



The Effective Meeting

Meetings are essential to doing business, but all too often they do not get the results intended. This is because they are denied the importance they rate. Here, a guide to having better meetings. And to having better productivity...

□ Almost all the major decisions in business today — as well as a great many minor ones — are made at meetings. This being so, it is strange that the business meeting is so rarely perceived as something separate and distinct from the set-piece meetings of political and community groups. The literature on the subject will tell you all about how to run a meeting at your golf club, but it says little about how best to conduct the kind of informal conferences that take place continually in offices and plants every working day.

A real difference exists between the two. Meetings of a club or school board are among elected officials who forgather on a regular basis and are constrained to follow, however vaguely, the established rules of order. Business meetings are very often unstructured *ad hoc* affairs among pick-up teams of managers and supervisors. By their nature, most business meetings are none too tightly organized.

The ability to "meet" effectively under these conditions is given no special recognition. It is commonly assumed that running a good meeting is an exercise in natural skill. Many companies are without policies or guidelines as to how meetings should proceed, and training in this regard is frequently absent from the curricula of management courses. It's as if all that is required for a good meeting are enough chairs to go around.

Given this hit-and-miss approach to such an important aspect of business life, there can be little wonder that many business people are sceptical

about the usefulness of meetings. Even senior managers are inclined to look down on them. In a survey of 471 U.S. executives conducted by Communispond Inc. of New York last year, 71 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement that meetings are "a waste of time."

It is a great shame that anyone in business — let alone those in the top ranks — should hold meetings in such low regard, considering all that can be accomplished when people put their minds together. Well-run meetings generate synergy, which means that the effect of a combination of ingredients is greater than the sum of all their individual effects.

Why is there so much disillusionment over meetings? One answer may be that people have attended too many of them that never should have been held in the first place. This raises the basic question of what a meeting is all about. It is a gathering of two or more (for the purpose of this essay, more) persons to do collectively what cannot be done by one person. The number of useless meetings could be reduced if managers were to ask themselves more often whether a meeting is really necessary, or whether the same results could be obtained with a memo or phone calls.

If a meeting is warranted, its purpose should be clearly understood in advance by all concerned, since there is no greater waste of time than a meeting at which the participants do not know what is expected of them. If, for instance, a decision has already been made and the object is

to inform people of it and discuss ways of putting it into effect, no one should be under the misapprehension that the issue can be debated again.

One of the chief complaints about meetings is that the people attending them have not done their homework — have not studied the relevant background material or thought over the anticipated questions. The problem of unpreparedness can be partially overcome by giving each participant as much advance notice as possible, together with a clear and thorough description of the reason for getting together, the questions to be considered, and the information the participant is expected to have available.

The initiator of the meeting should give careful consideration to who should be present at it. No one without a definite reason for being there should be invited, if any choice exists. In formal committees, etiquette must be observed, but in business meetings it is wasteful to have people in attendance who have no stake in the matter and nothing to contribute to the deliberations.

Nothing brings order to a meeting like an agenda, though it may consist only of a few hastily-typed lines itemizing the topics to be considered. If there is time to do so, an agenda should be distributed in advance to all concerned. If not, it should be passed around the table when people assemble. If the timing does not permit even that, the chairman (for sake of simplicity, we will use the word in the generic masculine gender throughout) should inform the members verbally of the order of business he plans to follow.

Always prepare an agenda and appoint a chairman

This brings up the point that, except in the smallest and briefest gatherings, a chairman should be appointed for every meeting with the object of ensuring that it proceeds in an orderly fashion. This is done by someone in the group suggesting that another member take the chair.

It is the chairman's duty to begin the meeting on time, or as soon as a reasonable number of participants has gathered. A 15-minute delay for

10 people means the loss of 2½ man-hours. Laggards should be given a brief summary of what has taken place prior to their arrival so that no time is spent going over ground already covered.

Just as a meeting should start according to the clock, it should finish according to the clock. While a meeting in theory should take exactly as long as it takes to accomplish its purpose, the chairman is quite within his rights to suggest a general time limit: "I'd like to get this over with by three-thirty, if possible."

Taking a page from the rules of order to move events along

The chairman should ration out time for each item of business, so that everything receives the consideration it merits. It often happens that meetings linger too long over the first couple of items, then give insufficient attention to the remainder. By following an implicit though flexible time-table, the chairman is able to keep the discussion in sequence. The tendency to leapfrog over subjects can be kept in check by insisting on taking one item at a time.

At the risk of seeming stuffy, the chairman might take a page out of *Robert's Rules of Order* and call for motions when he senses that nothing more is to be gained by further discussion of a particular item. All that is necessary is to ask the speaker whether he is prepared to move a motion to put his suggestions into effect. Motions tend to focus the discourse and set the pace of a meeting. "All the discussion in the world will accomplish nothing; the least little motion will result in some action," the American parliamentary expert Darwin Patnode wrote.

Having set the pace, the chairman must strive to keep the discussion on track and headed towards a conclusion. This is no easy task, given the natural proclivity of many people to ramble off the point. The chairman must diplomatically

inquire of such wanderers what the thoughts they are expressing have to do with the immediate subject at hand.

If there is a greater menace to the proper conduct of meetings than the irrelevant wanderer, it is the monopolizer who attempts to dominate the discussion. In dealing with this type, the chairman might attempt to relieve him of the floor by referring to other participants: "What do *you* have to say about that, Fred?" If the monopolizer keeps coming back for more, the chairman must put a less subtle stop to it. He can note that time is passing, and that others must be given a chance to state their views.

How to deal with chit-chat and subdue the office clown

In business meetings the rule that every participant should be allowed sufficient time to speak is not so much a matter of fairness as of sound management practice. The purpose of having the meeting, after all, is to tap the experience, judgment, knowledge and expertise of everyone in the group. The chairman is therefore responsible for getting all the relevant views and information possessed by the group out on the table. This means not only clearing the way for the more diffident members to put forth their views, but actively encouraging them to say their piece.

Anything said at a meeting, however, should be said to the group at large, and not in side-conversations along the table. One way of squelching this irritating distraction is to abruptly stop speaking in the middle of a statement, leaving the offenders with the embarrassing sensation of being the only couple on the floor.

Humour is welcome in most facets of life, but it can be carried too far at meetings. If a would-be comedian gains control of the show, it can become all comic relief. It is, to be sure, difficult for a chairman to control facetious members of the group without appearing to be a wet blanket, but a suitably straight-faced demeanour and an immediate return to the discussion after a wise-crack has been made may get across the message that this is no time for clowning. In a pinch, the chairman may have to say, "Let's get serious."

The worst thing he can do is grin and bear it if he does not want the meeting to deteriorate into a prolonged giggling match.

Though his patience may be ever so sorely tried, the chairman must be scrupulously polite to keep the discussion moving forward in a businesslike fashion. If the object is to come to a joint decision, he must also be scrupulously objective, even though he might hold firm personal views.

In cases where the chairman outranks the participants, there may be a reluctance to put views forward in case they might clash with what the boss is thinking. To eliminate such fence-sitting, the chairman should make his own thinking known at the outset: "I am inclined to favour this course of action, but I can be persuaded to change my mind."

The chairman must also exercise objectivity in dealing with any disputes that might break out among the participants. He must look for opportunities to intervene with an even-handed summing-up of the opposing opinions to determine if any common ground exists.

Summaries urge on the pace and help to clear up confusion

Personal disputes among members bring up another instance when one might fall back on the established rules of order. The age-old parliamentary practice of having members filter their remarks through the speaker was designed with just such acrimony in mind. If an argument threatens to fly out of control, the chairman is well-advised to call for order and suggest that the antagonists address the chair and not each other. If that seems overly punctilious in the circumstances, they can at least be told to direct their remarks to the entire group.

It is a rare discussion that does not contain a fair amount of repetition. The chairman is usually painfully aware of the point at which progress ceases and the wheels start spinning in vain. One proven technique for preventing the same thing being said over and over is to summarize the meaning of the verbiage: "As I understand it, what you are saying is this . . ."

In any case, it always pays to punctuate the dialogue with carefully-worded summaries. These urge on the pace and help to eliminate ambiguities by having the participants amend the chairman's interpretation of what they said. If there is one function that stands above the rest in the chairman's terms of reference, it is to facilitate a common understanding of the issues among those around the table. This calls for highly attentive listening to pick up exactly and fully what is being said.

If any doubt exists about the meaning of what has been expressed, the chairman must question the speaker until all confusion has been eliminated. It is also part of the chairman's task to rekindle interest in the proceedings when the pace slows, so that salient points are not passed over as people become restless. But he should not be too quick to interrupt silences. Some pauses are necessary to give people time to think.

The responsibility for a good meeting rests with the group

All the good work done at a meeting can amount to nothing if the actions decided upon are not subsequently taken. Tasks should be divided up and assigned before the meeting is adjourned. To guarantee that these things are actually done, deadlines should be set for the completion of each assignment. No one should be allowed to leave the room without a full understanding of the task he or she is expected to carry out.

Up to this point we have concentrated on the role of the chairman of a meeting, if only because it is a role which most people in management and supervisory positions may be called upon to fill at one time or another. But no matter how conscientious and alert a chairman may be, the responsibility for the success or otherwise of the meeting rests equally with everyone in the group.

Much of what is expected of participants in meetings as part of their terms of employment has already been stated in passing: that they be on time, that they come prepared, that they pay close attention to the proceedings, that they

create no distractions, that they keep their remarks to the point, and that they abstain from personal arguments. Participants must not skip ahead of the order of business or take up more than their share of the meeting's time.

In the past few years electronic communications aids and computers have come to the business meeting, making it possible to confer at long distance, to display vivid charts and graphs, and to call up information at a moment's notice. These technological marvels have been introduced to further productivity, which basically means doing more work in less time.

Business leaders in western countries still worry, however, that productivity is not moving forward as much or as quickly as it should be. The drive for greater efficiency in business seems to have slowed down from its former pace.

From the time of the Industrial Revolution on, productivity has been increased mainly through stepping up the output per hour of machines and equipment rather than the direct efforts of human beings. But given the present highly developed state of electronics, the room for advances in productivity through technological means may be growing scarce. It could therefore be that the next leap forward in productivity will come through the more effective management and organization of purely human activities. The meeting is an obvious starting-point for any campaign to put the time spent on the human side of business to better use.

Before that can be done, however, there are psychological blocks to be hurdled. The most formidable of these is the common attitude that meetings are at best a necessary evil and at worst a waste of time. This comes under the heading of self-confirming thinking; if people go into meeting rooms with the expectation that little will be accomplished, that is exactly what is likely to happen. On the other hand, if the meeting is seen as a medium for applying human brain power and imagination to their best effect, the way is open to higher productivity.