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Meetings that add value Aiming for meetings that people won't want to miss

By Anne Niesen, Senior Consultant

Peter Schneider is a sales manager at a medium sized company in Dusseldorf. Things are going well and he is very busy. It is Peter Schneider's 4th meeting today – and it is just 3 pm. "No real work done yet", he thinks. "Another long, long day. A mere waste of time."

Let's look at one of Peter's meetings more closely:

A monthly meeting of the management team, 2 hours long from 10 a.m. to noon. Attendants: Head of each department (9 people), CEO and CFO. After introductory remarks from the CEO and the CFO, each of the department heads gives a short presentation about the status of important projects in her/his department. There follows a short time for questions and comments, which especially the CEO and 2 other members use frequently. The meeting ends with a check on action items. 11:45: The CEO asks if there is anything else people would like to talk about. One manager asks about a detail for an upcoming event. The CEO closes the meeting.

Like Peter, many of our clients feel somewhat dissatisfied with their meetings. They ask me to attend for feedback and new perspectives. Those meetings in many cases are perfect according to what one finds in textbooks: The right people attend, the agenda is clear beforehand, people are well (enough) prepared. How come they still don't add enough value? How come they do not "make sense"?

1. Meeting objective is not properly defined

The person in charge has no real answers to the following questions: What is the actual objective of our meetings? WHY are we meeting? What can we achieve that we could not achieve otherwise? Why should everybody want to attend?

2. Content or structure is counter-productive to the objective

For example: If your objective were "information-sharing", quick reports from everybody would be just fine. If you want to make certain that your team is aligned, quick reports will be greatly counter-productive.

Let's go back to the example above. This is a management meeting. You have your best people available in one room, undisturbed. Your objective could be:

- To make best use of all that joint brain power, experience and creativity towards innovative ideas. [Getting to the 'next level']
- To create shared understanding and commitment towards common processes and goals [This is where we are heading to and what we need from each other to be successful]
- To give "sense": "We will achieve something meaningful together. I/my people are playing an important role in it."

Mini bio: Anne Niesen

Anne has been working successfully as a management consultant, coach and trainer since 1999.

She specializes in developing and coaching executives and teams.



She provides professional support for companies and individuals seeking to build successful partnerships and effective cooperation.

Some “DOs” for meaningful meetings that add value:

- Provide relevant information beforehand.
- Set a frame, provide a relevant topic or question. Leave room (time) and use it...
- ...for real EXCHANGE. Explore opinions and perspectives, ask people for their experience and ideas. Try to understand what drives other people and areas, why and with what effects on you and your common process.
- Agree on major points and ways to go forward together. [Action Plans, RASI]
- Alternate the role of facilitator, who guides discussions, helps to explore and to wrap-up.

Most of our clients start introducing different, pre-identified meeting types, each with its own different set of objectives: You might want to meet regularly in the morning for 10 minutes either face-to-face or virtually for a quick informational meeting. You might check project status regularly with only 2 other relevant colleagues on a regular basis. Or you might go for an alignment meeting such as the above. **Whatever adds value and makes participants aware of this value makes sense!**

Puzzling? Challenging? Yes, certainly. After all, you might have to understand, learn and introduce a new meeting culture and communication patterns.

Rewarding? Most definitely! You will gain a new level of effectiveness together AND people will feel your meetings are the ones that can't be missed because they would miss out on something.

Editor's thoughts

Anne's observations and practical tips on how to lend more sense to meetings have broad applicability around the globe. A study carried out by the Oxford Stationery company in 5 European countries revealed that 33% of interviewees become bored in meetings while 22% find them a frustrating experience. These and other factors, such as the frequency and duration of events, explain why 40% of respondents also admitted to working on unrelated matters during meetings (surfing the web, checking e-mail, etc.). That last figure was considerably higher (73%) in a US survey performed by Wolf Management Consultants. Disquieting.

It is by no means unusual for professionals to spend 30 hours or more per month in meetings. That's **over one day per week dedicated to what is all too often unproductive business activities.**

As Anne pointed out, clarity on the purpose of a meeting is essential to setting expectations and motivating participants. Her advice is of even greater importance when more than one cultural group is in attendance because of underlying assumptions about the purpose of meetings. Unless otherwise stated, for people from task-oriented cultures (Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Nordic are fine examples), the presumed default purpose of a meeting is to work on an action plan which culminates in a To Do List. Elsewhere, meetings are more often seen as an opportunity to exchange and strengthen relationships.

If remaining motivated and concentrated proves hard for one and all, it is especially challenging for people who have to listen and communicate in a second language. Factor in fatigue for some of those same participants who join a conference call late at night because of time differences... the case for tighter, creative planning becomes compelling.

Rotating the role of facilitator, be it from one meeting to another or for the different items on the agenda for a given meeting, is an excellent way to reconcile differences in how we manage time. People from cultures where agendas are secondary to relationships, and who thrive on creative discussion, quickly learn to empathize with colleagues for whom time management is paramount.

Yes. Organizing meetings so that they make sense... makes eminent sense around the world!

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