How to Make Meetings Effective: It's all in the Culture!

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, June 20, 2018

The data is clear: meetings are one of the two worst productivity killers in the knowledge workplace (the other, of course, is email overload). You can Google it and find the dismal findings in various surveys ("Meetings are the #1 time waster in the workplace", "69% of employees consider meetings ineffective"...), but of course you don't need those: if you work in a corporate environment (or in a large organization in the public sector) you know very well that meetings are a big problem.

Which is a damned shame, because meetings are supposed to be the place where brains come together to share knowledge, create insight, solve problems... they are supposed to be a focus of exuberant creativity that generates value and bottom line profit. They can be all that... but we've subverted them to be the very opposite.

Here are some thoughts on the causes – and the solutions.

The problem

There are many ways that meetings harm our productivity.

1. There are too many of them.

I've seen companies where the calendars of managers and engineers are literally triple-booked most of the time. Having too many meetings causes confusion and uncertainty, since obviously people can only be in one place at any time, and you never know where they will show up; and it comes at the expense of other work – notably thinking and creating value individually.

2. They contain the wrong people.

People get invited to meetings that give them no value (and vice versa) – they just sit there and waste their valuable, paid time. Meanwhile some of the right people are not present, rendering the meeting itself ineffective.

3. They are not managed effectively.

Running a meeting is an art, and many meeting chairpersons are clueless in this art. The presenters don't engage their audience, the bored attendees just do their email, and everyone wishes they were somewhere else. The meeting then strays off topic, overruns its time, and fails to reach the required decisions (and then another meeting must be convened, making things worse).

4. They fail to lead to actual results.

For the meeting to provide value it must be followed by action – whether by the participants or by others. Many meetings just disband and nothing happens; they might as well have never taken place.

Causes: it's the culture – what else?

It's easy for managers to see that something is wrong, but much harder for them to take action, because meetings are a part of "the way things have always been done around here" (how often do you witness an attendee declare that they refuse to come to a meeting they consider useless?). Occasionally a senior manager does pay attention and decides to do something about it – but it's easy to do the wrong thing.

The wrong thing can consist of a one-shot effort like buying everyone on your staff a copy of a book – "Death by Meeting" would be a good choice – or placing posters in the conference rooms that exhort attendees to be effective. The reason this is wrong is that it is not enough: I've seen these things fail to achieve a long term effect. And they are bound to fail, because they don't address the underlying causes, and without addressing those, no change can hold for long.

So where should we seek the underlying causes? Where the root causes of most problems in an organization lie: in the organizational culture.

The real cause of ineffective meetings is not ignorance, or stupidity, or ill will. It is the dissonance between the culture of the organization and the prerequisites of a good meeting that leads to results. In the case of meetings this can mean issues with one or more of the following aspects of the culture:

- **Overall communication culture:** this refers to all the channels on which coworkers communicate; it combines meetings, email, and other messaging tools. These all affect each other – the problem of email overload and the meetings disaster usually feed and exacerbate each other (as in, people set meetings to talk to recipients that ignore their email; and people "do email" in meetings so the latter are ineffective).
- **Ownership and responsibility:** the means how tasks are assigned, executed and tracked. It includes who may assign tasks and to whom, how tasks are delegated from one person to another, how tasks are modified, tracked and closed. Since most meetings involve the creation of tasks, a lack in this area can make them useless.
- **Employee empowerment:** an organization that disempowers, mistrusts or micro-manages its employees will experience many problems, and one of them is poor meeting practices. This is because people who lack the authority or the courage to make decisions by themselves prefer to play it safe by calling a meeting to make them – and inviting everybody to the meeting, just in case someone might object or take offense.

What YOU can do about it

The first thing to do, then, is to address the cultural issues. This is a big deal: changing culture is always hard. Here is what needs to be done:

- **Secure senior management commitment** to a serious, long-term improvement effort. Without this commitment, you will surely fail. And the commitment should include management "putting their money where their mouth is" – setting up a project team, giving it a capable staff sponsor, and committing to review the team's recommendations at top staff level.

- **Characterize the current situation** – the extent of the problem, its characteristics, and the root causes. These vary from company to company, so there is no textbook answer: you will have to interview many employees, examine processes, and analyze your findings in depth.
- **Define solutions**. These will vary based on what you find in the previous stage – and on the "DNA" of your organization. Some examples follow, but customizing the solution set to your organization is key.
- **Deploy the solutions.** This must be done carefully, with monitoring and course corrections as needed. Management leadership and role modeling will be critical for success.
- **Continuous improvement.** You will need to keep the new culture alive and well – impart it to new hires, monitor the impact over time, and intervene if things begin to decay (as, left to themselves, they will).

Potential components of a solution plan

I already said that solutions are company-specific. However, to get your thinking going, here are some things I've seen or heard of that can work – when deployed as part of a holistic program.

- **Definition of meeting norms:** Who can call large meetings, what information is mandatory in a meeting request (a detailed agenda, certainly!), how quickly are invitees required to respond (accept or reject), replacement requirements when one cannot attend, how minutes must be recorded and distributed, how tasks are owned and reported, etc. There's a lot of beef here, and it can make all the difference.
- **Reduction of the frequency, attendance and length of process meetings** (ones that repeat, say, weekly or monthly) by redefining what they do and how they do it. See here for more on this.
- **Effective Meetings training.** Done properly, this can work wonders. By properly I mean without cutting corners: full frontal training classes of at least a day's duration, delivered by trained professionals, and attended by all employees in small groups. The cost is high, but the advantage is that when all is done every employee will share the exact same norms and insights about how to run – or be part of – a meeting.
- **A ban on smartphone and laptop use during meetings.** This is tricky, since exceptions are needed for when such use is required for the meeting itself, but there's really no use in people checking their Facebook or clearing their inbox during meetings.
- **Go out of the box** – like those CEOs that had mandated removal of all chairs from the conference rooms...

Virtual meetings: same thing, but different

The meeting problem had been around for decades, but today we have a new twist on it – virtual meetings by phone or video teleconference. The technology is ubiquitous and useful, but this mode adds difficulties in addition to all the above. For example, you can't tell who is doing email during a voice only call; and even with video (unless it's an expensive room-based system) it's harder for the chairperson to see who is paying attention and who is just surfing the web.

The solutions to these difficulties are actually not different from those to face to face meetings – they are just even more critical, and must be applied with more discipline and commitment. The meeting chairperson must make every effort to keep all attendees engaged, and the attendees must cooperate. A bigger challenge is to get attendees to actually do work for the team *between* sessions – a good collaboration platform that allows effective tracking by the team leader can help. Ideally, with more work done and visible between the meetings, the frequency of the latter can be reduced, much to the relief of the attendees in remote time zones.

In conclusion

Making meetings effective is one of the highest-return investments you can make in effectiveness and productivity in a company. It is a problem taking a horrific toll not just in time (a.k.a. money) but also in harnessing employees' brainpower to generate innovation and solve problems.

Because this problem is culture-based, there is no quick fix: you must change the culture through the usual lengthy, complicated process. The good news are that it does not require expensive technology; it's a people thing, and as such your HR and Training groups should be able to execute the required process once you empower them to do so. While they're at it, if they do a thorough job, I can guarantee they'll find some very interesting improvement opportunities even beyond meeting space.

If you've done something interesting in this area, or if you want to discuss doing so in the future, please drop me a line!

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For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see here. You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.