



The Create Awesome Meetings Podcast – with Gord Sheppard Episode 002 – ‘How Students Can Create Awesome Meetings’

Show notes at

<http://createawesomemeetings.com/how-students-can-create-awesome-meetings/>

Transcript

Man: Are you a student? Do you have to work in groups to get your next assignment done just so you can graduate? Are those working groups going well, or are they not going well? Well if you want them to go great you're in the place. This is the Create Awesome Meetings podcast.

Woman: Welcome to the Create Awesome Meetings Podcast where you'll get tips and inspiration to help you make your next meeting more productive and profitable. And now here's your host, Gord Sheppard.

Gord: Welcome to the Create Awesome Meetings podcast; my name is Gord Sheppard. It's great to have you here today. Thanks for taking time out from your busy schedule to join me to get more tips, inspiration and information that's gonna help you make your next meeting fantastic and in this case, today if you're a student or somebody who helps students to work in groups, this podcast is designed specifically for you because I'm gonna have a guest on today. Her name is Nicole Blomme and Nicole amongst all of her other great accomplishments survived more than 30 group meetings throughout her Bachelor of Commerce degree, and she really did them well. And she's gonna come on today to offer all of the things that she did to get through. Things like being really truly flexible with each other when you're doing these group assignments. How to deal with strong personalities.

And, in fact, she even created a group expectations agreement that you can get at the end of the show in the show notes to take into your next group meeting that includes amongst other things a firing clause because sometimes people don't make it through the meeting, right? They're gonna maybe lose marks or get kicked out of your group and it gives you a way to formally kind of deal with that type of situation. I don't wanna take out too much more time in this introduction because I wanna get right to it so here's this terrific interview with Nicole Blomme. Hello, Nicole Blomme, welcome to the show.

Nicole: Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.



Gord: It's great to have you on. I've been working a little bit with you. I know through some of the work that you do in social media. Had a chance to get to know you a little bit along the way and what I've I really appreciated about working with you is your perspective on student meetings as sort of a big area that has to be dealt with and I really, really appreciate. And I know that's what we're gonna be getting into today to help as many students that might be listening to this or maybe even their parents who might be listening to this today. And we're gonna try and give them tips and information that they can use and maybe a few horror stories along the way that can be corrected to help them get better at their next meeting, which is what we're trying to do. But before we do that take a moment here just to introduce yourself to our audience and let them know a little bit about yourself. Go ahead.

Nicole: All right, my name is Nicole Blomme and I graduated from the Bachelor of Commerce Program at MacEwan University in April of 2015. Since then, I've started my own social media company, and I've also been working full time so I've had a lot of experience with work meetings, but I also had a ton of experience with group projects while I was in school. I participated in over 30 group projects and acted as a team lead on over 20 of those, so I definitely have some experience with good group projects and some horror stories like work with [inaudible 00:03:09]. And in my spare time, I really enjoy helping people, which is actually why I'm part of the Big Brother, Big Sister program. Something that I really enjoy giving back to the community with.

Gord: When I hear this from you, there's probably not a moment in your day whether you're volunteering or working or maybe whatever else you do where you're almost not involved in a meeting. Is that about right?

Nicole: I agree. I remember talking with you once and you said, "Our life is made up of meetings." So we're constantly interacting with people whether it's a formal meeting or an informal meeting, so I think that's definitely an accurate thing to say.

Gord: It's fun to sort of chat with you basically because you're so close to your post-secondary years. What are some of the big problems that students run into? You were in those 30 group projects. What are some of the big problems that students are running into in meetings in your opinion?

Nicole: I think a lot of it came from just how busy students were. I know that in B-Comm program almost every class in your third, fourth year has a group project. So



students are managing multiple group projects. They're managing work potentially, extracurricular activities, any other commitments so time is definitely valuable for a student, so I learned the importance of flexibility when working on group projects and really being accommodating to the different schedules. I think, in general, there's always the potential to have team conflict as well, so when you're working on group projects in school, there's gonna be different personalities that you're dealing with. That was definitely something I encountered, especially during my fourth year of university. And then I think just really managing time as well so like I said, students are busy and sometimes it's difficult for them to prioritize what would be most important, which can lead to conflicts and I'm stuck with meetings.

Gord: So many of these groups, and I've done a couple degrees as well, so many these groups get thrown together like maybe your teacher tells you to get together or you got to form up. And especially, I know when I've been on those groups that when it's more than two like it's four, five people, it's always tough to get everybody to be reliable in those situations.

Nicole: It definitely is. I think the best groups I had where when I had built relationships with people from a different class, and I was able to pair up with them for the project. But I know in my fourth year I had one professor who used an online tool where you just had to go put your name in a group. That was really interesting because you had to do that by the second class, and you didn't necessarily have a chance to get to know the people that signed up in your group so you were going in blind essentially.

Gord: I know you're a workhorse so again when we look at all those different personalities that come into meetings, some people sort of do a lot and some people don't do as much. Where did you find yourself if you had the name the characters in those meetings? Who would you say was in them and what were you specifically?

Nicole: Well, typically, I enjoy leadership positions, so I often took on the team lead role in group meetings. And I'm a perfectionist, so I was often the one that was ensuring that deadlines were set and that they were met and that people were completing their part to the expectations that we had established as a group. I was the one booking meeting rooms. I was the one setting meeting agendas. I think sometimes I definitely did experience frustration when I was working with people who didn't place the same amount of importance on the project. That was something that I learned to handle a little bit better especially during my fourth year. But at the beginning of my degree, it was definitely difficult to find a way to meet people in the



middle when I was at one end wanting everything to be perfect and then there were others that maybe it was not the top of their priority list.

Gord: You mentioned that you learned in your fourth year of your studies to handle it a little bit better. Expand on that for me for a second so the audience can learn some of the techniques that you picked up or things that you learned to cope better with meetings.

Nicole: I think I really learned the importance of flexibility. Like I was saying, students are busy so that's important. I learned that everyone has different schedules and work schedules and extracurricular activities schedule so finding the time to meet can be a little bit tricky. I remember during my first, second year I would be upset if people weren't able to attend the meeting or if they had to duck out a few minutes early. But during my last year, I started to realize that you need to accommodate sometimes. Oftentimes if there was someone who couldn't attend, we would just say, "Okay, that's okay. We're gonna send you the meeting minutes afterwards for you to review. This is what you need to have done by this date." We try to be a little bit more accommodating and flexible, and I never had a problem to be honest. Everyone completed their work when they were given the assignment to actually complete it by a certain date.

I think that's just because they appreciate the flexibility, so I really learned the importance of that during my last year. I also learned the importance of really just building on the strength of your team members and helping each other to grow. I know during my first I really disliked presenting. I would play rock paper scissors with my group members to avoid having to present. And by my fourth year, I actually was really confident presenting, and I think that's because I was able to learn from the people in my group that were stronger presenters, and they were able to learn some things from me as well. So it's building on the strength of your team members, and I think that's something that I definitely learn and that transferred really well into my work after graduation too.

Gord: How would you say it's transferred into your work?

Nicole: I think just understanding that when you're in a work environment...like I said, I have my own social media marketing company so my clients they may not be the best with social media. They may not have that expertise so they hire me as an expert in that area, but then they bring things to the table as well. So with my clients, it works and it also works in a general work day. So with different projects some



people will have different levels of expertise with the topic at hand and being able to acknowledge that and appreciate the expertise that people bring to the table leads to a more effective team environment overall.

Gord: It sounds like you've gotten very wise very quickly in your young life.

Nicole: Well, thank you for saying that.

Gord: Some of that wisdom I know having worked in corporate settings for example. Some people never figure that stuff out and the impatience and those things come up and meeting disasters happen at any time. But I know as we focus on helping the students to get into taking on some of these skills after they listened to this podcast and use anything in the show notes that they can take forward, let's just break it down for a second and go back and just imagine that you're being put into a group of let's say four or five people. This is not uncommon especially for big projects at the end of degrees and this kind of stuff.

If you're getting put in that in the beginning, let's just imagine that you were counseling someone or actually being a mentor to someone else's meeting, and they're in that beginning moment. Let's take them through a few steps that you would recommend right off the bat that's very practical that they can think about. I'll throw in one right away. I know, in my work, I always go for rapport. I think that's so important to take a few minutes at minimum in the first 15, 20 minutes. It's funny because it's not on topic. So often in student meetings, I remember people would jump to wanting to get stuff done, but if we didn't know each other at all, then I found things got more impatient more quickly and this kind of thing. I know that in every meeting that I'm in these days I spend some time so that people can put a human face on each other and, again, really empathize because you don't know what people's circumstances are in a given situation. I get that set up initially so that would be certainly one of my recommendations. What do you think for sort of practical steps if you're helping somebody to guide them in their group for getting ready to set up a great meeting?

Nicole: I think during my third year, I had a really great professor who took the first class when we got into groups and had us take that class to develop team expectations and get to know each other. And that's something that I applied moving forward in the rest of the group projects that I did. I think expectations are really important, and it should be related to work. It should be related to commitment to the group as well as the project, but it also should be related to how you're treating one



another as well. Showing up to meetings, for example, may not seem like a huge deal but if you're not showing up to the meeting, you're not getting the work done that needs to be done, and it may also be disrespectful to some of your team members. I think setting expectations with your team is really important, and those expectations are gonna vary based on the project and based on how many people are in your team. But setting those expectations and taking time to do that before you actually jump into solving the issue at hand or working on a project is important.

Gord: Some people are actually pretty uncomfortable with actually saying expectations out loud. Is there a practical way that you would help someone to...Let's say somebody was a quite type of personality, and they had to state their expectations, what do you think is the best way for them to get their expectations into the situation?

Nicole: It's difficult during the first meeting because you may not know who the team lead is gonna be, and it's difficult when you don't have a meeting facilitator, a meeting leader because the meeting leader is responsible for really bringing those introverts into the conversation. But I think the best strategy that you can use is, even though the leader may not have been formally identified, chances are someone's gonna lead that discussion. So if you're leading that discussion, give everyone a chance to identify what they feel would help them succeed in the project and what their expectations would be. You can ask open-ended questions such as what was the worst group meeting that you are ever a part of? What made it so bad? What was the best group meeting you were ever a part of? What made it so great? That can be a good way to pull out some of the insights and information that those more introverted individuals may have to say.

Gord: As opposed to being in a formal work setting where you have a boss and you're getting paid, the student group, you're saying, there might be a natural leader in the group who emerges as the natural leader and then everyone else can get in line and play their role in the group. Is that what you mean?

Nicole: Yeah, exactly and that's actually what I would say is after expectations it's really taking the time to get to know each other so during my group projects we would often talk about what our biggest strengths was. Some people are great at presenting. We would let them shine and give them a larger part of the presentation. Some people love grammar and spelling, so they would be responsible for editing the paper. Some people enjoy leading so we would let them facilitate their group meetings. And like I said, that often was me and it was something that my team just



thought that I enjoyed being in the leadership role. I'm a very organized person, and I remember during my fourth year a lot of the people I had worked with in the past wanted to take classes with me to be in my group because they said they appreciated the organization and the structure I provided because it kept them on track.

Gord: Organization and structure so, so important and isn't it lucky that they had you around because not everyone has that as their natural skill set. And the way you're talking, it sounds like 30 meetings and all your meetings were kind of Shangri-La, but I'm gonna guess that there might have been a few rocky ones along the way. Do you have any, without naming names, stories that you might be able to share that we can learn from?

Nicole: Yeah, I think probably the worst experience I had would've been in my last year of university, and it was a very group intensive class. There's a lot of group projects and one of the individuals that was in my group I had previous encounters with, and I knew that he could be a little bit difficult to work with. Knowing this about him, I expected this, and I had prepared myself. But I remember after our first presentation, we got great feedback from our professor, and she asked if she could use it as an example to tell the class what to do. That was really great for us and we were really excited about it.

Following that, she gave us time to discuss with our group where we were going in the semester. And during this time, the group member turned to another member in my group and started attacking her saying that it was disrespectful how she was unable to come to our first group meeting although she had actually completed her part of the assignment. So he just started attacking her, and it wasn't a very good environment. I knew that we had about four more group projects to complete together that semester so I knew it was really important to try and nip that behavior early on so that we were able to move forward and be productive. But that was definitely something that did add some tension to our group for the entire semester. That was probably my worst experience.

Gord: In terms of dealing with the tension, did you confront that person openly in the group? Did you wait to go one on one outside of the room? Did you work with the teacher? What was the way to deal with that situation?

Nicole: What I did is I just try to stick to the facts to be honest. I almost mediated it and like I said, I had had experience dealing with this individual. The other group members were kind of shocked when this outburst had happened. I just stepped in



they started mediating it and I said, "I can understand why you're concerned about this, and you don't want it to be a habit where we don't have this individual showing up for meetings. But they did have a legitimate reason, and they did complete the work that was assigned, and we just got praised by our professor for a job well done." I tried to make it very positive. I focused on the fact and then I said, "How can we move forward?" We were able to move forward. It was a little bit tense just because of what had happened and the personality conflicts, but we did very well on the class, and we did very well on all of the projects. So in the end, we were able to move forward with it.

Gord: I wish we could create a postcard to distribute right now and all you need to put is your words on there, "stick to the facts." That is incredibly valuable the way that you stated that so concisely. In terms of the things that we're gonna be putting into the resources at the end of this one, definitely, stick to the facts. Critical, critical, critical because what it does is it takes the emotion out of the situation and it really just does name the tasks that need to be done.

Nicole: That's just it. It would be very easy to turn any issue whether it's in a school group project or a work issue into a personal argument but the reality is everything needs to stay professional and focus on issues and that was one of the guiding principles I used when I was facilitating group meetings while in school. Like I said, students are busy, stress levels are high. Sometimes you're not sleeping much, and you're running on caffeine so there's definitely the chance to have those outburst happen. But if you just stick to the facts then you make it very project-focused and issue-focused, then you're gonna have more productive meetings.

Gord: So I'm hearing stick to the facts, know your role, to summarize some of the things we've been talking about. Are there other things that you think you'd wanna pass along to students as they get set up for their next group meeting?

Nicole: I think having an agenda for every meeting is really important and having an agenda with actionable items. When I was in school, especially during my first couple of years, I remember leading group meetings feeling so frustrated because I would spend an hour or two in the meeting, and I would leave, and I would feel like nothing was accomplished. We would talk about what we did on our weekend or we would talk about what we're doing that evening, but we wouldn't necessarily talk about the project. So it, ultimately, led to us having to have more meetings rather than having fewer meetings that were productive. Having an agenda with actionable items and at the end every point saying, "Who's doing this? Who's doing this?" I



found really helped in third, fourth year. Dividing up if it was a paper, for example, we would say, "Okay, we need 20 secondary resources. Each of us is gonna find four by this date, and this is how we're gonna communicate the resources we found to each other." So being really specific with the actions was something that was really helpful, and I think that in group projects there should always be an agenda. Whether it's a small group project or a large group project, I think agendas just help move everything along in a smooth and effective way.

Gord: That's a great, great suggestion that students, I think any student can pick up on and put into action right away. You mentioned communication. What was your favorite way of, when you're in student groups, of communicating with each other?

Nicole: We personally used Facebook a lot of the time. You could create a Facebook group. It was a private group. Sometimes some of the individuals preferred Google Drive, but the thing that we found tricky about that is that it wasn't compatible with an iPad, for example, so some individuals in our group didn't have access to a computer during our meetings so Google Drive wasn't overly effective. Facebook, we all regularly text. We all had the app on our phones so it was really good in terms of the responsiveness, which is really often really important when you're having a bunch of different schedules. I found that Facebook groups work really well. I have used Google Docs and Google Drive in the past as well, which worked okay but my preference was definitely Facebook.

Gord: What's going on in the Facebook group in a practical manner that you think makes sense. Obviously, is it instantly up on your phones so you know what's happening in real time?

Nicole: If someone posted in the group, you would get a notification on your phone saying, "John Doe posted in this group," and automatically you can see that they posted. You can just go take a look at what they posted. You could open the document and read what they had written if they're asking for feedback so there's a lot of great things that you could do through Facebook.

Gord: Is the document that you're opening up in Facebook is it like a Google Doc where everybody can write on it?

Nicole: It isn't and that's one disadvantage. So that was the advantage that Google Docs had over Facebook, but we found that with Google Docs, what would happen is you will almost have to send an email to the group anyway saying, "Hey I just edited



my part on Google Doc. Feel free to go edit yours." It was a little bit more back and forth where the Facebook we could automatically see when someone had updated a revision because they would just post an updated copy of that particular document.

Gord: That makes a lot of sense. I always love learning about new tools, and I'm learning something with you right now because it's not something that I've used in sort of a 48-year old perspective. It's a different one these days, but I love picking up new tools anytime. But I'm sure students are gonna be listening to this going and understanding what you're saying. When you are typing up messages to each other, I know that when I talk to people about sending around notes about meetings, I'm always very cautious how emails are worded. Again, it's keeping the emotion out and sticking to the facts is, generally, the safest way to go. How did you find the written communication on Facebook among your group members? Was it productive? Did you ever run into any trouble? What your recommendations be about the way the people type up their notes when they're interacting with each other, again, probably on email or Facebook?

Nicole: I can honestly say never did encounter any issues with the way that people did communicate. I think by the time we actually started using Facebook, it was after we establish the expectations and we had talked about the strengths and we got to know each other a little bit. Because we had a little bit of a personal relationship already, I didn't find it was difficult to communicate even though it was through Facebook as opposed to face to face. There didn't seem to be any issues at all.

Gord: One of the differences, again, between work world and the student world is how much did people care? Did you find when you're establishing that early personal rapport that you could get a feel for who is really into the class, who wanted to get an A, who was just kind of coasting by, this kind of thing? And how did you help each other to really care about the assignment?

Nicole: I think for sure that happened a lot more in my first, second year because like I said by third, fourth year you had had classes of people and you knew who you wanted to work with. I think it was just, again, establishing those expectations and having a strong leader. I worked with some people who took the class a lot less seriously than I did, but I establish the expectations with them and we made sure that they were upheld within the group so that was something that helped move us along even though maybe they were different levels of priority placed on the project.



Gord: This has been fantastic information. It's so fun to hear it from someone firsthand who's been there and done that. In a summary then, if we wanted to name your top three, top five points that you want people to take away today, can you break it down for us and give us very brief points about what you'd recommend somebody does going into their next student meeting.

Nicole: I could sum it up with one sentence really and it would be that group meetings are before, during, and after. So before you have a meeting, you need to take time to establish those expectations and get to know one another. You need to realize that it's important to be flexible and accommodate due to different schedules. During the meeting, you need to make sure that you're focused and you're not distracted. You're putting your all into it. You're coming prepared. You're committing to the action items, and you're staying accountable. And then after the meeting, it's about actually doing what you promised. Once again, remaining accountable, providing quick feedback as well so making sure that you're not taking weeks to respond to an email, making sure that you're responding in an appropriate amount of time. Really just meetings are before, during, and after. A lot of people think that it's just during that matters, but if you don't have the before and after, your meetings will be successful.

Gord: This all makes a lot of sense and there's one dark issue I've left to the end here. Sometimes you get into a situation where someone's just not working out, and I'm not sure if you've experienced that personally or not. Have you ever experienced that you had to kick someone out of a group?

Nicole: I haven't had to kick someone out, but I do have to say that all of my classes were really great with recommending. We had a firing clause in our expectations agreement. So by establishing an expectations agreement, what you can do is you can have a section in there that talks about when someone would be fired. That way it's laid out clearly from the beginning and when you all sign the agreement and expectations contract, then you've all agreed to what's in there for the firing clause. If someone misses three group meetings, for example, then they potentially are fired from the group or they lose a certain percentage of their mark.

Gord: This is again, very insightful, very detailed. I think it's the kind of thing where would you mind if you could create an expectations agreement that we could give out to the audience that they could take away as a blueprint for their next meeting when there's...I imagine it would be 5 or 10 main points, but we could really learn from you and they could download that in the show notes.



Nicole: Yeah, I could definitely do that.

Gord: That's perfect. Well, have you got anything else to add that you'd like students to know before we let you go?

Nicole: I think I would just say that students definitely need to realize how important the skills that they developed in university are when they graduate. It might just seem like a group meeting. It might seem like you're spending a lot of your time in unproductive meetings, but every meeting you have is gonna teach you skills that are gonna transfer into your work experience once you've graduated. So it's definitely valuable experience.

Gord: Well, what a great interview. Thanks so much for spending the time with us today. People, I know, are gonna get a lot from this, one and we're gonna set up this free giveaway in the show notes that's gonna be really, really good. And how can people get in touch with you if they need to ask you some questions directly?

Nicole: They can follow me on Twitter. It is @nicoleblomme N-I-C-O-L-E--B-L-O-M-M-E. That would be the best way. They can just send me a tweet, and I will respond to them.

Gord: Well, great resources coming in the show notes. You can get in touch with Nicole yourself if you want to. Nicole, thanks so much for being on the show.

Nicole: Thanks for having me.

Gord: Thanks so much for listening to the Create Awesome Meetings podcast episode number two. I hope you got a lot from it. I hope you get down to the show notes and you're able to get the free download that's gonna give you the student expectation agreement that includes, again, that firing clause just in case you got someone in your group who's gonna be able to work out. Please, feel free to get in touch with Nicole @nicoleblomme on Twitter. And if you need to get in touch with me, you can get in touch via email. That's gord@createawesomemeetings.com, gord@createawesomemeetings.com. I guarantee I will get back to each and every one of you and thanks for listening. And I hope you tune in again next week on the Create Awesome Meetings podcast.



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