

# The Dangers of Meetings

Taken from *The Performance Papers* by Dr Andrew Bass, BassClusker Consulting

Internal meetings definitely contribute cost, but their benefit is generally much less clear. It is also the case that the conduct of external meetings with existing and potential customers can have a major effect on profitability. Frustration with meetings does much to promote a culture of cynicism and low morale and, perhaps most worryingly, in this age of ever-increasing scrutiny, the way groups interact can actually produce worse decisions than individuals! This is true regardless of how competent group members are when acting alone, with sometimes disastrous consequences and potentially serious governance implications (think Enron/Anderson, or the UK Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act).

When it comes to meetings, something strange is going on. Almost everyone knows it, but people just keep going along with it. Consider the following three examples:

1. A friend who works as a research manager for one of the most respected and innovative corporations in the world likes to play a game with a colleague at meetings: they attempt to work random phrases of pseudo-management-speak into their "contributions" (e.g. "We need to find a way to maximise distribution bandwidth on this concept"). A point is awarded if their words are unknowingly accepted as a genuine contribution by the rest of the people present. The game provides an amusement and intellectual challenge that the meeting itself lacks (I should add that my friend is an extremely competent and conscientious employee who regularly gets to the office at 6.30 am – two hours earlier than required presumably to get some work done before she gets called into a meeting).
2. I once worked in an organisation where a game modelled on the scoring system of cricket evolved: runs and wickets were awarded every time an eccentric manager used certain key phrases.
3. I was on a committee at which decisions were being made which affected the careers of individuals in their absence. I began to notice that when there was a lack of consensus in the group, the Chair was tending to impose the decision according to the position I had taken. He would propose the decision, and look at me. If I gave a slight nod of agreement, the decision went through. Very uncomfortable for me – and impossible to comment on at the time. I handled it by giving the individuals concerned the benefit of any doubt in every case. (By the way, among the members of the committee were published experts in non-verbal communication and group decision making: they were apparently oblivious to what was going on).

## The real costs of meetings

In every kind of organisation, meetings are generally considered inefficient at best. Meeting organisers often just don't know how to plan and run one. Participants often give meetings low priority and so arrive late, nip out for "quick" telephone calls, split their attention between

BlackBerrys and items they consider of low interest, or leave early. Remember this is contributing directly to cost, but not to anything much else.

Furthermore, money is just one part of the cost. Discouraging meetings negatively affect attitudes and morale. They can make people so frustrated that it can take time to become productive and focused again once they return to their desks.

The third type of cost - incompetent decision-making – is potentially the most serious. I wonder to this day about the potential legal, never mind moral, ramifications of the committee where I inadvertently acquired undue influence. At its worst, and depending on the type of business you are in, the pitfalls of group decision-making can have serious knock-on effects on customer relations, financial results, even life and limb.

## Groups can make more dangerous mistakes than their individual members

Victims of Groupthink is the name of a hugely sobering book by Irving Janis which looked at the potentially disastrous consequences of the ways groups fall into decision-making ruts. His classic case study looked at the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which the USA under President John F. Kennedy got embroiled in a plot to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro, thus sowing the seeds for the Cuban Missile Crisis, perhaps the nearest the world ever came to nuclear war. The factors which led to the decision come up time and again in more mundane group decision processes, and include:

- Strong "us and them" syndrome
- Undue influence of a minority of members (enforced through subtle or not-so-subtle intimidation)
- Pressure on individuals to conform ("You're either for us or against us")
- Fear to express divergent views, and especially to disagree with someone in authority, even when they are known to be mistaken

By the way, the committee responsible for this was full of highly competent, spectacularly successful individuals including Robert McNamara (among many other achievements, the first person from outside the Ford family to become President of the motor company), and Bobby Kennedy, then Attorney-General, later a senator (who in the following year showed his incredible negotiation abilities in helping resolve the missile crisis - see the film *Thirteen Days*), not to mention several decorated multiple-star generals.

A further dynamic bedevils board meetings and other committees in the business of reviewing proposals: so-called "diffusion of responsibility". It is incredibly easy for a busy board member to feel that the CEO, their expert staff, advisors, and fellow directors have all given a particular proposal adequate scrutiny, with the result that racy ideas get the go-ahead with inadequate consideration of risk. If you have ever been at such a meeting I am sure you know what I am talking about. And if you recall the grilling that members of the RBS board got by MPs, you will be well aware that this can happen at the highest levels of the biggest organisations, just as it can to a local charity board.

Groupthink and diffusion of responsibility are often found at work in accident investigations and inquiries into corporate scandals - for example the Columbia and Challenger shuttle disasters, numerous commercial airliner crashes, the Enron scandal and BP's (lack of) safety culture etc. At best, groupthink makes fools out of individually competent meeting attendees; at worst it wipes out shareholder value and even kills people.

## Ten steps to more productive meetings

Perhaps few of us meet regularly to discuss whether to launch an invasion or a space shuttle. But we do decide to launch products, set objectives, allot budgets, appoint people to jobs and plan projects, and the risks in terms of time, money, morale and errors are real. The remedies are straightforward (although it has to be said they require a certain type of discipline which is not always easily mustered).

### 1. Be clear about the difference between political meetings and results-oriented meetings

Politics is an important fact of organisational life, and it is often played out in meetings. It doesn't make sense to complain about this or try to eliminate it, but it is good to be clear about peoples' objectives individually and collectively when agreeing to meet. If the substance of the meeting agenda is secondary to political considerations (jockeying for power and influence, building alliances etc), then by all means play the game and judge the value of the meeting in political terms. If, however, the substance is important, then don't let politics intervene to the detriment of the organisation's objectives.

### 2. Identify desired results before developing an agenda

Agendas are usually a collection of issues thrown together quickly, and items are often vague, nebulous and open-ended. The emphasis is on tasks ("discussing" issues), rather than results. To develop a results-oriented agenda, simply ask:

"If we discuss this issue, where would we have to get to at the end of the meeting in order for us to say we had used our time well?"

This discipline is simple, but it is not necessarily easy to do. However, it can be surprisingly powerful, and as I know from any number of "facilitation gigs", it is a trusty tool for breaking impasses and getting an organisation's leadership moving again.

### 3. Consider alternatives to meeting

Once you are clear on the desired results, the first thing to consider is: "Do we need a meeting at all?" Can the issue be handled by email, on the phone, in a videoconference, by delegation, or even by ignoring it? It is easy to quantify the potential savings. A well-focused single issue conference call can sort out in twenty minutes (with no travel time either side) an issue that can lead you round the houses all afternoon in person.

#### **4. Agree what evidence will let you know an item has been handled properly - beware the seduction of timed agendas**

Timed agendas are promoted as a way of saving time. But they make no sense unless the only purpose of the meeting is to be able to claim that an issue has been discussed (i.e. the meeting is political and may as well be done as quickly as possible). While a rough estimate may be possible, how can anyone know in advance how long an issue requiring genuine discussion will take to reach satisfactory closure?

#### **5. Don't try to handle too many issues at one meeting**

If the discussion of an item doesn't reach closure, the tendency is that it becomes "Chair's action" (in which case why did it need a meeting in the first place), or it gets held over to the next meeting and the whole discussion gets opened up again. Prioritise items (various well-thought out methods for doing this exist), and pick a very few. Have a reserve list in case there is time left over – I bet you'll never need it.

#### **6. Establish and uphold ground-rules to avoid time-wasting diversions**

For example, once everyone has agreed on the outcome the meeting is to achieve, a context has been set in which anything which does not contribute is irrelevant. You can now set up a time-saving rule: if someone can't justify the relevance of a point when challenged, they must drop it (and pursue it at another time if they wish).

#### **7. Use decision-making processes which head-off groupthink**

Many workable processes exist or can be devised. What's important is to collect contributions from all participants, apply consistent and reasonable criteria for weighing objectives, challenge assumptions and ensure that dominant personalities do not bias the conversation. Email me for a copy of my GREATER meeting format.

#### **8. Be systematic in your appraisal of risks, and make preventative and contingent actions standard features of plans**

In meetings I observe, risk is often handled haphazardly. Certainly, experienced managers and directors will raise questions of risk, but it is done informally, with the result that vulnerable areas can slip through the net (there is also sometimes the pressure not to raise too many such questions in one meeting to avoid being perceived as "negative"). The advice recommended years ago by Kepner and Tregoe in their book *The Rational Manager* is timeless. Make it a standard practice to have a formal scan that looks for vulnerable areas in the plan, identifies specific issues, and then sets up preventive and contingent ("insurance") actions in advance.

## 9. Ensure follow-through

Many people have observed that "strategies never fail at the formulation stage" and the same is true of any decisions, plans or resolutions made at meetings. Lack of follow-through promotes cynicism. How will the group ensure that its decisions are implemented? Make this explicit in defining actions.

## 10. Consider bringing in skilled facilitation

The recommendations above could amount to a lot of work for a busy executive. And it's difficult to participate fully in discussions and attend to the process at the same time. For important meetings, away days and retreats, or when a team is going to be working together over a long period, there's a lot to be said for getting specialist outside support.

A good facilitator is someone who:

- allows to you and your people to focus on the substantive content rather than also try to manage the process
- keeps the meeting on track towards its objective
- can bring the necessary discipline, because they have a single focus (they don't have any agenda other than a successful meeting)
- is not affected by internal politics, or intimidated by the relative seniority of some attendees over others
- will solicit contributions from reticent people and ensure dominant ones don't steal the show or bias the proceedings
- acts as an honest broker, and can get agreement on relevance and priority issues
- acts as a referee and upholds ground-rules
- can take you through decision-making processes that head off group-think
- Can ensures that risk receive thorough consideration without being perceived as negative
- provides an external check that actions have sufficient accountability

## Final thoughts

Poor meetings waste time and money, negatively affect morale and can lead to bad decisions with worse consequences. Groups can easily fall prey to patterns which lead even the most competent individuals to be party to wasteful, silly, and even dangerous actions.

The processes of good meetings are well understood and can produce dramatic improvements in organisational effectiveness. Because it can be hard to attend to both the substantive issues and the demands of a good process, it is often worth bringing in a skilled facilitator from elsewhere in the organisation, or from the outside.

*If you would like more ideas on improving organizational performance:*

This article is extracted from *The Performance Papers: Incisive Briefings for Busy Leaders*, By Andrew Bass:

"Provides expert guidance for aligning your people with your objectives and turning strategy into action."

*Jens R. Höhnel, CEO / President Europe, International Automotive Components Group (IAC)*

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