

FESTIVAL OF US

Meetings & Email: Help or Hindrance

'If you had to identify, in one word, why the human race has not achieved and will never achieve its full potential that word would be meetings'

Dave Barry

They may be face to face, virtual, one to ones, team, planning, reviewing or strategising, the list is never ending. Meetings dominate the lives of many, and yet when asked to articulate their feelings towards these get togethers, people's dialogue is rarely overflowing with enthusiasm.

A good meeting is one where there is a sense of purpose both on arrival and departure, and this is achieved by getting the basics right.

- **Pre-meeting papers** – these should be submitted to the attendees at least 24 hours before the meeting
- **Agenda** – An agenda that is copied and pasted week in week out, will become white noise and is likely to be ignored. If you want to evaluate the attention that is paid to your agenda this simple experiment may help. Edit one of the usual items that appears e.g. Item 4 may typically be Financial Update, replace this with A visit from Coco the Clown and see how many people notice this amendment – the number is likely to be less than 50%. My suggestion is to create an agenda that has interest: 'Financial Update' could become 'How we have hit our cost saving targets goals for March', you could use a motivational statement at the top of the agenda, even a different font or colour is likely to get more attention!
- **Environment** – Try and mix up the location or, if this is not possible, ask people to change the place that they sit. If you are having a meeting of less than 30 minutes, consider no chairs – stand and talk.
- **Walk & Talk** – Aside from the obvious benefits of exercise and daylight there are other pluses. The side to side body position naturally reduces the intense eye contact that can occur in a face to face encounter across a desk, and can provide the space and time for people to speak more openly.
- **Laptops** – There will be some occasions when there is benefit in people taking digital notes, referencing papers, etc; however, there will be others when having a laptop open, disengaging from the meeting and doing your own thing is downright rude. So as a basic rule – if the meeting is based on fact and intellect then yes; if the topic is sensitive or has an emotional undercurrent then no
- **Timing** – Too many meetings start late, too many overrun and too many simply do not get everything done. If one person turns up 10 minutes late and there are six people attending, it does not take a genius to work out that an hour has been lost by the collective. If you have a culture of hour-long back to back meetings, try and ensure that some of these start at ten past the hour and finish at ten to the hour – all of a sudden you have reclaimed 20 minutes – 30% of your time. It is also probable that you will achieve just as much in a focused 40 minutes as you would in the hour.

- **Completion** – How often is it that item 1 on the agenda gets 90% of the meeting time and then items 2, 3, 4 and 5 are squeezed into 10 minutes. A meeting that overruns may suit you, but how is that impacting on everyone else in the room? Having someone to control the time can help. Ideally not the Chairperson, a ‘time monitor’ will help police the minutes and ensure that each agenda item runs to time.
- **Energy** – Whilst not ideal, whether triggered by crisis or content, an all-day meeting is sometimes required. If this is the case you should think how the energy, across the group, can be maintained for such a duration. Regular breaks, hydration, getting up and moving and creating clear focus around what the meeting will look to cover in the next hour are all tactics that can help. Do not let the meeting drift.
- **Chairperson** – There are some meetings where there will be greater benefit in the leader contributing as a participant rather than chairing. Being the hierarchical head does not automatically demand that you dictate the proceedings of a meeting.
- **Right people for the right occasion** – If agendas can adapt then so can the participants; there is no harm in asking people whether they feel that their presence is required at every meeting. It could be that their time would be best spent elsewhere, so as long as good communications are in place (minutes, conversations or even a recording of a zoom session) absence in person does not mean exclusion from the subject.

Creating a Communication Culture

Meetings are part of every organisation’s culture, so spending some time to draw up ‘rules of engagement’ can provide benefit to all. Before dictating a policy, try to get insight from a range of people and maybe start by showing a degree of vulnerability. Using an opening gambit of ‘I don’t think meetings are working, what do you think we should do’ is unlikely to stimulate open conversation in the same way as ‘I am not sure I have got meetings right recently, and sometimes find myself feeling a little flat afterwards. Are you okay to provide three ideas that you think would make us all feel more energised?’

By using language that reflects your feelings, rather than your thinking, you are likely to engage people, so that they are working with you, rather than feeling they have yet another chore to complete. It is also worth noting that you rarely get a rebuttal when asking for help!

Once the ideas are in, discuss them as a group, agree upon the best way forward and then look to implement an experiment. Experiments are great things to run in a corporate organisation, they are not a policy or procedure, more a way of exploring best future practice. Experiments can fail, they can be tweaked, but they do not put excessive pressure on the creation of perfect at the first time of asking. Remember to set a time frame for the experiment and ensure that it is reviewed by the group that designed it. It could be that meetings are now a roaring success and a new way of working has been unearthed; it could be that there are some tweaks that need to be done, and occasionally the experiment could have been a disaster and total recalibration needs to take place. Whatever the outcome, an experiment should never be seen as a waste of time.