Making Meetings Productive…

It seems that every manager is concerned with improving meetings. Many books are written about the topic. (We checked, and currently Amazon shows 334), seminars are offered all over the country; and there are even videos that offer to teach any of us how better to conduct our meetings.

Yet, for most people that I have the opportunity to observe, meetings remain little but a burden. I cannot recall too many times that people have described with joy the meetings that they have attended. For some, attending meeting is a form of hypnosis….

Clearly, something is amiss…

I wish to suggest that the core difficulty rests in an inappropriate understanding of the purposes of meetings. That is, why do we call meetings in the first place?

When I ask, I am most often told that meetings are conducted to "share information", or "update the team." Sometimes I learn that meetings are conducted "to assure that everyone is on the same page." On occasion, I hear that meetings are called so that "we can make group decisions."

In my view, none of these are appropriate reasons to have a meeting, and (at least intuitively) most people seem to know that.

I have often attended meetings that were so boring that I started to experience a fantasy. I began to look around the table at the talented people in attendance. I then imagined a huge meter on the wall tallying the total wages paid to all the participants. Behind the huge dial was a computer of sorts that somehow factored in the other valuable work that these good people could be doing were they free to make their individual organizational contribution.

I then watched as the huge hand of this imaginary meter started to turn… "Tick… Tick… Tick…"

Often I have thought: "If only there were a way for the people in this room to see that meter, we would all be doing something else right now…"

Indeed, meetings, as usually conducted, are incredibly wasteful of organizational resources of money, and talent, and human energy.

But, that is not the worst of it, as we shall soon see.

Simply stated, the time, talents, dedication, focus, and energy of employees are all far too *precious* to be wasted.

By implication, *nothing* should be done at meetings that can better be done in another way.

The notion that we would bring people together to "share information" is, in my view, an absurd remnant of another era. Assuming, as I do, that we are typically working with people who can read, there are obviously much more efficient ways to share information.

But what then, of "group decision-making" as a worthy purpose for meetings?

One of the most overused words in the modern organizational vocabulary is "consensus." Many people tell me that on their teams, they make decisions by consensus. When I ask that they describe the decision making process to me in more detail it usually becomes clear that that are describing a modality that I prefer to describe as "decision by fatigue."

Usually, the group, or team, discusses a matter until they are too tired to continue, or until it is time for them to attend to other tasks (often, their next meeting.) In either case, the decision is most certainly not made by consensus.

Just what is consensus?

Consensus means that a group works to generate a solution to which *each member commits.*

It is rather easy to describe, but, as our experience clearly tells us, it is sometimes extremely difficult to achieve.

For organizational purposes, consensus should rarely, if ever, be used. This is not only because achieving consensus is difficult. Consensus ought not be used because it has one profound limitation: One cannot tell in advance how long a consensual decision will take (if, in fact, consensus can be reached at all.)

It is now appropriate to ask:

Do meetings have any useful role in modern organizational life? And if so, just what *should* happen at meetings?

As I said earlier: "nothing should be done at meetings that can better or more efficiently be done in another way."

In other words, when we take people from other aspects of their work to have a meeting, they should *interact.* This is because there is no other setting in which people can fully extract the (many) benefits of

productive interaction. We can easily communicate by phone or email, but certain extremely important things can only happen when people are together, and have the opportunity to *engage* with one another face-to-face.

We know that managers have meetings to "assure that people are on the same page" but the very setting of the meeting, that is, the opportunity to interact, encourages people to move in precisely the opposite direction. Most of us sense that much greater benefit would be extracted from honest exploration of our *differences.* As a result, having a meeting to assure uniformity of perspective (getting people on the "same page") is using the wrong tool for the job.

With an exploration of their *differences* (or, dare I use the word, *conflicts*) people experience the opportunity for greater creativity, loyalty, connection, engagement, energy, and commitment to the work they do individually, and to the work they do together.

Quite obviously these are very significant benefits to any organization, and they can best occur when people have the opportunity to engage, or *interact.* These things can best happen at *meetings.*

But, of course, many people are not highly skilled at the sort of interactions I have just described. They might be hesitant to express their views, or might be somehow limited in their ability to productively respond when others do.

If we think about doing things that will contribute to the enhancement of these important skills, we will see that such growth happens best through (ah, here it is again…) *interaction.*

We call the process of contributing to others skills, or capacities, *support.*

Support must happen interactively. *Group support* can best happen at meetings.

And finally, for support to succeed, it is necessary that people *know* one another. If I wish to contribute to the capacities of a colleague, I am most likely to succeed to the degree that I understand something about those capacities. Knowing someone's *real* strengths requires something much more than a casual interaction. It requires interacting *in depth*. And that can happen only when we are together, *interacting*.

Meetings will be more enjoyable, stimulating, and productive only when participants are encouraged to use that setting to *learn about one another* so that they can provide successful *support* that will allow them to explore their *differences or conflicts* productively.

For that to happen, those who conduct meetings must shift their perspective about their own role and responsibilities. Rather than encouraging an overly orderly process, with careful listening as each person who speaks in sequence, leaders of successful meetings must encourage authentic interaction. Sometimes such interaction is, shall we say, *less than orderly*. Of course, based upon the concepts above you might expect me to say that such interactions are *more than orderly*. That is because when meetings are truly interactive they have much greater benefit for everyone having the good fortune to attend.

The material above is offered in our desire to share our thoughts with our many colleagues.

Of course, we sincerely value any reactions you might have.

If you wish to reach us, please call us at 866-659-3169, or send an email to downloads@soleassociates.com.

We thank you for your interest in our work…

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