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CASE IN POINT

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Coordinating Care, Changing Lives



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Using group time to build and strengthen teams

Optimize Staff, Liberate Your Meetings

BY VERGIL METTS, PH.D.

Necessary evil. Time vacuum. Serial productivity killer.

Negative feelings about meetings are common for many reasons. Most of us spend too much time sitting in too many of them, feeling the pull of tasks, email and voicemail piling up while nothing meaningful transpires. From the weekly department gathering to the annual corporate offsite, the critiques are remarkably similar.

Generally speaking, I'm in the less-is-more camp. But given that meetings are and will remain part of our corporate identity, how can we make them matter more?

The most effective meetings serve two purposes. Making progress toward satisfying clearly articulated objectives is the more obvious, but sadly often-unachieved purpose. (See the accompanying sidebar for more on this.)

On a higher level, however, effective meetings, held for almost any reason, can serve another powerful role: team building. Done right, meetings — especially those regularly scheduled — can make your workgroup, division or company a better functional unit. There becomes a multiplying effect, making each subsequent gathering better than the last, with benefits to individuals extending far beyond the walls of the conference room.

The biggest barrier to this team-building effect is trust. Or to be more precise, it is the lack of trust, at a fundamental level. Exercises like meetings work best when participants feel secure enough to take healthy risks. Making unconventional recommendations, speaking in a stream of consciousness manner (if that's how one operates optimally), or challenging long-held assumptions or procedures are but three examples of high-result end-products engendered and offered by participants who feel safe.

When this occurs, managers can expect not only the solution to a short-term problem or the completion of an agenda item. You can expect to see growing confidence among participants to speak more frankly and debate more freely. That's how, and when, meetings take a quantum leap forward, and when the people in them become more free-thinking and confident.

Healthy conflict is absent from too many meetings and organizations due to the basic principle of a lack of trust. Meetings that are characterized by interpersonal conflict (i.e., unhealthy conflict) often do not leave room for the kind of conflict you and your organization need to build teamwork.

Conversely, in many settings, playing it safe becomes status quo, for fear of being viewed as difficult or unmanageable. It's how and why the rightfully derided groupthink sets in. Lyndon Johnson said it well: "If two men agree on everything, you may be sure that one of them is doing the thinking."

The meeting facilitator's challenge is to manage

personal conflict while encouraging healthy debate. It is impossible — and counterproductive — to keep emotion out of it, so it is of great importance to note the action verb in the sentence above: *manage*, not *eliminate*. It is important to remember that each person's opinion is simply a point of view. When people state their opinion as absolute fact, there is little room for healthy debate.

We encourage people to begin their statements with phrases such as, "Here's how it is for me," or "As I see it..." By discussing and exploring differences in viewpoints instead of arguing absolutes, you stand a better chance of successful dialogue. The meeting leader may occasionally remind the group to focus on the issues instead of the people.

It is easy to say that trust is the critical foundation of effective teamwork. But how does one build trust in a group? First, remember that trust is very much like love: those who give also tend to get. In a team situation, it requires someone to take the first step. And the steps to building trust among team members are simple. Trust has its own "3 R's": Revealing, Receiving, and Respect.

Revealing means that you tell what is true for you. It may involve sharing some of your own vulnerability or discomfort. When others see your willingness to reveal your "true self," they are often more trusting and willing to do the same.

Receiving involves completely and fully listening to another person's point of view without defensiveness or argument. When people feel they're not going to be attacked, belittled, or discounted in what they say, they are more willing to take the risk to state their true opinion.


As for respect, heed Aretha Franklin's admonishment: *Find out what it means to me*. Learn what's important to your teammates and how they want to be treated. Then do your best to treat them that way. Practicing these "3 R's" can build the trust that enables healthy and productive conflict of ideas.

There may be a terrific opportunity on the near horizon to reset your meeting style: your group's or company's summer offsite setting. We've all seen how a change of scenery away from office confines does wonders in freeing

people to be more themselves. It's an equalizer.

If you typically mix business with pleasure at such events, hold a meeting unlike any you've had before. Choose a topic everyone has an interest in. Set a single, clear objective and one ground rule: pretend you're meeting with family, not business associates, and don't hold back.

Build trust and openness by pledging any idea deemed not worth pursuing stays here, to die a quiet death. Pending success, conclude by announcing future meetings back at the office will run just like today's.

What is there to lose at your next meeting? Nothing, save for some serial stealth BlackBerrying. To gain? The first in what may be a long train of creative, serviceable ideas. 

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Meetings That Decide...and Unite

How many meetings leave you feeling like the question at hand was broached but never firmly attended to? Or worse, that the meeting's very purpose was never made clear?

Structuring meetings with simple decision-making tools can help. Here's a flow chart that has proven effective here at Impact Associates and with our clients.

**Not all decisions will require every step. For example, not all brainstormed list will require a weighted ranking. However, a legitimate opportunity for involvement/participation and open discussion is imperative if personal commitment to the decisions is to be achieved.*

Decision-Making Tools

*Steps:

State Purpose or Goal

- Identify the issue, problem, task or question.
- Work until you gain understanding and clarity; spend the time necessary to get agreement; write on flipcharts so all can see.
- Establish criteria if appropriate.

Brainstorm

- Individually and silently; time is generally two to five minutes; no discussion; ask for concepts not sentences (one or two words).

Record on Flipchart

- Go round-robin quickly; no discussion; exhaust all ideas.

Clarify

- Do not combine similar ideas/concepts; gain understanding only, not agreement; do this quickly.

Rank

- Use weighted priority (most important as five to least important as one); use appropriate criteria (cost, time, etc.); no discussion; do quickly.

Discuss

- Spend the time necessary to get understanding and agreement; give ample time for all to contribute.

Decide

- Buy consensus; get 100 percent commitment, not 100 percent agreement; poll each individual for personal commitment.

