

Effective Communication

A successful organization is one in which people communicate well and work together effectively. But that's easier said than done.

Meetings are the bane of many a manager's existence, but they are also an important way of building and maintaining constructive interaction in a company. How do you make sure that the meetings in your company get the work done? How do you plan and run meetings so that they leave attendees feeling more committed to achieving organizational goals?

In the first article below, Paul Sandwith lays out a practical approach to meetings that meet a company's functional and symbolic needs.

Meetings are just one way in which groups of people work and communicate. If your company is moving to a system of self-directed work teams, you probably have firsthand experience of the need for better ways of working together to make decisions and solve problems.

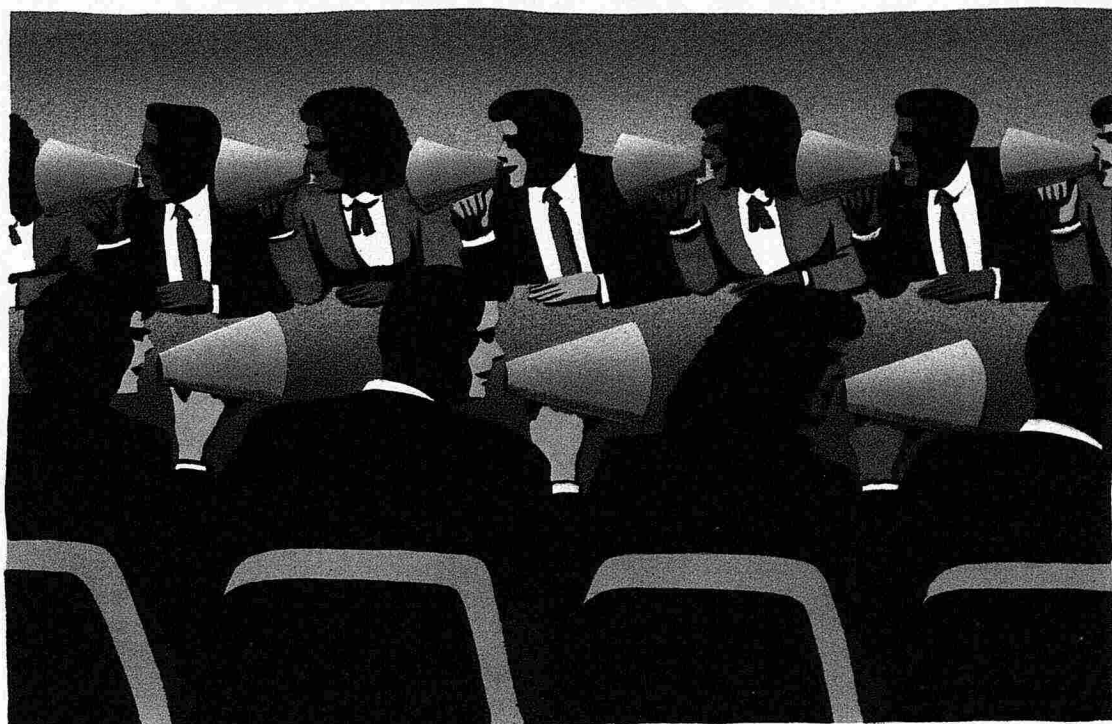
In the second article below, Paul Brauchle and David Wright offer some advice for helping self-directed teams to help themselves.

Better Meetings for Better Communication

By Paul Sandwith, Box 1392, Grand Bend, Ontario, Canada N0M 1T0.

The 9 a.m. meeting starts at 9:08. Except for one or two stragglers, most of those who are supposed to attend have arrived.

The boss starts with the usual speech about how he or she knows everyone is busy, but that these weekly meetings are essential. Then the boss promises (falsely, it will turn out) to keep the meeting brief.



David Chen

The boss drones on about his or her perspective on various items, in no particular order, sometimes pausing for questions or comments. Occasionally, some mild debates result, but most often the boss's words are met with silence.

The meeting finally grinds to a halt. The boss's commentary has been exhausted, some insightful comments from others have been overruled or ignored, and a few brave but misguided souls have flogged their dead horses once again.

If that scene sounds familiar, you are not alone. By some recent estimates, the average manager spends about 20 weeks of the year in meetings, 6 weeks of which are a complete waste of time. Many people in most organizations regularly attend meetings they see as useless.

A critical challenge for companies and managers is to find ways to make meetings more productive for the organization and for those who attend them.

Powerful tools used badly

Meetings are one of the most powerful communication tools in companies, second only to organizational

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grapevines. When people come together in a meeting, they communicate a lot of information. But much of the communication is hidden and much of it is unintentional.

People listen to what is said and not said. They watch how things are said and how people react. They evaluate the way in which the meeting was conducted, the quality of decisions reached, and the use of attendees' time.

People in a wide range of organizations share some common complaints about meetings:

- Meetings are boring.
- They are a waste of time.
- Many are poorly organized, unstructured, and chaotic.
- They last too long.
- We have them too often, or we don't have enough of them.
- Nothing is ever decided in meetings.
- People aren't asked for input and no one will speak up.

At first glance, those sound like symptoms of functional problems involving domineering leaders and a lack of purpose, structure, and direction. But more fundamentally, the symptoms suggest that people in organizations tend to overlook the role of meetings as symbolic communication processes.

Functional and symbolic

The purposes of organizational meetings fall into two interrelated categories: functional and symbolic.

Meetings are functional in that we intend for them to accomplish concrete, practical work. Meetings that are well-managed functionally can develop competence for the organization.

Some examples of functional purposes of meetings:

- disseminating information about new products
- seeking information about work problems
- building support for new ideas among those who will be responsible for implementing them.

Meetings are symbolic because the purposes for which they are used and the ways in which they are conducted send meaningful messages to employees about a company. Meetings that are well-managed sym-

bolically can develop commitment to the organization.

Symbolic purposes of organizational meetings include the following:

- establishing norms and values
- acknowledging individual worth
- developing networks of communication and support that carry on after a meeting.

Meetings can achieve both competence and commitment when meeting leaders recognize their symbolic and functional purposes and manage both aspects well. Work results are achieved, meetings operate efficiently, and attendees feel that they've been part of something worthwhile and rewarding. They leave such meetings with enhanced commitments to individual, team, and organization goals.

Well-run meetings succeed on both the functional and symbolic levels, as the following two examples illustrate.

Example 1: maintenance shift meetings

The maintenance manager for a two-shift food-processing company recognized the need for close coordination of maintenance crews on the two shifts.

The manager instituted and led daily shift-change meetings to fulfill that need. The maintenance manager, the two shift maintenance supervisors, and the tool room supervisor came to the daily meetings, which were held for about 20 minutes just before the shift change.

The meetings focused on specific problems on each shift, joint projects, upcoming work, and other relevant matters. They were informal but followed a set structure. Everyone participated actively. The manager made sure that people listened to each other, that decisions were noted, and that follow-up actions were built in.

The maintenance meetings were successful on both functional and symbolic levels.

Functionally, they were timely and well organized. They achieved results.

Symbolically, the meetings linked two interdependent maintenance groups. They also included attendees in the management team and helped

develop that team by providing opportunities for useful participation in joint decision making.

Example 2: monthly management meetings

A division manager at a manufacturing company was concerned about poor communication among departmental managers, and decided to make some changes to address the issue.

After several sessions spent in identifying problems and developing new approaches, the group decided on three-hour monthly meetings. The meetings would include 12 management staff members from operations, marketing, and finance and administration.

The team adopted a standard agenda that included the following items:

- general communication updates
- business carried over from the last meeting
- new business
- problem solving and action planning.

An agenda was developed before each meeting, with input from every department. Managers took turns arranging and facilitating the monthly meetings and taking notes.

The meeting facilitator's role was to ensure that the group

- followed the agenda
- made efficient use of time
- encouraged open, constructive participation
- fully addressed and resolved the issues being discussed.

Commitment to action and to follow-up were built in.

After some growing pains, the management meetings were judged to be successful.

On a functional level, the managers quickly and easily resolved problems that had never been addressed, or that had previously caused disputes and conflict. They identified and took advantage of opportunities for improvement. Team members' communication outside the meetings also improved substantially, as they increased their understanding of each other and of their common goals.

Symbolically, the team meetings allowed people to join forces to

resolve problems. They increased levels of participation and teamwork, and came to be seen as fundamental to the management of the division.

The same division recently underwent a successful transition to new ownership. The team was able to weather the uncertainty with relative ease, while maintaining effectiveness and increasing revenues. Much of the credit was attributed to the meeting process.

"We started this team meeting process in the nick of time," said one manager. "If we hadn't learned to communicate with each other, listen to each other, and solve problems as a team, we never would have made it through the transition."

A recipe for better meetings

Successful meetings don't happen by accident. They are the result of careful planning and effective facilitation. Here are some key ideas to ensuring that meetings achieve both functional and symbolic success.

Make every meeting purposeful, "resultful," and brief. Otherwise, everyone wastes time. Establish several meaningful objectives for a meeting and consider what else could be done instead of holding the meeting.

Brief meetings are almost always better than long ones. Don't short-circuit the need for discussion and consideration of ideas, but lay out a time plan and try to manage within it. A concrete meeting agenda will help you achieve useful results.

But structure should be balanced by informality. Meetings help meet attendees' social interaction needs. An informal approach to meetings suggests allowing for some social dialogue, treating people respectfully, allowing humor, and encouraging discussion.

Meeting leaders should be inclusive and facilitative. Active, constructive participation is essential to the functional success of a meeting—making sure ideas are discussed, problems are solved, and decisions are reached.

Participation is also essential on the symbolic level. People who are invited to join in the group and share their thoughts feel a sense of belong-

ing. Their commitment to the meeting and its outcomes is enhanced.

The meeting leader plays an important role in asking for input, ensuring that all perspectives are heard, working through differences or conflicts, building agreement, and helping the group achieve solutions.

Closing the loop is vital to meeting success. A truly effective meeting ends conclusively. Progress has been made on some issues; other issues have been completely resolved. Before the meeting ends, attendees should review the meeting objectives, the results that were expected, and the agenda. They should note and summarize any progress or results achieved, any actions to be taken, and any plans for subsequent meetings. If someone has been keeping minutes, attendees should receive copies as soon as possible after the meeting ends.

All of that closing activity ensures that the work of the meeting will in fact be completed. It also shows attendees that the time and effort they have spent have been worthwhile and are valued.

Fourteen Team Building Tips

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More and more companies are grouping their employees into self-directed work teams. Because the transition to a team structure redefines work relationships, it poses a special set of challenges for trainers.

Here are 14 tips for trainers who want to make successful contributions to team building in organizations.

Know how economics affects business

It's important to know general economic forces and trends that affect the company's area of business.

For example, say the company manufactures electronic equipment. A trainer might need to know if competition from the European Community or the Pacific Basin could cause managers and workers to feel extra pressure.

Read industry periodicals and the firm's in-house publications. If you are an external consultant, interview company officials at various levels before taking the job. Such interviews can alert trainers to any potential problems caused by economic conditions.

Get management support first

Management backing is essential to the effective development of a self-directed work group. Management needs to show support from the outset and throughout the developmental period. Everyone should understand that management is behind the team concept and will support it throughout the process.

Ask top managers for their perceptions of self-directed work groups. Ask what sorts of behaviors will indicate success for such a work group, once the training is over. If managers don't really understand what they say they want, continue to discuss the issues until you are sure of agreement in thought and definition.

An important part of keeping management support is to keep managers informed. Let managers know what's happening. Give them frequent reports. Verbal reports given in face-to-face meetings may be more effective than written reports. Most managers like to see an agenda that lists the issues that will be discussed. They want the chance to ask questions and clarify issues.

The best way to get management support is to get managers involved and invested in the team building.

Persuade midlevel managers to attend team development sessions. If managers don't attend, a work team may develop far beyond managers' perceptions of where it is in the process. When such a unit begins to act in self-directed ways, managers tend to resist. Such opposition sends team members strong negative messages that can inhibit progress.

The final step in a work team's development may be a formal transfer of power. Management involvement is vital to such a transfer.

For example, one plant manager brought in the unit's budget, put it up on an overhead projector, described the budget categories, and said, "Okay, it's your budget. Spend it. Use it. You are in charge of it."

That transfer of power from the manager to the work group made a big difference to team members. It demonstrated to them that they really were in charge of their own work activities.

Know how management sees things

If management sees team building as a temporary balm to soothe workers' low morale, its sincerity may be questioned. But if management is genuinely concerned with implementing sound team building practices, then team-related training can be helpful.

Managers must truly buy into the concept of self-directed work teams. They must be willing to go to some lengths to implement them in the company.

Management's attitude must be clear to employees. Team building should not come across as "this year's gimmick," but as a solid, long-term approach for building a better organization.

Be careful about what you promise

It is important to avoid making promises that you might not be able to keep.

When you look into the company's situation and the different options that are available, you may conclude that certain team building techniques are more likely to be effective than others. Even so, it is better not to guarantee results.

Focus on the positive aspects of the procedure that you will use, not on results that may or may not occur. Guarantee only that you will implement the best practices available and use techniques that have a good chance of succeeding.

This is particularly important if managers demand that you use methods you don't believe will work.

In fact, if you are an external consultant, it may be better to lose a contract than to set yourself up for probable failure.

Assess employees' perceptions

Past training has undoubtedly affected employees' attitudes toward any development efforts. If employees have bad feelings about training in general, then trainers fight an uphill battle, no matter how good they are.

Assess the employees' attitudes toward training in general and team building in particular. Do they view self-directed teams as a gimmick? Do they think forming teams is management's way of flattening the organizational structure? Or do they see it as a useful step toward the company's goals?

An easy way to assess attitudes is to conduct a survey of employee attitudes toward training and team building. If such information is available at the start of an intervention, it can help trainers anticipate obstacles they may encounter along the way.

Establish rapport quickly

Trainers need to establish rapport with work groups as quickly as possible. Honesty usually helps build rapport.

For example, as external consultants, we wanted members of a particular work team to know that, as consumers, they had some control over the intervention. We acknowledged to them that management could fire us at any time. But, we said, the work team itself also had the power to dismiss us.

The group, forced to take a look at what it really wanted, gave us an overwhelming vote of confidence.

Don't be too directive

Many group members come from authoritarian systems. They may not feel comfortable in environments that allow them to make decisions for themselves. This is especially true of teams made up of employees who have worked together for many years. Many such groups actually prefer to have things set out for them in an autocratic way.

For example, we once told members of a group that we wanted to

help them develop their repertoire of techniques to use as a self-directed work team. They replied, "Fine. Tell us what to do."

In such cases the trainer must find ways to move the group toward behaviors that will make it an effective team. Sometimes those behaviors can be carefully shaped by the judicious use of recognition.

Recognize and reward teams

Sometimes a work group that has been somewhat autonomous in the past will claim that it is already a self-directed team and doesn't need development. Workers may consider themselves self-directed, when actually they are only semi-autonomous in their work behavior.

A useful technique here is to specify clearly the important behaviors that characterize a self-directed work group. Each time the group members display one of those behaviors, let them know that they are acting as a high-quality self-directed work team. Try to get management's recognition of that specific behavior.

For example, an autonomous work team developed a new work-order system. It had never done that before, and the new system did away with considerable duplication. When management endorsed the change as a positive step, it provided a clear reward for the team and helped shape the desired behavior.

Consult management about bad news

During most team building efforts, it is necessary at times to tell management things it doesn't want to hear. Being the bearer of bad news is never easy, but it may be necessary for the success of the project.

One of the best methods for deciding how to share bad news with managers is to ask early in the process how they would like to be informed if you discover things that may make them uncomfortable. Do managers want you to come right out and relate bad news in person? Would they rather hear about it in a memo? Would they prefer learning of it in another way?

Arm yourself with information about their preferences. Then you

can present bad news, if necessary, in a way that managers have already agreed they can accept.

Be patient with outlaws

In a team building situation, "outlaws" are among the more pervasive problems a trainer faces. An outlaw is a team member who refuses to attend or take an active part in the team building sessions. He or she simply does not want to make the investment required for building a work team.

Outlaws are often high on the seniority list, or about to retire.

Probably the best thing to do with outlaws is to leave them alone. Sooner or later, if the team is successful, peer pressure will build. At some point, outlaws will be compelled to participate in order to protect their interests.

That's especially true if management supports the team's decisions and if success begins to highlight the strengths of the emerging work team.

Focus on cognitive and behavioral change

The most effective team building activities are those with both cognitive and behavioral bases.

For example, team members may participate in a group technique in which they list problems in company work teams and assign them levels of importance.

Before team members suggest ways to solve a problem and implement a solution, they should analyze the facts of the problem—concentrating on what they know. That is the cognitive element. Then they can look at the behavioral aspects—suggesting ways to improve team building and change behaviors.

Involve managers and workers

Integrating layers of management and workers into team building sessions can yield positive results. If managers are sincere about the im-

portance of teams, they can serve as valuable resources for ideas and inputs. When managers and employees share their views in productive ways, they enhance communication at all levels of the organizational structure.

You may decide not to include management in worker team building sessions, and vice versa. If you prefer to train managers and workers in separate sessions, then at least remember to keep each party aware of what the other is working on.

Use team building on the job

Team building in the classroom is one thing; team building on the job is quite another.

Team building strategies may be most effective when used in direct work situations. For instance, a team building group should hold meetings in its natural work setting, when possible, rather than in a training room. If team members are involved in cross-training, why not have it done on site?

Evaluate effectiveness

Various strategies are available for evaluating the effectiveness of team building in an organization.

Have participants fill out standard written and oral evaluations after individual team building sessions.

It's also a good idea to keep track of management's expectations. Meeting regularly with managers allows for their continuing input.



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