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Workplace Meetings Require a Focus on Social Dynamics

“No matter what time it is, wake me, even if it's in the middle of a Cabinet meeting.”

Ronald Reagan

The concept of workplace meetings has gotten a bad rap—often deserved—with the most common complaints being that they are a waste of time and boring. While this critique may be true, meetings are probably here to stay within workplace environments. Therefore, rather than avoiding meetings, the best approach may be to make them as interesting and productive as possible.

Meetings, like most human interactions, are more complex than they may seem. The most commonly cited ways to generate successful meetings focus on goal definition, logistics, and proper organization. However, meetings are social subsystems that often mirror the cultural, emotional, and personal aspects of the overall workplace system.

Before addressing the social dynamics of meetings, we should summarize the more traditional remedies to poorly managed meetings.

- Determine if a meeting is actually needed. If it is not necessary, do not have it.
- Set meeting goals in advance to provide focus to the agenda and proceedings.
- Make sure that the meeting progresses steadily, beginning and ending on time.
- Include every participant in the discussion and end the meeting with a clear action plan.

“A meeting is an event where minutes are taken and hours wasted.” ~ Captain James T. Kirk

People can spend a great deal of time learning how to run successful meetings, following all of the theories, rules, and suggestions provided in the literature and by consultants. However, the best planned and executed meetings can be derailed if the social dynamics of the group are ignored. Here are a few not so rational aspects of meetings that need to be addressed.

- It is important to understand the perspectives and priorities of meeting participants. Many will have strong investment in the issues, while many others will not feel very compelled to engage actively in the discussion.
- Meetings often represent competing agendas from participants; some are passionate about the issues, while others may be seeking political capital or credibility. Other participants may just be there because it is on the schedule.
- Meeting participants vary greatly in their willingness to lead or be led, resulting in power struggles or even efforts to sabotage the meeting's facilitator or leader.

Successful meeting management requires knowledge and expertise related to the more traditional requirements, and sensitivity to the less visible dynamics that represent normal human interaction.

“Purgatory is a meeting that goes off on a tangent. Hell is a meeting that ends there.”

Jack Pitney

Check out an interesting article “The Hidden Side of Meetings” by Ron Ashkenas in the June 25, 2013 edition of HBR Blog Network to learn more about the social systems represented in meetings.