

NEWDAWN BRIEFING

We have more and more meetings to attend, and more of them are ineffective.

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What to do?

Meetings! OK, we trade together and have some complex cross-functional issues to resolve. So, we have to meet occasionally to resolve issues and differences. But, time is valuable – more valuable than ever; business people now attend an average of 23 hours worth of meetings every week compared with 10 hours in the 1960s. It may even be more than that given the recent move to video meetings during the recent lockdown—it seems that since it is no longer possible to drop by someone’s desk for an informal quick chat you need to arrange a more formal video call! Many executives are finding their entire working day booked out with Teams or Zoom calls. Just think about that in terms of a 40 hour week! Even worse, so many meetings are boring, unengaging, dull and tiring. The consequence of this is a reticence to attend meetings and a deeper scrutiny of the value of attending meetings. In short, your attendees better feel that the meeting is worth it or they will not bother coming again. Businesses have developed more democratic decision making processes such that more and more people are required to provide input and gain alignment. A laudable situation, but the down-side is over-inclusion in decision-making and a lack of available time for the all-important creative work. So, what to do? The solution lies in better and more thorough preparation and planning for meetings (more creativity needed as referred to in my previous comment), combined with shorter, tighter and more focused meetings, and finally a preparedness to follow-up and review the success or otherwise of your meetings. Neil Rackham once said “Would the other party be prepared to pay for that meeting?”. That is a good litmus test for the value of a meeting in today’s busy world.

Rackham would probably despair! You might be interested to note that meetings are commonly cited as the activity employees of all levels and roles love to hate the most:



The opportunity costs associated with poor meetings are huge. Meetings cost time and money – neither are abundant in today’s commercial environment, and with the amount of available time for productive work declining (because we have so many meetings) the opportunity costs are increasing. Whatever your particular views on meetings — and despite the slew of anti-meeting content and sentiment among employees the world over — the truth is **the most successful companies today don’t necessarily meet less (although they probably could). Rather, they meet better.** For meeting organisers, this is the cue to take a long hard look in the mirror.

The Most Fundamental Issue— Purpose and Desired Outcome



Decide on the **purpose and desired outcome** from the meeting as the start point. Why are you having the meeting and what are you hoping to achieve? This merits more than superficial thought; for example, information-share and status update meetings can be done more efficiently on other mediums. Ultimately, you need to decide if the meeting is absolutely necessary or is it just a bad habit? Some meetings are highly confrontational and may lead to further friction if not handled correctly. Others can be warm relaxed affairs between close friends and associates which drift into pleasantries without dealing with important issues.

So, deciding on the outcome you would like to achieve by the end of the meeting is critical and will drive the whole approach and tone of the meeting. If your goal is to build a better relationship, then your agenda and behaviour better be supporting that goal and not making it impossible to achieve!

Our analysis shows that many meetings are destined to fail even before the meeting begins. So, we shall focus on the three key stages of the meeting process; before the meeting (pre-meeting), during the meeting (post-meeting). We are going to look at a few key activities which, when done properly, can revolutionise the conduct and impact of your meetings.



Pre-Meeting Activities:

Good meetings are not the product of ad-hoc or lucky preparation and planning. The best meetings are generally founded on excellent preparation and planning. Top of our list of priorities are:

- **Agendas.** Senior and professional business people expect and value an agenda – they like to know what is going to be discussed in advance. Furthermore, agendas prevent troublesome attendees from straying into irrelevant areas. There is a direct link between the agenda and the purpose of the meeting – or there ought to be! Normally, the agenda and all the supporting materials would be shared with all the attendees well in advance, although there might be circumstances when you need to maintain the level of surprise in the meeting so will not share an agenda with all attendees in advance. Say, for example, that a particular supplier has been profiteering at your expense; you might want to savour the moment when you advise them that you have now sourced a new alternative and will be terminating their contract. So, sending them an agenda might be counterproductive. However, springing surprises on the other attendees could damage trust and credibility. Remember, refer back to the outcome you want and make a conscious decision about this. Finally, many meetings are simply too long (and never end early)! Think about shorter, tighter meeting agendas (40 minutes in place of the standard one hour?) and the use of a timer to control overruns.
- **Difficult or contentious issue management.** Contentious issues need to be handled skilfully and diplomatically before and during the meeting. It might be wise to garner a few allies amongst the key attendees and decision-makers before the meeting. Experienced business people will discuss the issues informally with the other key stakeholders before the meeting to ensure some support and reduce the risk of a nasty surprise during the meeting. It is quite common, for example, for Board-level papers requiring a decision to be ‘walked round’ the key stakeholders before the meeting. You get a chance to emphasise the key points to them and they get a chance to air any grievances which can be addressed before the meeting. The issue should then get a ‘clear run’ during the Board meeting itself.
- **Positive Attitude and Frame of Mind.** Get yourself into the right frame of mind – especially for difficult meetings. Attitudes are infectious – if you look nervous and worried, this will rub off on the other attendees and will make a difficult meeting even worse. Some useful tips:
 - Do the contingency planning beforehand, particularly preparing for how things might get derailed. For example, what are you going to say when the other party says “No!”?
 - Rehearse your opening statement. It is the key moment when you kick the meeting off and set the tone for the rest of the meeting. Get this wrong and you may struggle to recover the situation.

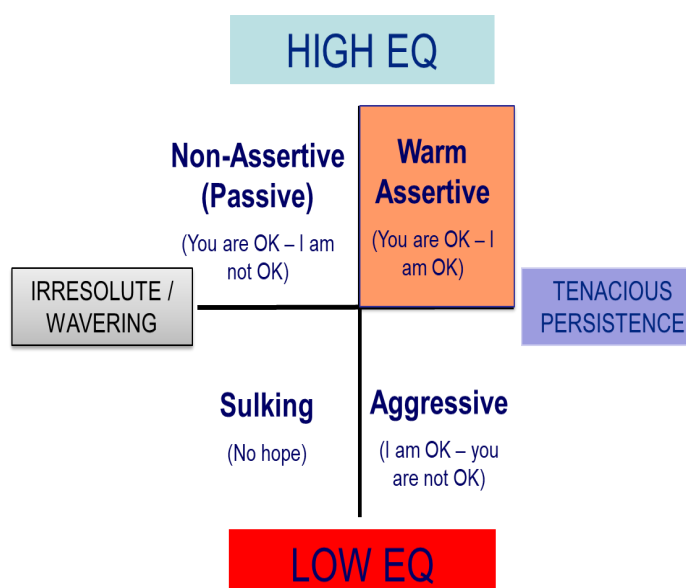
Effective Meetings



I am going to focus unashamedly on behaviour and communication skills. Behaviour because so many people are supremely unaware of their own behaviour and the effect it has on others, and because they worry so much about the behaviour of others and how disruptive this can be. Communication skills because these are so closely linked to persuasion and influencing skills, but also because listening skills and how you communicate are more important than just what you say. The meeting itself is both an art and science. It is important to blend some soft persuasive skills with key facts and logic to appeal to all tastes.

Behaviours and Communication:

- First impressions count.** If the stakes are high, you need to perform: as the old saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. And first impressions are hard to shift. Success in a first meeting all but ensures a second one. Fail to impress though, and that's the last time you'll end up on their calendar. The other attendees are going to classify you by your performance, putting you in the category of time-waster if you fail to make a good first impression. A strong first impression will place you in the category of value creator and potential ally. How you handle that first meeting portends which category you'll find yourself in. However, it does not end there; you have to keep making a good impression in subsequent meetings. You will pay a high price for creating little to no value in a meeting, no matter where in the process you are. One more thing; always start on time (50% of meetings start late and this starts the rot of ill-discipline and poor attitudes)!
- Rapport.** A little rapport-building can boost your chances of success, proving that you have a pleasant personality. And people like to do business with people they like and trust. But the longer you spend on rapport, the less effective it gets. Too much small talk will quickly shift the meeting from a pleasant conversation to a waste of the other party's time. When a businessperson agrees to a business meeting, they expect that the agenda will be largely about business. If you "treat" them to fifteen minutes of small talk—time you could be using to provide actual value—it will be difficult for them to justify another meeting.
- Build credibility** when you need to. Before you can convince an audience to accept anything you say, they have to accept you as credible. There are many aspects to building your credibility and this is a subject in its own right. Suffice to say, the other attendees need to respect you, believe you are of good character and you are generally trustworthy, and believe you are an authority on this topic. So, a little time laying out your credentials or demonstrating your understanding of the issues will be well spent. This is particularly true when providing insights; if these are common knowledge they lose impact and value. So, tell them something they don't know and you'll have their attention.
- Warm Assertiveness.** The most successful attendees are warmly assertive most of the time. That means they are persistent on their goals and objectives without being objectionable to others. Assertive behaviour involves acting in a way which is neither Passive nor Aggressive but a happy medium between the two. Individuals act assertively and will express their own needs, wants and feelings in a very firm, persistent manner which is also constructive and warm. This requires having your empathy radar switched on – not easy in a busy stressful situation – so that you can read the temperature of the meeting. Being aware of your own mood and situation and the other party's mood and situation will help you to navigate through some very difficult situations. Unfortunately, most people are blind to one or both of these. So, sometimes an observer to help you to monitor all the behaviour at the meeting is a must.



- Controlled Un-Assertion.** That is not to say that there is not a time to be more passive (or unassertive). Sometimes, you need to let the other party sound-off and let off steam as their frustrations bubble over – that is their problem not yours. By 'zipping it' temporarily you can defuse a hostile situation and let the other party cool down a bit before returning to normal. This is 'controlled un-assertion' and is done consciously rather than unconsciously – it is a deliberate act.
- Controlled Aggression.** Similarly, there may be a time for mirroring aggressive and bullying behaviour from the other party if it is getting out of hand. Bullies will bully you as long as you let them. So, call it out and let them know that that type of behaviour will not be tolerated, and quickly return to your warm assertive norms.

Post-Meeting

For some, the meeting is over once it breaks up, but generally not for those who habitually run good meetings. Recording agreements and who agreed to do what, plus staking some valuable time to reflect on the quality of the meeting, is the difference between sloppy and amateurish meeting behaviour and professional business conduct.



Actions and Decisions. Recording actions and decisions is often viewed as an administrative burden. Wrong!! I have seen numerous examples of the impact of failing to do this effectively ranging from denial that the conclusions were agreed at the meeting to carefully spinning the outputs in favour of the person producing them. My advice is simple; be clear on the agreed actions and decisions by recording them during the meeting – preferably in an email to all attendees that is sent before the meeting breaks up. Second, hold people accountable for their actions and decisions. It is sloppy and unprofessional to return to the next meeting with actions left undone or outstanding – if the organiser accepts this type of behaviour then they will get it in spades.



Meeting Reviews. Finally take some time in reviewing the meeting – either privately or with the key attendees. Was the purpose achieved? Compare the result achieved with the desired outcome. Is there a reality gap between the two and, if so, why? Think about the quality of the meeting; did it follow the agenda? What was the level of interaction and participation? How committed were the attendees to the actions and decisions? What could you do better next time? It is only through really honest reflection that you will improve future meetings.

In a survey of 1.300 respondents, Beenote found that the five main meeting problems are: **lack of participant preparation (28%), poor communication (20%), time allocated is not observed (17%), no follow-up on tasks (25%) and no minutes (13%).** All eminently fixable issues and all of which merit management consideration—if you want to get the most productivity from your people.

So finally,

We do not expect businesses to hold fewer meetings—that seems to flying in the face of the recent trends (although that may not be such a bad idea). However, we do expect them to hold better meetings. This requires the meeting organiser to prepare and plan more thoroughly, to hold shorter, tighter and more focused meetings with a carefully selected group of the right attendees, to hold more engaging meetings that do not bore the attendees, and to spend some time in reflection so that the meeting process continually improves.



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