



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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MANAGERIALLY SPEAKING

BY MARCEL GINGRAS

In previous editions, I've noted one factor that inhibits the effectiveness of organizations is the absence of good control over internal meetings. I am sure many organizations do an excellent job controlling meetings; however, I have seen several organizations that lack the discipline to optimize time spent in meetings. This article summarizes the issue, identifies some symptoms to watch for and identifies tangible actions that can be taken to bring control over financial resources being invested in meetings.

Why is This an Issue?

Meetings are not bad, per se. In fact, they are a very good way to communicate, arrive at decisions with proper input and create a shared mindset within the organization. In fact, physical meetings may be much more efficient than e-mail meetings, which may also be time consuming, create unnecessary communication problems and ineffectively deal with issues.

Meetings sometimes lack the proper structure and discipline that may exist for other activities in the organization. Most companies need to set clear spending guidelines when it comes to hard cost items where a physical disbursement needs to take place. However, when it comes to meetings many organizations are reckless at accounting for the meeting's cost and holding people accountable for the results. In reality, every day there may be thousands of dollars wasted on meetings that do not need to take place, meetings that last too long, meetings attended by too many people or worst case scenario, meetings that fail to produce any tangible results.

The unspoken feeling is that as long as it is an internal meeting, there is no cost to the organization, as people are paid regardless of the way they use their time. In reality, internal meetings pose a great cost to the organization. Organizations could operate with fewer people in the absence of wasteful meetings. They could be more effective dealing with other issues or people could simply shorten their work day and be less exhausted from spending long days in the office. If people are not exhausted, they can be more creative.

Some senior people are so booked up in meetings that they have little time to do their job and deal with client issues and employee issues. For many people, corporate life is an ongoing flow of meetings during the day followed by a mad rush back to their office to make or return phone calls, late departures for dealing with crisis situations and evenings or weekends spent at catching up on e-mails that have piled up while they were sitting in meetings. Hence, any positive step toward improving management of meeting time is likely to produce a huge incremental impact on the effectiveness of any organization.

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Some Symptoms that You May Have a Meeting Issue

I am sure that every one of you has been in contact with organizations where people are totally unreachable. Essentially, the answer is that people cannot be reached because they are in meetings. The problem is too many meetings that last too long. If one can cut 25 percent of meetings and cut 25 percent of the time in each meeting, this is a 44 percent time savings in meetings. Even a 10 percent/10 percent reduction (quite achievable) is a 19 percent reduction in time spent in meetings. So, if people are always in meetings, maybe they don't need to be!!

Another symptom of an issue with meetings may be obvious if you attend too many meetings where the material is not organized, people are not prepared, there are no stated deliverables for the meeting, you never see minutes, etc. A good clue that you have a major problem is when you attend a meeting and people have a problem determining who exactly called the meeting and who is running the meeting. If this has never happened to you, you are very fortunate indeed.

Finally, if you are invited to meetings with no end time, it may be an indication that people should have more respect for other people's time. Again, I have

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seen this on several occasions, especially in meetings where I had limited control over imposing an end time; as you may guess these were meetings called by more senior people or people from other parts of the organization.

Tangible Actions to Optimize Meeting Time

There are several ways to attempt to make more effective use of meeting time. I have indicated below some of the practical ways, and in the next section, I have attached a real-life example of meeting guidelines sent to one of the organizations for which I was responsible.

1. Tighten up controls over who can call meetings and accountabilities for time spent in meetings. At some point, I had toyed with the idea of asking people to identify the cost of specific meetings based on per-hour charges. We abandoned the idea because it was too complex. However, if people had to explain why they incurred a \$2500 charge for a three-hour meeting or if their budget was accountable for the expense, I am sure meeting time and number of attendees would be reduced.

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2. Have an agenda with beginning and end times for each item. It does not mean that the meeting has to unfold exactly as scripted; however, it provides a sense of joint responsibility to stay on schedule. I introduced this with a board of trustees with high-level outside board members. At first, they thought it was strange and then they liked it as everyone understood when the meeting had to finish, and it helped plan the meeting content and their departure time.

3. Tighten up time allocation and encourage people to have a clear idea of the expected outcome. When running internal management meetings, sometimes we had people from lower down in the organization requesting to cover a specific item in person. Typically they would ask for 45 minutes out of three hours. The first step was to ask them to do it in 15 or 20 minutes and when they came to the meeting I would ask them to state clearly the purpose of their presentation and the expected outcome, i.e., information only, request for feedback or immediate decision, etc... This avoided having chat sessions as opposed to working sessions.

4. Have a clock in every meeting room. It seems too simple, but it works. Many people just lose sight of the time and at some point people realize they are out of time; at that point, people start leaving, there is no conclusion to the meeting and another meeting gets called two weeks later to continue the discussion.

5. Send a clear message to people that it is acceptable to decline to attend certain meetings. At some point, we issued meeting guidelines and told people that they could decline attending meetings if they only had a marginal contribution to make, and use colleagues or minutes to obtain the information they needed. All of a sudden, attendance at meetings started to decline as people started making a judgment on cost of attending versus expected benefits.

An Example

As mentioned previously, in one organization I was responsible for we had issued fairly detailed guidelines to help people assess the way they conducted meetings and also the need to attend such meetings. I have reproduced on the following page the covering memo, which provides a pretty good idea of the message we were trying to send to the organization.

Conclusion

Organizations are always looking for quick methods to increase their profitability and effectiveness. In

MEMO

RE Meeting Management
FROM Marcel Gingras

It's said that the only certainties in life are death and taxes... but most of us would probably add "meetings" to that list. While we can't escape the first two items, there is a lot we can do to manage meetings within the organization.

Meetings carry a heavy price tag, both from a financial and a productivity perspective. They cost so much per person, per hour, plus fixed costs, and the "productivity lost" costs are equally large. While you're attending meetings, your work is piling up and you can't take phone calls – which means often you work late to play catch-up.

We believe that meetings are an important tool to help us achieve our overall business goals and objectives. As part of our focus this year on improving leadership and management capabilities, the Leadership Team has adopted the following practices in order to establish consistency in our approach to meeting management.

Philosophy Regarding Meeting Management

- *Be discerning* - About the need for meeting; plan meetings with a purpose.
- *Prepare* - Release an agenda 24-48 hours prior to a meeting and clearly indicate any advance preparation that needs to be done.
- *Arrive on time* - With advance preparation done, and be ready to participate.
- *Finish on time* - Even better, aim to finish each meeting 15-30 minutes early.
- *Involve everyone* - As a meeting leader, ensure that you involve all participants and pursue opportunities to solicit input.
- *Participate* - As a participant, feel free to ask about the purpose of a meeting, the agenda, your role, etc. Be prepared to participate and be involved.
- *Eliminate* - Limit attendance to only people who need to attend. Don't hesitate to speak up if you feel you or others do not need to be involved.
- *Question* - The need for any meeting held on a regular basis or agenda topics that are the same, meeting after meeting.
- *Document* - Ensure someone is acting as a meeting recorder/scribe, who will then issue follow-up action items, accountability assignments, timelines, etc., ideally within 48 hours after a meeting.
- *Go with the flow* - Formal meetings that are well planned are important. So are informal meetings that "just happen." Know which type of meeting will best serve your purposes and achieve your results.
- *Silence is acceptance* - If you can't attend a meeting, provide input in advance. If you don't provide input, people will assume you are in agreement.
- *Support the outcome* - Often the goal of a 100 percent consensus is neither reasonable nor realistic. In such situations, strive for an 80 percent solution, 90 percent consensus and 100 percent commitment. Remember, whether you're in agreement or not, it is important to publicly support the group efforts.

We strongly encourage you to review these guidelines and carefully consider how they can be applied to how you manage your involvement in meetings. Hopefully this will give you an opportunity to consider your meeting schedule and make some changes.

many organizations, especially head office organizations or service type organizations, the human resources costs constitute a major expense item. For organizations in which people spend a significant

amount of time in meetings, it might be wise for management to pay some attention to how such a significant time consuming item is being managed. ■