

# Meetings: The Bane of the Workplace

## It Doesn't Have To Be So

Robert F. Moran Jr.

A recent survey of 38,000 people found that, on average, they felt that 66 percent of the time they spent in meetings was wasted.<sup>1</sup> Surprised? Probably not. Reflective of your feelings? Probably, if your experience has been anything like mine. Tried to improve your meetings? Probably. Still dissatisfied with your meetings, and even more so with the meetings you must attend? Probably.

As with other lingering yet tolerated irritations, we live with ineffective meetings because no apparent solutions present themselves, and there is little motivation to look more deeply for remedies, as the negative consequences of bad meetings seem minor. Yet, at a time when decreasing budgets are reducing the time that can be spent on traditional functions and developing new services responsive to changing user needs, how can it be thought that the amount of time wasted in meetings is inconsequential? If meetings do waste time and fail to produce worthwhile results, this situation needs to be improved. Contrary to prevailing opinion, effective and efficient meetings can occur, provided those involved make an effort to understand the complexity of this common workplace activity and then prepare in a manner respectful of this complexity.

There are many how-to books for effective meetings, two of which are *Effective Meeting Skills* by Marion Haynes, and *The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings* by Barbara Streibel.<sup>2</sup> Such books are generally helpful lists of behaviors that have been shown to improve meeting efficiency and effectiveness. If you haven't read one, you should. They are worth the time. However, continuing dissatisfaction with meetings provides evidence that these lists are not sufficient. As with many how-to books, they lack sufficient attention to underlying phenomena. For meetings, these are the complex conditions of human interaction.

Meetings are not merely discussions of work-related issues. They are small-group interactions with all the dynamics of small groups. Behavior is determined by much more than an interest in a solution to the problem before the group. Because these dynamics affect both meeting process and outcomes, they need to be understood.

Second, communication at a meeting is much more difficult than first appears. If communication between two individuals is difficult, simultaneous communication among several is even more so. Unspoken assumptions,

emotions of the moment, word choice, attention, and external interference contribute to misunderstanding when two people are speaking. How much more will these and similar factors inhibit communication when several are involved in a discussion?

The dynamics of small-group interactions as well as the difficulty of effective communication at meetings increase the importance of meeting structure, detailed planning, and meeting management. A combination of traditional meeting strategies with a more recently developed structure will improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of meetings.

### Meetings Are Complex Events

#### Small-group Dynamics

Small groups—groups of individuals who are brought together for a common purpose and who relate to each other according to established patterns, share norms for behavior, and participate in a system of interlocking roles—have been studied by sociologists seeking to understand and identify small-group behavior and structure. These researchers have identified these characteristics of small groups: informal standards for behavior within the group; pressures toward uniformity; specific roles within the group; regularity of behavior; and behavior for purposes other than group goals, such as improved member status or power. Membership in a group influences how one acts. People act differently when with other members of a group of which they are a part than when they are interacting with one or two other people.

Meetings are discussions within small groups and so have many of the characteristics listed above. Participants understand that their comments are circumscribed by the expectations of the rest of the group with regard to acceptable subject matter, there are limits on one's reactions to another's comments, and some behaviors acceptable in a conversation with colleagues are unacceptable here. Of more significance, statements apparently addressed at the topic under consideration can actually be made in order to correct out-of-role behavior of another, exert power, or stop behavior seen as inappropriate for the group. For example, a senior member may disagree with a statement of a junior member because of that person's junior status, or to demonstrate that the senior member holds power in the

---

Robert Moran (rfmoran@anet.com) is a library consultant.

situation under consideration. The following statement by a senior member to a junior member who has just spoken illustrates this kind of behavior. "You haven't been here long enough to make a statement like that." How often is the true meaning of this statement, "I'm in charge of that, I am the one to suggest how we ought to respond?" Other examples of statements made for purposes other than a contribution to the discussion include a member disagreeing with another's statement because the latter is speaking with emotion unusual for the group, and a member arguing a point in order to impress a superior or a colleague.

When this kind of behavior occurs at a meeting, group progress toward a resolution of an issue is hindered. For example, when a member disagrees with a suggestion in order to exert power rather than because she actually disagrees, the discussion is inhibited. At the least, content, in this case disagreement, is introduced where there probably is not disagreement. Also, because members can often sense the actual motivation behind this kind of a comment, positive dynamics can be disrupted with the result of a significant waste of time.

It is likely that anyone who attends meetings regularly is not surprised by these assertions. Yet, an awareness that this kind of behavior occurs and has implications on the group's movement toward resolution of an agenda topic is easily lost in the heat of the meeting. Thorough planning for a meeting, as well as good meeting management, can decrease the negative effects of this behavior. Also, a sufficient understanding of the small-group characteristics of meetings allows participants to recognize group-motivated behavior when it occurs and helps them react constructively in its presence.

## Communication

A communication model developed by Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman demonstrates the multiple obstacles to effective communication.<sup>3</sup> The model identifies the elements in communication as the sender, the receiver, the communication channel, and the message. Each person's involvement in an effort to communicate, both as a sender and as a receiver, is formed by the person's unique experiences and attributes. When someone speaks, this personal history determines message content as well as how it is formed, including syntax, diction, word choice; when that person listens, it determines what the person receives, or what they understand. The communication channel is not always clear, it can be obstructed not only by physical noise, but also "forces within the sender or receiver that make these people less able to express or understand the message."<sup>4</sup> Negative feelings of one person toward the other, and feelings of fear, aggression, and hostility, are examples. Next, the message may not be clear; it may not be complete or well constructed. Finally, by depicting each participant as a sender and receiver, the model highlights the need for each participant to be responsive to the other.

Listening well is as important as speaking coherently and clearly. Focus on one's own argument, impatience, certainty of one's position, and lack of respect are merely a few characteristics and emotions that can inhibit listening to, and therefore understanding of, what the sender means to convey.

This model demonstrates why misunderstanding occurs so often between two people in a conversation. With this model in mind, it is easy to understand why the statement, "That's not what I meant" is heard so often, even in conversations between friends, partners, or siblings; to understand why arguments are often based on a misunderstanding of an original assertion; and why a conversation is so often ended by one person saying, "That's OK, it isn't important." The model helps explain why, "What did you say?" is heard so often, why it always seems to take longer than expected to explain something, and why the attempt to communicate in an emotionally charged situation usually fails.

If effective communication between two people can be this complicated, a discussion involving six to eight people will be more so for these, among other, reasons.

- The presence of others may limit a speaker's willingness to be straightforward.
- Because there are multiple receivers, each message is open to multiple interpretations.
- The presence of several others makes it much more difficult for one person to say, "What did you say?" or "I don't understand what you mean."
- When someone does ask for a clarification, the response still may not be clear to several others, but the discussion moves on because of the pressure imposed by meeting timelines.
- When emotions arise, they need to be neutralized in several individuals before accurate listening will occur.
- Meeting rooms are a lot noisier than the environment in which a two-person conversation usually takes place.

Questioning on the part of the listener and restatement on the part of the speaker are the two behaviors that most help people in a conversation move to mutual understanding. Each requires time and patience, but the former is limited by meeting time constraints, and the latter is made more difficult by the number of people involved.

## Effective and Efficient Meetings

Meetings are complex events in which behavior is determined by multiple factors, many of which are not apparent during the meeting. As with any complex event, success will occur only if there has been thorough preparation and then effective management of the event. For meetings, this

means choice of a structure that best fits the meeting's purpose; detailed, thorough planning; and good meeting management.

## Structure

Generally, two types of workplace meetings can be identified based on purpose. One type is held to inform the participants regarding work-related matters. Content includes announcement, updates, and reports. Participants are expected to listen and understand, and to ask questions if they don't. The second type is held to reach a conclusion on agenda topics. The conclusion may be a solution to a problem or the details of a new activity. It may also be a recommendation. Here participants are expected to understand the issues, make suggestions for addressing the issues, evaluate the suggestions, and then participate in the choice of one of these. The former can be termed an information sharing meeting, and the latter a decision-making meeting.

Different structures serve these two forms best. The structure for information sharing meetings is simple. The order of reports needs to be identified as well as the time for questions. Someone needs to have the authority to control the use of time, and to keep the meeting on topic.

The structure for a decision-making meeting recognizes the two distinct activities that occur: the search for potential solutions or actions, and the choice of the best solution or action. These activities each require a different set of behaviors from meeting participants, behaviors determined by the optimal processes for each.

In the search for solutions, openness, creativity, and freedom are essential. Personal assumptions need to be suspended. Also, participants need to avoid analysis and evaluation and, in particular, criticism of the ideas presented. Analysis and evaluation will occur in the second portion of the meeting. When they occur here, they inhibit the articulation of ideas, especially unique or original ideas.

In addition, during the search for potential solutions, all participants need to be seen as colleagues, with hierarchical roles put aside temporarily. If this search for solutions is truly focused on finding good ideas, roles in the hierarchy are not relevant. The ability to react with all meeting participants as colleagues not only increases the number of ideas generated, it also helps develop a group cohesion that will assist in an effective analysis and choice in the second portion of the meeting. An interaction focused on the exploration of a complex situation from multiple points of view, with everyone equally involved, decreases both the awareness of the group members as individuals and competitiveness between them.<sup>5</sup>

If the routine and discipline described here are not common in a workplace, the meeting leader will have to function as an expert facilitator. She or he will need to see that this portion of the meeting is focused on the creation of ideas, potential solutions, and that the group avoids two

tendencies common in many meetings: the tendency to evaluate or criticize a suggestion as soon as it is offered, and the tendency to identify a solution for implementation as quickly as possible. In addition, each participant must not only need to understand that he or she is expected to contribute, but also to feel comfortable doing so. The facilitator also must keep the process moving, ensure that each participant has an opportunity to speak, and deal with such unhelpful behavior as digressions or excessive talk from one or two members. These facilitator skills are becoming more common as shared authority and decision-making become more widespread in libraries.

The second portion of the meeting, the goal of which is to decide on a solution or activity for implementation, involves an analysis of the ideas generated in the first portion and a choice of one of these. Analysis is limited to these ideas. The method for the choice for implementation needs to be determined beforehand. It may be consensus or a form of majority choice.

Though a new idea that arises in the second portion of the meeting may look tempting, it should be considered only if the majority of the group immediately responds favorably. Although it is possible for a truly new idea to surface here, it is unlikely, and the introduction of new ideas at this point brings the risk of spending much more time on the issue that can be given it. One of the purposes of this structure is to streamline meetings so that time is not wasted.

The recommended behavior for the first portion of a decision-making meeting, the search for ideas, will take time to develop; it is not what people are used to. However, structuring meetings to begin with this kind of brainstorming is an especially worthwhile choice to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings. More and better ideas will be generated, the portion of the meeting in which decisions are made will be smoother and take less time, the decisions will be better, the group will be more cohesive, and the participants more committed to the decisions.

Decision-making meetings need to be structured in these two distinct parts. First, the search for ideas and potential solutions, and second, the choice of one of these for implementation. A meeting at which a decision on more than one issue is needed should be structured as a set of first a search for ideas and then analysis and choice.

For those interested in a deeper discussion of this form of meeting, Peter Senge's presentation in *The Fifth Discipline* is recommended.<sup>6</sup>

## Planning

Thorough planning must accompany proper structure if a meeting is to be successful. One of the most common causes for a meeting to fail to produce significant results and waste people's time is the lack of time spent by the convener on planning. Conditions that will ensure failed meetings include scheduling the meeting the day before it occurs, lack of understanding by those attending as to the

meeting purpose, lack of preparation by those attending, a failure to allocate meeting time effectively, and a lack of understanding by attendees of the meeting process. Each of these conditions can be avoided by thorough preparation. In addition, thorough planning will reduce unproductive behavior arising from group dynamics and communications problems. But adequate planning will take time. A manager who is too busy to spend significant time planning every meeting for which he is responsible should reconsider holding the meetings, if only out of respect for the employees' time.

## Guidelines

The following guidelines for meeting preparation are essential. None are new. Past failure lies in managers not taking the time to follow them.

- Locate and provide to attendees whatever background material is needed for an informed discussion.
- Prepare and distribute a detailed agenda before the meeting. The agenda should include:
  - Beginning and end times of the meeting and meeting location.
  - All agenda items, with the time to be given to each.
  - The first item should be meeting organization. Decisions on process will occur here as well as agreement on meeting rules.
  - If there is to be an information-sharing portion, such as announcements and brief reports, list this next with the amount of time to be given to this activity.
- Then the agenda should list each topic on which a decision is expected. Under each topic the agenda should list:
  - Whatever preparation is required for an informed discussion, including background readings.
  - The anticipated outcome from the consideration of the item. Examples of anticipated outcomes include "A solution to be implemented immediately," "Major elements in the new policy," or "Agreement on rules to govern the project." The anticipated outcome of a meeting discussion is not always clear to participants. Listing it will provide clarity and focus for participants.
  - The amount of time to be spent on each portion of the discussion. First, how much time will be given to the search for potential solutions or ideas, and second, the amount of time that will be given to choosing the solution to be implemented, assigning responsibility, and identifying report back time and method.
- Distribute all reading required as preparation well before the meeting. Never pass out material at a meeting and ask attendees to read it. This practice assures wasted time and inefficiency. People read at different speeds; the faster readers will have nothing to do while the slower readers finish. The need to read quickly decreases understanding. There is no time for consideration of the content of the reading. If it is not possible to distribute readings before the meeting, cancel the meeting. Otherwise the meeting convener is guilty of deliberately wasting employee time.

## Meeting Management

Finally, a complex event must be managed effectively. For meetings, the most difficult management task is focusing participant behavior so that each person contributes optimally to meeting success. In addition, time needs to be used effectively, and each decision needs to be concluded with a clear direction and responsibility for carrying out meeting results.

The most effective means to productive attendee behavior is a set of meeting rules, rules governing conduct as well as meeting management, that are created and agreed to by participants. Meeting management need not be left to the leader; participants can and should take responsibility for the meeting. Meeting rules not only provide directions as to how participants should act, they also empower participants with this responsibility.

The rules are best created at the first meeting of a meeting cycle (for example, the fiscal year, academic year), and then brought before the group and reaffirmed before each meeting. Some examples of meeting rules are:

- Each agenda item will be given only as much time as noted on the agenda unless the participants vote by simple majority to extend the time.
- Decisions are made by consensus. If consensus cannot be developed in the time allotted to the agenda item, the decision is made by simple majority vote.
- During the first portion of a discussion of an agenda topic (the portion given to a search for new solutions and ideas):
  - Ideas may be developed but not evaluated. For example, a statement beginning, "Do you mean . . ." is appropriate. A statement beginning "That won't work because . . ." is not appropriate.
  - Each member is asked to offer an idea.
  - Member suggestions and comments are related to the agenda issue.
- Each participant agrees that the person chairing the meeting should call attention to the meeting rules whenever a participant is not acting in accordance with the rules; this includes making comments unre-

lated to the issue under discussion. Participants can and ought to bring failure to adhere to meeting rules to the group's attention.

A second element of good meeting management is time management. Meetings should always start and end at the time announced. Not only does starting late waste the time of individuals who arrive on time, it also sends a message that the agenda is not controlling, and does not need to be followed carefully. Also, times assigned to agenda items need to be honored.

Finally, the meeting cannot end until decisions have been documented; those responsible for carrying out the decisions identified; and report back processes and times chosen. These occur at the end of each discussion of an agenda topic. The meeting should close with a review of all of them.

### Final Word on Communication

If understanding what another person means to say is as difficult as described earlier, one would expect that questions would be a common occurrence at a meeting. Yet, my experience is that seldom does one participant ask another to clarify or explain what he or she has just said. It is much more common for participants to follow a comment by one person with a statement agreeing, or disagreeing, with what has just been said, or making an unrelated statement. I encourage you to take the time at some future meeting during a period when your involvement is not crucial and track the kinds of statements made. I believe you will find that there are few attempts to make certain a speaker has been understood.

Understanding one another is the core requirement of good meetings. Continuing understanding at a meeting will occur only with the give and take of questions, and the responses to these questions. Effective meetings will have as many questions asked as statements made. Phrases such as these ought to be common: "Do I understand you to suggest . . . ?" "Are you suggesting that . . . ?" "Are you telling us that . . . ?" (But not, "Do I hear you to say . . . ?")

This personal anecdote provides an example of the

value of taking time to understand. During a discussion at a meeting of a senior management group, one participant suggested a particularly foolish solution to the problem under discussion. My immediate reaction was to say something like, "That will not work. That approach will only make the situation worse." However, rather than letting my impatience control me, I said "Are you saying that you think we ought to . . . ?" The person's response was, "Of course not, what I meant was . . ." I had completely misunderstood. If I had followed my first impulse, my colleague would likely have reacted defensively, and an argument might have developed. The meeting flow would have been disrupted, and it is possible that my colleague's very good suggestion would have been lost.

### Conclusion

It is not surprising, then, that so many meetings are ineffective and a bad use of time. Meetings require much more time and effort on preparation and management than usually given to them. The solution to the complaint that meetings waste time and are not worthwhile lies with the participants, primarily the person who calls the meeting, but also with everyone involved. Those willing to understand meeting dynamics, to prepare well for each meeting, and to commit to good meeting management will have more effective and efficient meetings. Those who are not willing shouldn't complain.

### References

1. Dike Drummond, "Are Non-productive Meetings Stealing Your Time and Energy?" [www.effective-meetings-now.com](http://www.effective-meetings-now.com) (accessed Oct. 26, 2005).
2. Marion Haynes, *Effective Meeting Skills*; Barbara Streibel, *The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).
3. Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman, *Understanding Human Communication* (New York: Holt, 1985).
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).
6. *Ibid.*