

What Purpose Meetings? Hands up if you think they can waste your time...

Recently I was working with a group of first line managers in a small but rapidly expanding and very successful company, when I noticed how often the subject of their weekly management meetings would enter the conversation. Most of them agreed that it was important for the group to get together regularly as a management team with the directors and to deal with the latest operational issues.

However, they also said things like “we waste so much time in these meetings” and “they go on for ages” and “we go round and round the same old issues week after week” and so on. No-one had many good words to say about the actual experience of being at the meeting for themselves. I began to wonder...(which of course I was being paid to do!)...and I couldn't resist attending one of these meetings to find out for myself what was happening.

The cost of meetings

It reminded me of a time much earlier in my career within corporate life when sometimes if I got bored in a meeting I would do some mental arithmetic to add up how much that particular meeting was costing the business and pondering on what value it was adding to (or losing from!) the bottom line.

The cost figure could easily rack up into tens of thousands of pounds; some big ones where people had travelled overseas were even into the hundreds of thousands. This arithmetic was a fun activity...but only because it wasn't my business!

And so back to the group of managers. I began to ask them in their one-to-one coaching sessions ‘what exactly did they think the purpose of the meeting was and what did they think the purpose should be?’ At which point it all started to become clearer...they all had very different answers to both of these questions!

Looking from the outside it's obvious, isn't it? Unless there is a common purpose for the meeting and this is well understood, and agreed to by those attending, then it wouldn't be surprising to find that people were getting frustrated about being there – they weren't getting what they came for and nor was anybody else.

Purposeful meetings

Interestingly the purpose of the assignment I was engaged on was to generate a greater sense of ownership within the business by the management population so that individually they could ‘raise their game’ and collectively respond to the huge opportunities for growth confronting the business.

We set about identifying what the purposes of the meeting could be and exploring how they as managers could improve the effectiveness of the meeting by clarifying and developing ownership. Clearly the meeting involved communicating in some way but this could include disseminating information downwards, reporting information upwards, reviewing progress, exploring opportunities, dealing with problems, evaluating options, making decisions, building a sense of team, agreeing actions and responsibilities and so on.

In practice the purpose of a meeting is not often discussed or declared with enough clarity and agreement, and there will be insufficient ‘buy-in’ from the people attending. Consequently, the person running the meeting will usually dictate the proceedings to satisfy their own agenda. Typically the most senior person will be chairing the meeting (as was the case here) and he or she will probably get most of what they want from the meeting, but the danger is that others won't.

Creating ownership

I set the group of managers a task to agree amongst themselves what they thought the purpose of the meeting should be and to approach this with enough depth and clarity so that they were all satisfied and ready to buy in to it.

The next stage was for them to 'sell' this to the Managing Director who chaired the meeting and to negotiate an agreed purpose and format. I also urged them to explore wider options for who should run or 'own' the meeting – since it doesn't have to be the most senior person present.

The MD was of course resistant to making changes because he was already happy with the format, but he did demonstrate a willingness to accommodate or at least try out some of the alternative views. He had to, really - because he was sponsoring the programme to increase ownership within the business! Now they were all in a position to make the meeting work better and be more productive for all of them, so I left them to it!

It was interesting to note how many things had changed when I went back a few weeks later. The journey had not been pain free for them but a new 'regime' had been established. This included a clear and shared sense of purpose, changes around who chaired the meeting (and when), structured timekeeping, better preparation and agenda, as well as improved processes for minute taking, recording of actions and follow up. There was also better discipline in the meetings and good agreement when items could be taken out of the main meeting to be dealt with in side meetings with fewer participants.

There was a greater sense of shared ownership and as a result everyone was pitching in to make the meeting useful, productive and efficient. Consequently, the managers and the directors were all getting more from it and feeling that it was a much better use of their time. This was a satisfying demonstration of the positive impact which can be felt from people proactively 'managing upwards' and challenging the status quo.

I often reflect back on that experience when I talk to people about what causes stress in organisations and how they can improve their time management or ability to prioritise their activities.

In the highly pressured workplace of today the mental arithmetic can't be so much fun anymore. Particularly when I am sitting in 'badly managed' meetings thinking about how late I will have to work tonight to get through my workload. Or how the 'less than productive time' I am wasting in this meeting is eating into my precious time at home, with my partner and children, or cutting down the chances of me getting out on the golf course at the weekend!

Perhaps it would be better for me to invest some of my own time in helping those who set up and run the meetings to improve the standard rather than getting excited about the mental arithmetic!

Peter Jefford
Associate Partner

Peter Jefford is a trainer and coach. He specialises in productivity and performance training, especially Stress Management and personal effectiveness.

Brilliant Minds
Suite 440, 99 Warwick Street
Leamington Spa, CV32 4RB
01926 435609
www.brilliantminds.co.uk