

FRICTION

SYSTEMIC

Design Meetings with Emotions in Mind

The Experiment: Run One Meeting Differently

Duration: One week

Time required: 15 minutes of preparation, 5 minutes at the start of the meeting, 10 minutes to debrief afterward

Goal: Run one meeting differently, paying close attention to what changes and drawing conclusions from that.

Step One: Choose the Meeting

Pick one recurring meeting you own or co-own, ideally one that has developed a default, unremarkable opening. A team standup, a weekly sync, a project check-in. Something ordinary enough that people have stopped noticing how it begins.

Step Two: Design the Opening

Spend 15 minutes before the meeting answering two questions:

- What do I want people to feel or think in the first five minutes, not about the agenda, but about this gathering and the people in it?

- What is one specific thing I can do in the first five minutes to produce that?

The design does not need to be elaborate. Some of the most effective openings are simply a single well-chosen question asked slowly and genuinely. Others involve naming the purpose of the gathering with unusual specificity, not “we’re here to discuss the project” but, “we’re here to make one decision today and I want us to leave aligned on it.” Others involve acknowledging something true about the moment: the pressure the team is under, a win worth naming, a transition underway.

What matters is that it is intentional, not improvised. You are choosing what the first signal will be. Some options to consider:

- A check-in question—something specific enough to require a real answer. Not “how is everyone?” but “what is one word for how you are arriving today?” or “what is some-thing that happened this week that is worth naming before we get into the work?”
- An explicit statement of purpose—what this meeting is for, what it is not for, and what you need from the people in the room.
- A brief acknowledgment—of the context everyone is operating in, the stakes of what you are deciding, or the progress the team has made.
- A transition ritual—something consistent and brief that signals the group has shifted from wherever they came from into this shared space.

Step Three: Run It and Notice

During the meeting, pay attention to two things:

- When did people arrive, not physically, but attentionally? When did you feel the room engage?
- Did the opening produce the condition you designed for? How?

You do not need to share these observations with the group during the meeting. Just notice.

Step Four: Debrief

Immediately after the meeting—within an hour—write a short debrief answering the following:

- What did I design for, and did the opening deliver it?
- What did I notice about the energy or quality of the meeting compared to the default version?
- What would I keep, change, or try differently next time?

If you can, ask one person who was in the meeting what they noticed about how it began. You do not need to explain that you designed it. Just ask: “How did this meeting feel to you compared to usual?” The gap between your design intent and their experience is where the most useful information lives.

Pay particular attention to the moment the room shifts. In a well-opened meeting, that moment often comes earlier than expected, sometimes within the first 60 seconds. In a poorly opened one, it may never come at all, which is its own finding worth sitting with.

What do you notice becomes possible? Honest disagreement. A question someone had been holding. A quieter voice that rarely joins in. What you build over time besides just better meetings, it is a team that has learned, through repeated experience, that showing up fully is worth it.