

On Meetings

While most people would agree that face-to-face contact remains an important element of human interaction, I keep wondering if the misuse and over-utilization of meetings is not a dangerous tendency.

While meetings can certainly be a powerful tool to interact within groups, I would like to focus my thoughts assessing when meetings should be called and subsequently on rules of engagement to ensure a productive outcome.



While doing so, I would like to move beyond the often superficial statements such as meetings are only good for lonely people or meetings never lead to decisions.

In its core many critical statements on meetings relate to the how, when and at what frequency meetings are called now-a-days. Bain & Company recently assessed that a staggering 15% of the work time is spent in meetings, often with little or no clear outcome.

Meeting organization

As an organizer for meetings the first critical question to ask is why a meeting should be called. If there is a viable alternative to a meeting, it should be preferred. Can the exchange of information be managed differently? Don't call a meeting. Are key contributors unavailable? Don't call a meeting. Does a similar meeting format exist? Don't call a meeting.

In my opinion there are two main reasons to call for a meeting: First, timely synchronization is needed. Second, a joint decision has to be made. Full stop. I am using the word synchronization to emphasize that a mere sharing of information does not justify calling for a meeting. Furthermore a meeting without a decision is like an unresolved mathematical equation. You keep wondering what could have been meant but the result is frustration.

Integral part of the meeting preparation is naturally setting the agenda and deciding on the right participants. Unfortunately, many meetings are called without a clear agenda or allow drifting away from the agenda. If you call a meeting ensure that the

agenda is set properly up front. In addition, all participants should be actively involved. Avoid inviting people who do not contribute and ask all participants to come well prepared. Always ensure that you follow through with the agenda as there are few things as dissatisfying as seeing a meeting stop or deviate straight from the first agenda item. My recommendation to the chair of a meeting: State the purpose clearly and don't let the meeting be high-jacked.

Meeting participation

Meetings seem to have lost little of their magic. More often than not, a meeting invite seems like an approval statement, crying: "You are important, You are relevant". Given the time-loss mentioned in various studies being more selective about attending a meeting is very important. Good guidelines to decide on one's own participation in a meeting are to:

1. Request for the agenda
2. Check if other similar meetings can be dropped or if meetings can be merged (esp. if called by the same person or entity)
3. Assess your own contribution
4. Be critical when it comes to routine meetings, as their value may be doubtful.

The Meeting

If the meeting preparation was done properly and the agenda was set clearly, the chances increase that the meeting will not be a failure. Still a good outcome is far from certain, esp. if the meeting start is derailed.

This brings me to the point of time management. It is of utmost importance to start meetings on time. Is a participant delayed without notice? Start the meeting without him/ her, even if he/ she is the CEO. He can either read through the minutes later on or, if the missing participant's presence is needed you reset the meeting to another date. Else, proceed and stick to the allocated time slots for each point on the agenda. The target should be to finish the meeting with a summary on or even ahead of time. This ensures that participants will continue to attend meetings you organize. Another key point that helps achieving a good outcome is the clear definition of at least two roles. Time-keeper and moderator. These roles can in principle be filled by one or several people. It is advisable for the chair of a meeting to delegate roles as this achieves a higher focus. Hence, time-keeping may be delegated to a dedicated time-keeper or the person taking minutes of the meeting.

To keep the flow of the meeting, certain rules of engagement need to be followed. As mentioned in the outset, all participants need to contribute. Physical presence is not enough. This means that appeasement is not the right guide when planning a meeting. If a person / department representative is invited just for political appeasement or to listen in, you have not selected the right participants. Reducing the number of participants is also a good means to boost performance. It furthermore re-enforces the call for active participation. In simple words the rule to apply is: No participation without involvement. How often do you see people writing e-mails, SMS, WhatsApp messages or even browsing the www in a meeting? This does not only interrupt the flow of a meeting but is also means that these participant are actually not required to attend. The attitude for meetings should rather be: All in or nothing.

A final thought

While I believe that the outlined ideas can help make meetings more efficient my final remark will be on execution. In my experience, deliverables from the Minutes of Meetings (MoM) are very often either not assigned properly or not followed up. Either case limits the impact of meetings. A strong follow-up is just as important as the meeting preparation to leave a lasting effect.

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