

Meeting Effectiveness:

Taming of the Bête Noire

In his latest book "Managing in the next Society" Peter F. Drucker states that "only the productivity of knowledge workers makes a measurable difference - and right now it is quite poor".

And where do you find all these knowledge workers?

In meetings.

Meeting-Mania many critics moan. A waste of time, engineers and scientists groan. And managers fear, the group would decide by its own. Bête noire.

But,..

Meetings often represent the only way to converge different knowledge resources to produce the desired results within a project or a process. Meetings also are a unique opportunity to initiate and steer new dynamics. And they are the best way to learn and develop as a group.

So let's tackle this "bête noire" in four chapters to turn it into a beloved animal:

Only on purpose

The key to an effective meeting is to make you aware about the purpose of the meeting. Distinguish 3 purposes:

Information / Mobilization

- You want to inform about a specific situation, a (project) status, and interim results
- You want to present a (new/change of) strategy, project, program, or management
- You want to kick-off a new process, a pilot, and a roll out of a program
- And you want to make your audience enthusiastic about it.

Coordination / Follow-up

- You need to systematically monitor milestone achievements, update project status
- You need to regularly review performance of an organizational unit, a team
- You need to ensure cross-functional/-departmental/-country cooperation
- And you want to incite participants to assume responsibility and take action.

Strategy making / Problem solving

- You feel the need for revisiting a current strategy or program
- You need to find a solution, or to make a decision on a complex issue
- You want to set up a task force or focus group on a specific topic
- And you need to find the right delegates or agents to get things done.

Refrain from going for a multi-purpose meeting. Better focus on one purpose only, and organize a separate meeting for a different purpose.

By consequence, your meetings become shorter; participants can be selected according to their degree of involvement, which enhances the commitment of the participants.

At the end, an effective meeting will strengthen your leadership position!

Preparation is the cheapest investment.

The other open secret for an effective meeting is preparation.

It is startling how much efforts managers invest in cutting costs and rationalize processes, and at the same time, they call for meetings with highly paid resources, where, at most, there is an agenda prepared.

The following 7 questions shall help you to prepare your meeting, in order to make the best use of time and knowledge available at the day of the meeting.

1.) What is the distinctive topic?

Refrain from buzzwords, generalities or typologies (Strategy workshop, development meeting, brainstorming, kick off,...).

When defining the topic of the meeting, be aware that you raise or kill expectations with the description of the topic. Even a regular coordination meeting should have a specifying (sub-) title.

2.) What is the context or background?

What is the overall situation? Any external or internal events, which might have an impact?

What is the role of that meeting? What is the intended goal? Is it embedded in a greater process or program?

Who are the key players and stakeholders? What are their ideas, concerns, and beliefs? What might be their hidden agendas?

What would happen if there were no achievement/no progresses, just stagnation? To what extent this may threaten or protect the group, individuals, and the process...?

What would be the logical next step, after this meeting?

3.) What should have been achieved at the end of the meeting?

What do you really want to obtain at the end of the meeting? What should be stated on the board/flipchart? With what (in mind) should the participants go home?

What should not come out of the meeting?

[Do not urge for decisions during the meeting. Decisions are to be made by decision makers, not via democratic vote.]

AND: Is the meeting really necessary? Are there alternatives to achieve your objective?

Writing out the objectives of your meeting helps to understand its purpose. Especially for purpose 3, it is recommended that your objective statements contain three dimensions: action, outcome, and qualifiers.

Actions: use results-oriented words such as: develop, generate, identify, plan, prioritise, recommend, resolve...

Outcome describes what should be the visualized result of the meeting, e.g. Action plan, key levers, decision criteria, strategic scenario...

Qualifiers further describe the objective and put focus on the meeting. This could happen by stating additional parameters (time frame, market segment, business area, product type...) or distinctive characteristics the outcome should have.

4.) Who shall/shall not participate?

Who need to participate? Who need not or even must not participate? For what reason?

Criteria to select the participants needed:

- Who have the information or knowledge related to the objective?
- Who will be involved in authorizing the objective?
- Who needs to be involved in implementing the objective?

[The old principle of representativeness is a proven democratic mean, however it has a diluting effect, when you really want to work on something.]

Furthermore you would enquire: What might/might not be the expectations of the participants? What are issues they are aware of? What do they probably ignore? What are their hopes & fears?

[For purpose "strategy making/problem solving": Make sure that you have a good "mixture" of participants: ideally, there should be 1/3 protagonists, 1/3 antagonists, and 1/3 generalists. If you keep the antagonists out, they will come back later, even more forceful. However, select the constructive thinkers, not the ill minded.]

5.) How much time do you realistically have available?

The more people, the more time you need. (If you are truly interested, that people understand and build on the topic). Unfortunately, the time needed is not correlated with the intelligence of the participants, but with the diversity of opinions.

Be generous with breaks: they can be very productive!

[For each 90 minutes, count 15 min. break. Add min 45 minutes for lunch break.]

Again, do not go for a multi-purpose meeting, Stay away from the nice "open-end" habits in some companies. Three 2.5-hours-sessions are more productive than one full day meeting.

Your direct reports and colleagues will be more than thankful for that.

6.) What should the participants think through in detail?

Which content needs to be presented and /or explained?

[Better do not take anything for understood or granted. For this is a frequent pitfall: people think that everybody should know, thus they do not dare to question it. Eventually they won't be in a position to support the outcome!]

Is any pre-meeting work necessary? Would it be more efficient if group members prepare content ahead of time?

If Yes, how should their input be structured? What format to choose for the presentation? (Slide show, overheads, flip chart, poster, oral speech?) How much time would be needed then?

[Ideally a presentation should never go beyond 20 minutes. If you have a lot of content to present, cut it in 3 times 20 minutes, in between organize interactions within the group.]

What needs to be discussed? In which sequence? What should not be discussed? What is not directly related to the topic and the meeting's objective?

At the end draw the flow of the meeting and plan the interactions for the phases: Warm up, introduction to the topic, in-depth work, refocus and wrap-up. With which questions are you going to trigger interaction within the respective phase? How much time do you have for that?

[Remember: for each interaction with the group, reckon at least 15'; attribute 50% of your time for in-depth analysis; typically, for a problem solving session with 9-12 people, you would need 2 to 3 hours working time, plus breaks.]

7.) Check process and logistics

Compare 3 (objectives of the meeting) with 5 (meeting time available): Is this realistic? If not, you either have to cut down on your objectives or you have to ask for more meeting time.

[Do not compromise. Otherwise, it will fall back on you.]

Review 6: Will the presentation and interactions consistently lead to your defined objectives? Or is it just wishful thinking? Don't trust that the people come up with ideas they are not asked for!

Calculate the time needed on the base of 6. Add time for breaks. Does this match with your time objective? Maybe you can organize some "pre-digest group work", to better focus discussion. Or you have to revise your meeting's objectives.

When should the meeting be held? (Time period, kind of day, start-end time, travel times needed by the participants...) Do you need a get-together in the evening or teambuilding exercise during the meeting?

Where should the meeting be held? Which environment and atmosphere would be stimulating? Which location or country would support the objectives?

Virtues of Leadership to Remember

There are some key virtues of an effective meeting leadership, which – together with the preparation – will almost guarantee an effective and successful meeting.

- Welcome doubts and questions.
- Listen actively.
- Reserve judgment and keep an open mind.
- Visualize contributions of participants.
- Have your eye on the meeting's objective.

I call them "virtues", since they are more than techniques, they are related to attitude. And attitudes change slowly, especially one's own attitude.

I am afraid, that attitude cannot be changed through intellectual penetration of the task, but only through practice and exercise - both being regularly reflected and developed.

Pitfalls Test The Best

Eventually, be aware of possible pitfalls, which may occur during your meeting.

The list below is not complete. Nor are the hints to sidestep those pitfalls.

- i. Participants do not (dare to) speak up
- ii. The group does not come up with any new idea
- iii. Participants arrive late and want to leave early
- iv. Nobody is keen to own a defined action
- v. Quarrels are contaminating the meeting
- vi. Key players do not show up – send assistant instead
- vii. You are running out of time

i. Participants do not (dare to) speak up

What might be behind it?

- a. People meet in this setting for the first time; they do not know each other very well
- b. The meeting language is not the mother tongue of the participants; the headquarters' culture is not theirs; or they fear not to be eloquent enough.
- c. People experienced that if one wants to be on the safe side in this company, it is better not to put forward one's own opinion.
- d. Participants do not know, why they are here, and how this meeting will impact their role or their career, especially if there are higher hierarchical levels than their direct supervisor.

What could you do about it?

- a. Use your facilitation skills: ask questions and – even more important – listen to the whole answer; visualize all important statements, even if they differ from each other. Create opportunities to work in small groups, which give the participants more confidence.
- b. In case of different languages, you may accept a second language for your meeting, and ask one of the participants to play the role of the translator and co-facilitator.
- c. If the culture is perceived as closed minded or too authoritarian, you could have pre-meeting sessions to resolve the people's fears. Or you may ask for an impartial facilitator to help out.
- d. If the people are afraid of spelling out doubts in the presence of their boss, it might be better to have another meeting without the boss. That meeting however is not to resolve any factual problems, but to work on this communication issue and to learn about one's own behavior and thinking pattern

The Boss is present

I do not believe, that there is any use of keeping the hierarchy out of a meeting or process (except training or individual development processes). Since the outcome of the meeting should be implemented in some way, you need hierarchy for it. If the hierarchy stays out during the discussion process, it will be more difficult for it to get the whole picture, which leads either to decisions which do not take into account the reflection of the group (hence are de-motivating), or to further investigations and meetings as long as the hierarchy feels ready to decide (hence a waste of time and resources).

ii. The Group does not come up with any new idea

What might be behind it?

- a. The topic is too broad, producing broad answers.
- b. Issue has been discussed for n times, always with the same people.
- c. Dominant opinions prevent from going astray, nipping "crazy" ideas in the bud.
- d. People are caught in their existing procedures and do-how, they know too well, what is not feasible.

What could you do about it?

- a. Go for the most challenging piece of the issue. Or: radically put into question the topic (and the group).
- b. Mix the group. Break out in small groups. Beforehand: Add new participants from other functions or organizational units. Have different experience levels on board.
- c. Ask each one for crazy or utopian ideas, and defend them from being turned down during the first part of the meeting.
- d. Present recognized 'truths' in opposition to the existing experiences. You may even get an external expert from another industry/country to relate about different, also proven patterns.

*No ever grand idea
Was ever born
In a big conference,
But a lot of foolish have died there.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

iii. Participants arrive late and want to leave early

What might be behind it?

- a. Are they really concerned? I mean, concerned in the way they should expect something from the meeting?
- b. Participants are invited due to their position, not to their capacity to contribute
Their boss sends participants, to represent him/her. They cannot commit, in any way.
- c. The meeting was badly planned, did not consider flight schedules/travel times of participants.
- d. The meeting is boring.

What could you do about it?

- a. Make this the subject of the discussion: How could they benefit from this meeting?
- b. For purpose 2 & 3, communicate meeting principles, such as: whoever sends a representative, should give him/her the power to commit, if the invited persons does not appear 2 times, nor does he/she send an empowered representative, he/she won't be invited any more. [Now, you have to stick to your principles!]
- c. *[Too late]*
- d. Skip parts of presentation: max. 1/3 of the meeting time should be presentation, 2/3 should be interaction with the group

[If this is not acceptable for you or your hierarchy, you should ask yourself or them, if it is economically wise to have so many people traveling and spending their time in one room, just to listen to the hierarchy, and having a cup of coffee.]

iv. Nobody is keen to own a defined action

What might be behind it?

- a. Participants are frustrated, and do not want to invest own resources anymore.
- b. Participants are scared by the possible implications of a consensus; they do not want to take accountability for an action.
- c. Participants do not think that they have the competences necessary to take over the task.

What could you do about it?

- a. Address the issue in an open and defensive manner. Be prepared that participants are disappointed by lack of decision taking or weak leadership.
- b. Ask yourself if different opinions and doubts have been expressed and visualized. Have the proposals or ideas been concretized and tested? Has it become clear to everyone, where consensus has been reached, and where areas of disagreement have been remaining? If not, the ground was not well prepared for the participants to take and sustain responsibility.
- c. Review the activities: are they too big or too many? It would be preferable, to focus on few actions, which are pretty clear-cut.

If there are project initiatives, it is wise to precisely define the first action step, together with the group *[use the 3 dimensions described for the meeting objectives: action, outcome, qualifier (see preparation, question 3)]*

v. Quarrels are contaminating the meeting

What might be behind it?

- a. Participants do not feel that they are taken seriously.
- b. The group is split into two opposing camps; no one wants to move.
- c. There are conflicts among participants, they are getting personal or are taking comments personal.
- d. There are conflicts between you – as the leader of the meeting process - and the participants.

What could you do about it?

- a. Remember the virtues of facilitative leadership: active listening, reserving judgment and visualize statements of all parties in an equal way.
- b. You need to find a bridging objective, e.g. where both parties can see a real interest in. Then you can work out, in which area or to what degree they can act together.
Be aware that it is easier to find a common platform to act, than to converge the different attitudes and beliefs into one.

I am not sure if the convergence of attitude and culture should be an objective at all. In order to act in a team, people need common goals or interests, which tie them together. They do not need to have the culture in common.

Anyway, culture changes slowly; revolutions had only changed the faces, but never the culture.

- c. Whenever you sense some personal attack, you should step in, and redirect the discussion onto the factual level. Visualize the rational part of the statement, never the emotional part.

If this does not help, make a break, and define – together with the group - behavioral principles for the

rest of the meeting. Do not forget to establish – again with the acceptance of the group - possible "sanctions", in case some participants continue to break those principles.

It may become necessary to break up, in order to change the setting (way and order of seating, agenda, even the room, split the group for a while), which shall provoke mental movement among the participants.

- d. I always recommend having a co-leader, with whom one prepares and manages the meeting. This may prove valuable especially in situations where the participants develop uneasiness with you, the meeting's leader. You could switch the role with your Co, and observe the group's dynamic from a different perspective. Already this simple move may help to resolve the discomfort.

vi. Key players do not show up – send their assistant instead

What might be behind it?

Key players may have an engagement that is seen more important.

They do not see the value of the meeting.

They do not attribute high importance to their role within this meeting, so they choose to send the assistant to be kept informed.

They do not feel concerned, at all.

What could you do about it?

During the meeting: Treat the assistant with the same respect that would be due for the key player initially invited. You should conduct the meeting as you planned it. At the end it should become very clear to all – especially the assistant – what is expected from the key player. You should ask the assis-

tant to commit to the meeting's outcome and discuss with him/her how to feed back to his/her superior.

Before the meeting: You should give a special attention to your key players. Invite them personally! Involve them in the prep phase. Share with them the objectives of the meeting, even better: develop the objectives together with them.

If you are dealing with very busy and important persons, you need to sell the meeting to them, explain the value of participating, and welcome their doubts on the content of the meeting. Schedule the meeting to fit with their agenda.

vii. You are running out of time

This always might happen, even with a good preparation. Bear in mind that you always have a second objective, when organizing a meeting: To encourage individual expression, and to build consensus and commitment.

This sometimes need more time in the first run than expected. But in the long run, the time invested will speed up implementation processes later on, since the people have really understood and accepted the idea/project or program.

If you do not see a chance to achieve the objective in the given time frame, speak up and say so. You could – together with the group – agree upon what to conclude and which items to postpone. The group will appreciate your honesty and your sovereignty, with which you tackle this time challenge.