

## **The Mystery of Meetings**

### **Why Are Some Meetings Successful?**

We once heard a client say, “The problem here is we have lots of useless meetings.” We asked the group, “What do you mean by lots and what do you mean by useless.” The answers were vague. We therefore set up a one week observation period to track how many meetings they were having. The value of each meeting was then rated on a scale of one to five, with one being useless and five being excellent.

Here is what we learned. First we affirmed the primary law from *Total Quality Management*, “anything you measure automatically gets better even if you don’t do anything.” There is a reason for this; it is human nature to want to look good when you know someone is watching. We asked the group to measure the value of the meeting. They did that, and a whole lot more. After taking the measurement, they asked themselves how the next meeting could be better. They immediately put these ideas to use and this made the next meeting better.

Another thing that happened when they started measuring meetings is they found that each person defined “lots of meetings” differently. Some thought two meetings a day was too many while others thought six was the maximum number. The value of measuring the number of meetings was that it gave us a realistic view of how many meetings there were and took away the phrase, “lots of meetings.” One of the participants had a cartoon that showed an office worker on the phone saying, “We don’t do any work here; we just go meetings.” After taking the measurement, they realized that the time spent in meetings was not as bad as originally thought.

The important thing to acknowledge here is that there is no magic formula for better meetings at your company. The magic is in the process of asking questions and letting the group take it where it needs to go. For each group, the answers will be different, but it will be their answers. When the answers belong to your team, you will see team commitment and follow-through, making every meeting as good as it can be.

### **A Model for Meeting Format**

Before we get too deep in techniques for improving meetings, let’s define what a meeting is by looking at a simple model. There are two basic formats for a meeting. At one extreme, meetings are planned and structured with a laser-like focus on achieving specific goals. At the other extreme, are meetings that are spontaneous and free flowing designed to get people’s thinking out on the table without worrying about where the thinking goes.

Structured ————— Free Flowing

### **Planned and Structured**

When there are clear goals or specific decisions to be made, it is wise to plan your meeting with a great deal of predictable and clear structure. For example, when Congress meets, there are clear rules, a vote is taken, and the decision is final. Robert’s Rules of Order come in quite handy for this type of meeting. In business there are many meetings that require this approach.

If you are meeting to review and ratify a requirements document, you need a high degree of planning and structure to assure that every person has a chance to speak and at the end a formal decision is made. Further more, the decision is documented for all time. If there is any doubt in the future, we can go back and read the notes to remind everyone of our agreement.

### **Spontaneous and Free Flowing**

There are time when structure and rules get in the way of interactive communications and getting work done. The rules sometimes take on a life of their own and become more important than what we are trying to accomplish. This is why Congress has committees and why there is a lobby where they can interact with lobbyists. In business, formal meetings can also get in the way of interaction. When the issues are complex and the group cannot make a decision, it is time to back off from the rules and let people interact. Let's remember, the whole purpose of a meeting is to use interaction to get something accomplished.

### **Middle Ground**

Most meetings require a blend of both approaches. We have certain things that must accomplished and documented, plus we want interaction where people are comfortable expressing their thoughts. The problem is we get caught up in our tradition of using structure and more structure to solve every problem.

Let's go back to the team that was measuring meetings and figuring out how they could be better the next time. What they were really doing was looking at how the meeting format served them this time and how it could serve them better the next time. Meeting format is just as important as the meeting content. To be successful, you need to spend as much time planning the format as the content.

In our workshops when we address meetings, we like to go through an exercise on how to make meeting better. We stand at the white board and write down suggestion made. Initially, we tend to get the same suggestions, as if everyone read the same book on making meetings more effective. We write these all on the white board using a blue marker. Here is sample of what we tend to hear.

Blue Items:

- Have an agenda
- Take notes
- Start on time
- Finish on time
- Keep to the schedule
- Have the right people there
- Send written material in advance
- Send meeting notes out within forty-eight hours

From time-to-time we get a suggestion that is slightly different and we write that in green on the other side of the board. After this goes on for a while, we comment that there are not enough green suggestions. Once people start to see a pattern, they quickly shift gears and come up with a number of green ideas. Here are some of the ideas we have seen.

### Green Items

- Take breaks
- Bring food
- Have name cards if people have not met before
- Does the room layout encourage interaction?
- Start the meeting on a subject other than business
- Tell a recent humorous experience
- Begin with quick wins
- Celebrate

Can you see the pattern? Which meeting do you want to attend, the blue meeting or the green meeting? Probably you want combination of both. If you don't do the blue stuff, you are guaranteed to have a bad meeting, meaning some of the people will be frustrated because the meeting was not focused on task. The conversations may have gone in any and every direction. If you don't do the green stuff, people will also be frustrated because there was not enough opportunity for free-flowing interaction. The key is balance. You need blue and green.

### **The purpose of a meeting is to fill space between breaks**

Why is a group having a meeting in the first place? It is to interact. If you just wanted to give information, you could put it in writing and e-mail it, or use a video and let people view it in their own time. The meeting gives opportunity for meaningful conversation and feedback.

Have you ever noticed that some people are reserved and rarely speak up at a meeting, even though they have a lot to offer? They are the types who say things after the meeting while they are walking down the hall. If you ask them why they didn't say something during the meeting, they may say they needed time to think about it but they were listening to everyone else. Here is where breaks come in really handy. The thinkers get a chance to talk one-on-one in hallway-type conversations. They are comfortable with that. The meeting talkers are listening while they are eating the food in the back of the room. A lot of interaction is going on. That was one of the purposes of the meeting in the first place.

One of our clients commented that nearly all-important decisions in meetings seemed to happen right after the breaks. The management group of this client consisted mostly of women. We discovered that their discussions took place in the ladies room. The point is, if you sit in a meeting all day and don't take breaks, you cut yourself off from all the useful and essential interaction that takes place during the breaks.

Lets get back to conventional wisdom. In our blue/green exercise, people consistently gave great blue suggestions for improving meetings. These blue suggestions are what you typically see in

books and articles about improving meeting. If they worked, the meeting problem would have been solved a long time ago and we would not be writing this article. In our workshops, once people see the green lists, they realize what they have been missing. When you keep working harder and getting better with the blue list, you hit the point of diminishing returns. When you add the green list, a whole new set of opportunities open up.

## **Virtual Meetings**

Just when we think we have this all figured out, we have a brand new challenge. We are seeing virtual teams popping up all over. The primary meeting format is the teleconference. How much success have you experienced with teleconferences? Do you hit the mute button and work on your e-mail, listen for your name, and pretend you were listening all the time? If yes, you are normal. A teleconference is a more challenging meeting format than any face-to-face meeting. There are so many factors working against you. For example, you often don't even know who is talking and there are no non-verbal clues to help clarify communication. Only one person can talk at a time and side conversations are nearly impossible.

We don't have quick solutions to the teleconference challenge, but here are some things that will help. Start by measuring success. At the end of the conference, give it a rating and talk about how it could have been better. That alone, will help. Establish rules of conversation, such as saying your name before you speak, each time you speak. There are some people who don't need this because they have a good ear for voices and they remember people well, but others really need it. Your goal is effective communications for everyone. If you lose one person you are in trouble.

Another suggestion is to send a photo of each person scheduled to be in the conference and include a quick biography. This can be sent along with the agenda and other support material. Remember, the goal of a meeting is interaction and we are more comfortable interacting with people we feel we know.

## **The Role of the Leader**

Whether the meeting is face-to-face or virtual, the role of the leader is critical. The leader needs to be like a coach who is watching the action, calling plays, and encouraging performance. As the leader, you observe the interaction and call the plays using the blue and green lists of suggestions we already discussed. Also, think about the time-out. Use a break when things are not going well so people can have side conversations. Make sure everyone is contributing and ask questions of people who are not speaking. Decide if you need more structure or more free-flowing time.

After you have done all of this, remember to evaluate the meeting at the very end. As teams get better at the evaluation process, some leaders will do an interim evaluation during the meeting, saying, "if we were to end the meeting right now where would it be, and if we need to make changes now, what should they be?" Here is a simple scoreboard you can use to rate your meetings. We suggest you try it for one week per month for two months and notice how the scores change.

Date	Length (minutes)	Blue Score(1-5)	Green Score(1-5)	Overall Value Score
Weekly Total				

Meeting leadership is an art. If it were an exact science it could be loaded into a computer and we could just hit the start button, but we all know that would not work. By using our model for a meeting format (structured/free-flowing), and looking at the blue/green suggestions, along with a few other ideas, you will be in a position to have meetings that are effective, creative and get the job done.

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