception of the Public

- Bang the gavel
- Announce to the room that he or she will be calling the meeting to order at precisely the appointed hour,
- That there are 347 speakers on the agenda
- That they plan to strictly enforce the speaker time limits
- And launch into the agenda. Right?

The Mood Is Set Unintentionally...

- Remember that split second when people decide how they are going to behave, that applies to the public as well.
- That missing the moment scenario emphasizes efficiency over empathy.
- It says, “yes we know you have a problem...but here’s how we plan to manage you tonight.”
 - How do you think people (already upset) react to being “managed”?

Public – Set the Tone

“On behalf of the Board, I want to thank you all for taking the time to be here tonight, clearly an important issue to many people, we have a big crowd and to be fair to everyone we have some time limits, but we will RESPECT everyone who wishes to speak.”

- **Set The Tone Of- Fairness and Respect.**

- Everyone wants it (and probably wouldn't be there if they felt like they had it).
- And notice, here's the **trick**, the subtlety, I didn't say “**You Need To Be Respectful**”. I have seen this happen a lot and it just upsets people more.
- **It is harder to be obnoxious to someone who is being fair and respectful to you.**
- **Easy to become emotional when someone tells you to “be respectful”... like telling someone to “calm down.”**



During “the meeting”

Separate the People From The Problem

1. Most People Don't Wake Up Looking For A Fight
 2. You Can't Fix Them Anyway
- Solving The Problem Becomes the Focus & Believe It Or Not... They (for the most part) Are Not The Problem

Be A Cop

- Vince - Role of Law Enforcement Officer needs to -
 - o Enforce the law, **we have rules, we all know the rules, and I enforce the rules**
 - o They need to be a Traffic Cop at times

During “the meeting”

Law Enforcer (Chairman)

- **Maybe more like “rule-reinforcer”**

- “What do I do when that happens?” ... is the wrong question (Too Late At That Point)
- “*Why* does it (disruptions) happen?” (and how can we avoid it happening in the first place?)

- There are 2 basic reasons people do this:

1. They feel the **Meeting is Not Theirs** - people are much less likely to interrupt their own meetings, right?
2. And they feel like Rules are **Not Fairly Administered** or “**There are favorites**”- More difficult for people to act out when they feel like they are being treated fairly

Once Again

1. Uphold a **fair set of rules** and administer those rules **equitably and consistently** among the commissioners/public. (if you are straightforward with commissioners then the public will be more comfortable with you enforcing the rules with them)

During “the meeting”

Like a traffic cop

- You are giving the signals and
- The motions are moving through you
- Reminding members that there is (or is not) a motion on the floor,
- To interpret, to clarify, and to occasionally re-state the motion (without being overbearing or dominating).
- Remembering the laws and the goal(s)

This action, serves two very important purposes:

1. This keeps your fellow commissioners from getting frustrated or confused on process and/or specifics of a motion.
2. This tactic not only provides clarity and avoids problems, but keeps the traffic moving and the meeting moving forward.

During “the meeting”

Disruptions, Interruptions, and Eruptions

- Yes, even if you’ve done everything right, good meetings can still go bad.
 - All it takes is one person, or an entire room of citizens, who want to be disruptive and hijack your meeting.
 - So, what does this look like? It could be:
 - Personal attacks against commissioners, staff, or other citizens
 - Waving inappropriate or obscene signs during the meeting
 - “Baiting” commissioners during public comment
 - Speaking for longer than the time limit
 - Interrupting during other items on the agenda



During “the meeting”

What To Do...

We all know that we can't control other people's behavior, but we can control our own and sometimes our behavior can make these issues better or worse.

- So first, pay attention to your (and fellow commissioners) **body language**
 - Citizens can easily see if you are being receptive (leaned in, arms relaxed) or if you are checked out (looking at your cell phone, eyes rolling, arms crossed)
 - Citizens sensing a Board is paying attention and genuinely engaged in the moment continues to set a mood of mutual respect
 - Leadership Modeling
 - Find Interests NOT Positions

During “the Meeting”

A Few More Tips

- A few other basic tips to “disarm” tense situations and reinforce the respect.
 - Always use proper titles (i.e. Mr., Ms., Doctor, Reverend)
 - Ask that citizens come to the podium (not scream from their sets) to be recognized (preferably with a system of speaker cards) – Funny little thing - people’s behavior change dramatically.
 - And don’t try to suppress their speech – just makes a bad situation worse.

During “the Meeting”

Don't Take the Bait

- And what is the single biggest mistake a commissioner makes – **they take the bait**.
 - Do not take the bait – do not engage. This is what they want, to goad you into responding.
 - **Now made it a conversation** or a dialogue and the cycle continues.
 - **Also, by taking the bait you put yourself on the spot**
 - Maybe you don't have the information you need to be able to respond and you might respond with inaccurate information – they would love that.
 - Remember **you are the deciders**.
 - **You can always agenda the issue if needed** and when you can consider the issue more broadly and not just in the interest of the loudest person.

During “the meeting”

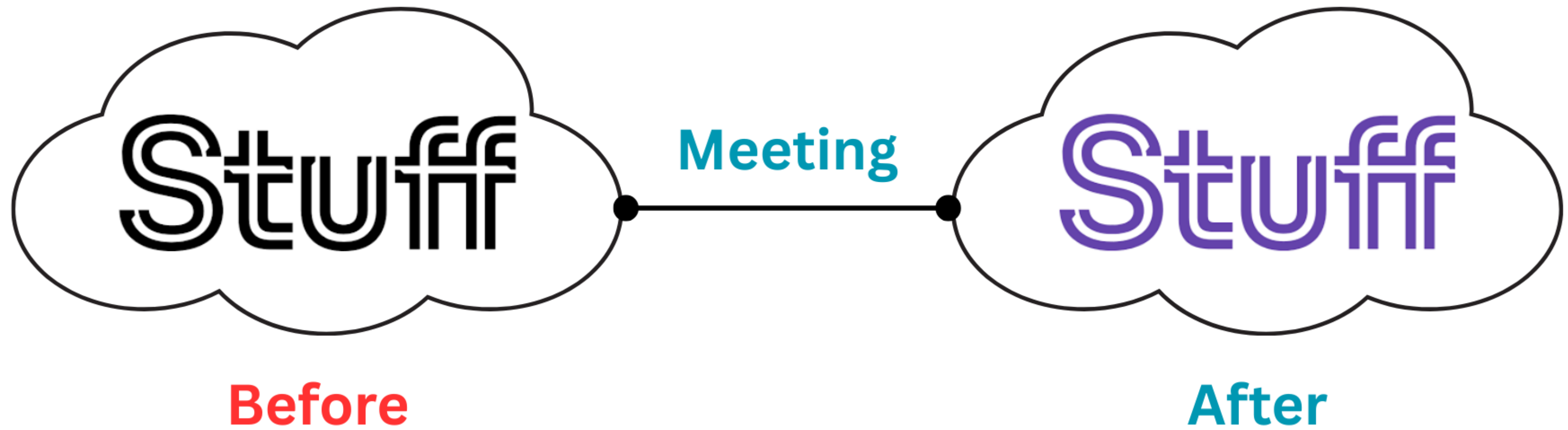
Don't Take The Bait

Sometimes a simple response is: *“I see that our Administrator is taking notes on your question. I trust that he/she will get back to you as soon as staff has had a chance to research the issue. Is that correct, Mr./Ms. Administrator?”* This will almost always suffice in the moment..

During “the meeting”

Habitual Offenders...

- Even one can make meetings **a lot more challenging...**
 - **Maintain order**
 - The most effective way (by far) to combat a disruptive commissioners/public is with a well-run meeting.
 - These tend to be personality types that thrive in chaos and disorder. So... order is their kryptonite.
 - **Next, Treat them with respect**
 - Give them their time (according to your rules) and let them talk, get it out of their system
 - They tend not to have a great long-term plan, tend to flame out, unless you give them fuel
 - **Finally, Don't let them bait you** or your colleagues into public spats
 - Thank them
 - Agenda their issues if the Board wants to talk about it with all the information or if the Board has heard the same issue or complaint – just stay consistent. “Thank you, the Board has already considered this issue”.
 - **If they spin out of control, take a break or adjourn the meeting**



After “the meeting”

A Few Best Practices

- Reflection
- Follow Up
- Begin Planning the Next Agenda
- Let People Rate Meetings – Through a tool like a Scorecard
- Collect data on community perception (take the temperature)

Questions?

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