



Article

We've Got To Stop Meeting Like This...

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Did you ever stop to think of the amount of time spent in meetings in your organisation? – or more importantly – the return on the time invested? In this article Tony Shone looks at the two fronts – the process and the culture – that need to be developed to ensure meetings are really efficient and effective.

Did you ever stop to think of the amount of time spent in meetings in your organisation? – or more importantly – the return on the time invested? Some of our clients have and have taken steps to improve on their meeting Rol.

Getting meetings to be really efficient and effective needs work on two fronts - the process and the culture. We see a lot of work being done on the process (what meetings to have, who needs to attend, what needs to be discussed and action arising etc.), but if the culture isn't right and specific, desired meeting behaviours called out, then very little will change.

In this article, I'll focus on the process and in the next edition, share some thoughts around the culture.

A few tips for the process:

- Always insist on an agenda – if this hasn't been circulated in advance either don't have the meeting or if you have to, take a few minutes at the beginning to identify the points for discussion and decisions required. The CEO in one client organisation has issued a directive that meeting invites are to be declined unless the purpose and agenda is clear – this includes invites from himself!
- Issue pre-reads well in advance to keep the focus on discussion rather than informing.
- Sticking to standing agendas can be a disaster – instead think about the priorities – these should be dealt with first.
- Most meetings are about giving or gathering information (in which case, is a meeting necessarily the most efficient tool?), or making decisions. If its to make decisions, specify these decisions on the agenda so people come prepared to make the decision. For example, instead of agenda item - 'Staff Christmas party', it might instead read - 'decide on the venue for the Christmas party'.
- Where possible, kill AOB – its often an excuse for people not preparing and an opportunity for some to hijack events. At the beginning of your meeting, check-in with attendees if anything urgent and important has arisen since the agenda was issued, then decide - does it need to be dealt with at the beginning, or perhaps require a separate conversation when people are prepared. If we are to stick to time, that means some items may need to be deferred.
- 'Leave technology at the door' – Do we really need our phone / laptop at that meeting? – maybe so – but establish ground rules for use.
- Set a meeting free time zone to allow people to get work done!

Interestingly we see some clients taking a lean approach to meetings. This can work well provided the culture is also addressed. Establish rules on the length of meetings - some specify a maximum of 50 minutes – firstly to indicate time is precious, secondly to allow people running from one meeting to another to catch their breath and ensure meetings always start on time (honestly, were you ever a little late for a meeting, just finishing something and believing that everyone else is going to be late anyway?).

Lean meetings may also have a time-keeper – the speaking clock who will interject to alert people that the time specified for an agenda item is coming to an end and a decision is needed. These organisations are ruthless in their meeting execution and their ground rules for efficient meeting management are often displayed in the meeting room – next to a BIG clock!

The great thing about it all is that most people feel the same about the quality of meetings in their organisations and would only be too delighted to support a change in the way meetings are run....but please do be careful if you decide to have a meeting about it!

Dealing with the elephants in the room

OK – Confession time.... Did you ever leave a meeting and say to yourself – or your confidants something like “...well that was a complete waste of time.... that’ll never work.... somebody needs to deal with yer man...”

Maybe YOU didn’t and had the courage to speak up, but do you believe others do?

I gave a few tips around the process of meetings, however all the processes in the world won’t deliver great meetings unless the culture and behaviours are right.

The reality is that too often people don’t speak up and our organisations, customers, shareholders and others suffer as a result. Maybe those same people did once speak up but were subconsciously trained that it could be a career changing experience to do so.

As a manager I used to love when everybody agreed with me (*even though they really didn’t*) or some just *seemed* to have no opinion and sat quietly. The love quickly evaporated when I later found problems surfacing due to shoddy decisions, that with a bit of healthy conflict we could have flushed out earlier and dealt with proactively. As Drucker succinctly said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” and all too often for me people left the meeting room and rightly or wrongly did something different – or simply nothing at all. It was the culture I had perpetuated.

I later learned it was often down to psychological safety. Can people dare to speak up without fear of being ostracised? One of my favourite articles on the subject of teams appeared in a 2017 edition of the Harvard Business Review. In it the author stated how the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety; the article went on to cite studies that show how psychological safety allows for creativity moderate risk-taking, and supports positive emotions like trust, curiosity, confidence, and inspiration. We become more open-minded, resilient, motivated, and persistent when we feel safe. Simply better for everyone.

Working across a diverse range of organisations and teams, **creating psychological safety** is often the first hurdle that needs to be tackled. It’s not that people necessarily go out to close others down – people may be busy and vie to get their point across, or maybe are afraid to open a can of worms, or maybe just don’t understand the impact they may have on others.

An independent facilitator or team coach can help here and I’m always amazed at what people will tell me that has never been previously said directly in a team meeting.

So how to create such safety? Take a peek at Tom Peters vlog – (*the little big things*) – the four most important words a leader can utter ... what do you think? And those are indeed according to Peters the very four words. What happens in the room when we genuinely ask others? What does it say about you as a leader and your respect for others? - Providing of course we listen to the responses (and for more on that you have to listen to Peters trashing our listening skills)

Another technique I find helps create psychological safety is **negative brainstorming** – encouraging people to pick holes in a proposal, before turning it around to find ways of proactively dealing with the holes.

I conclude some offsites with an **ABC – Actions, Benefits Concerns**. First ask people ‘*what concerns do you have?*’ (think about how that differs to ‘*do you have any concerns?*’). If you don’t think people will speak up – get them to put the concerns on post it notes and collect them up. Put them on the left hand side of a flip chart – batching concerns under key headings. Now move to the positive – the benefits. Kotter talks about the need for “quick wins” so build team confidence with a quick round-up of the progress to date and benefits so far (or benefits if things turn out as planned). Finally go back to your flip with the concerns on; on the right hand side, systematically work through the concerns turning them into actions. Takes time but can produce great results. I love the technique as it allows people to open up more and deal with the elephants in the room.

But then maybe deep down we like the elephants in the room?

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