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## **INTRODUCTION**

Meetings are a vehicle through which managers can communicate vital organizational information, involve employees in the decision-making process, and keep everyone up-to-date on issues relevant to the field. However, meetings can also be ineffective, demoralizing, and waste time. A manager needs to find the balance between using meetings to their fullest potential and recognizing their downfalls. Striking this balance can be complicated, as it relies on managerial work outside the meeting space to ensure employees will rise to the occasion, but it's important that managers understand the benefits and limitations of meetings before implementing a strategy.

## **BENEFITS**

In order for procedures, programs, and strategic planning to take full effect, they must be discussed and reported on a regular basis. Meetings give the structure necessary to explore and decide on issues; give employees a chance to contribute; and create a safe atmosphere in which employees can reaffirm their commitment to the organization.

When confronting an issue, there are three types of meetings that should be held: critical information sharing, discussion, and decision-making (Dearstyne 186). Each of these meeting types represents a different level of organizational importance and all three should not, arguably cannot, be done at the same time. In order to arrive at the point where a manager must make a

decision, or take “a course of action from among multiple possibilities,” (Dearstyne 207), the “possibilities” must be researched, presented, and discussed. The process needs to start with filling knowledge gaps through information sharing in the first set of meetings; then evolves to brainstorming and discussion of possibilities and options in the second set of meetings; and finally, the manager must lead employees in making a final decision in the last set of meetings.

Meetings with a clear purpose allow employees to effectively contribute and share their ideas. Meetings are a great venue for discussion and using individual talents for organizational benefit. Managers should “explicitly invite and acknowledge others’ ideas,” (Detert 24) in the meeting space to ensure that all points are discussed and all those affected by the ultimate decision are able to contribute. Managers can ensure participation by the right employees through pre-meeting work, which will be discussed later in this paper. Though an employee may work at an organization every day, they rarely have the opportunity to share their opinions with co-workers and bosses, whether because of normal communication barriers or frequent teleworking. Meetings provide the space for those who have hitherto kept silent on certain issues to make their opinions known and, hopefully, add different perspectives and possibilities to the mix.

Additionally, providing a “soapbox” for opinions, and not belittling or punishing those opinions, creates a safe atmosphere in which employees will start to develop a trusting relationship with their manager and the organization as a whole. If a manager can create a meeting atmosphere where contributions are welcomed and encouraged, employees will no longer keep their mouth shut for “self-preservation” (Detert 24) or the fear of being fired because their opinions might differ from those at the top. In his article, “How to Run a Meeting,” Antony Jay frequently makes the point that meetings give employees a connection to the parent

organization that can't be found elsewhere. Not only do meetings "help every individual understand both the collective aim of the group and the way in which his own and everyone else's work can contribute to the group's success" (Jay 45), but they also can create a culture of collaboration and trust. In this workplace culture, employees attend meetings to ensure that their opinions are being heard by the organization and even if they don't agree with the outcome, their attendance represents an unspoken agreement that the employee will go along with whatever decision is made (Jay 45). Meetings are highly beneficial not only to organizational planning and reporting, but also to employees' self-value and relationship with the organization.

### **LIMITATIONS**

When managers do not understand how to run meetings or if employees are not willing to participate, then valuable time is wasted with no clear purpose. The limitations of meetings include relying on employees to do "homework" before the meeting; limiting or offending extroverts; and making introverts feel uncomfortable.

Much of the literature surrounding effective meetings makes the point that informational and background materials, especially lengthy ones that don't benefit from in-person review, should be circulated before the meeting (Jay 50). Even if the manager gives ample time for review, is clear that review is required, or highlights key items (Dearstyne 187), passing out meeting prep materials is ultimately equitable to a teacher assigning reading and not giving an in-class pop quiz. It will be to the employees' own detriment if they don't read the prep materials, but unless the manager decides to test their knowledge during the meeting—which will do nothing but cause anger—there are no consequences. Therefore, a meeting can be a total waste of time if the manager is the only one prepared, as employees will not be educated enough

to contribute and discussion items will almost certainly stall out or become confined to those who did the “homework.”

As discussed earlier, meetings can be beneficial to the organization because they invite open discussion and contributions, which helps to build the ideal trusting relationship between employee and employer. However, if managers do not know how to effectively run a meeting with a mix of introverts and extroverts in attendance, then the atmosphere will change quickly from one of open communication and trust to hostility and discomfort. Extroverted, “garrulous” (Jay 56) employees can be great assets to discussions. They are not afraid to speak their minds, but sometimes they over-extend their “welcome,” per say. There are many strategies for dealing with employees who dominate the conversation, including: politely cutting them off; talking with them separately about limiting their contributions to only essential pieces; or steering the conversation towards others (Dearstyne 187; Jay 55-56). However, if these strategies are implemented incorrectly, these employees can feel that their ideas are invaluable or that their personality is being attacked. Instead of limiting their contributions, these extroverted employees might revert to a “hostile” silence (Jay 56), which is extremely detrimental to a meeting atmosphere, especially if the manager decides to focus on the so-called “introverted” employees to make up the difference.

Managers might feel they need to stop discussion amongst a few in order to bring in employees who have not contributed, or those labeled as introverted. However, these employees might not have anything of merit to contribute. For example, if an employee is required to attend a meeting for a topic (or series of topics) with which she is not familiar, then she might choose not to offer her opinion. Her silence can be taken as general agreement (Jay 56). However, if there is a meeting on a topic she feels comfortable with, then she will contribute to her fullest

extent. It is, therefore, harmful to both the meeting's effectiveness and the employee's morale if the manager tries to draw contributions out of her during meetings where she does not feel qualified to share. It's up to the manager to decide if an employee's silence is one of "diffidence" (Jay 56) or if they're saving their contributions for another topic, and if that decision is made on-the-spot and comes to the wrong conclusion, then the employee's discomfort will rub off on the rest of the attendees. Finding the balance between ensuring meeting attendees are well-informed before the meeting, knowing when extroverts need to curb their contributions, especially when they've ceased to be useful, and giving introverts the chance to shine when they are ready takes some strategy and work outside of the meeting space.

### **MANAGER IMPLEMENTATION**

The manager should focus on the strengths of meetings and try to lessen the impact of their limitations by working with employees to ensure valid contributions; encouraging debate of ideas; and following up with action items—all of which can be achieved through creating and sticking to a tight agenda. An agenda is the most effective way to ensure that the meeting runs smoothly and achieves its purpose(s). The manager should schedule meetings for the entire year (Dearstyne 186) and add-on meetings should be scheduled at least two weeks in advance. This gives the manager ample time to start drafting the ever-important agenda. The agenda should include the following items: name/date/location of meeting; start/stop times (of entire meeting and of each item); list of attendees; action/decision items; discussion items; information about current decisions and topics; and update items (Dearstyne 186). Though some argue that agendas should be lengthy, with each item described in a few sentences to keep people on task and informed of issues (Jay 49), I argue that agendas should be brief and the manager—rather than a piece of paper—should keep people informed and on track. The agenda is a game plan for the

meeting, but if it is too specific or lengthy employees may feel that their contributions are invalid or off-topic. Brevity will allow for open discussion and freedom to contribute ideas.

The first step in drafting the agenda is to decide who should attend the meeting. The inclusion is better than exclusion (Dearstyne 186) principle is a safe one, especially for information sharing meetings. However, if the meetings are working towards a decision on a specialized issue, yet the manager has a list of attendees reaching an ineffective number for decision-making—Jay suggests 12 is the “outside limit” (49)—it is in the manager’s best interest to reach out to employees and gauge their interest or opinions on the issue. Though it does require extra work on the manager’s part, this “canvassing” reminds employees that the manager’s door is always open and that the employees’ time is valuable. If an employee has nothing to contribute on to an issue, even if the final decision will affect them directly, then they shouldn’t have to attend and can use that time to contribute their skills elsewhere. Through these conversations, the manager can also survey employees about possible discussion items or other update/informational issues, which will further flush out the agenda.

Once the manager has a list of attendees who have expressed interest in contributing to the discussion or decision-making process, she must also draft action and discussion items that will encourage a debate of ideas. By preparing an agenda that will give each “side” of an issue ample time to argue their case, the manager can further gain the respect and trust of employees, while also cultivating a learning organization which has an “appreciation of differences” that sparks innovation and “fresh thinking” (Garvin 111). Though it is important for the manager to schedule discussion items, it is also essential that she keep employees on task and make sure that the conversation doesn’t stall out or regress to a heated debate between two people. There are strategies (discussed previously) for ensuring that employees don’t dominate the conversation,

but the most effective seems to be politely interjecting, picking out their main point, confirming its validity, and then asking the meeting as a whole if anyone else would like to respond—this is a great way of summarizing the item and calling its discussion to a close. Additionally, if discussion items stall out, the manager needs to recognize that perhaps the employees most qualified to contribute may not be present, or that employees need to be better educated about the topic at hand (Jay 55). Hopefully, this limitation can be addressed before the meeting as the manager communicates with potential attendees, but it's important that the manager recognizes this may be an issue and note it in the meeting summaries and follow-up items.

Finally, once the manager has followed the agenda, summarized each item, and called the meeting to a close, she must send the attendees a meeting summary, discussion summary, decisions made, follow-up assignments, (Dearstyne 187) and meeting minutes on request. This is essential to ensuring the effectiveness of any meeting; without sending a formal summary and assignments, employees can leave a meeting thinking a completely different decision was made, based on their perception of the discussion or simply because they misunderstood or misheard. Misunderstandings, misconceptions, or a “blocked flow of information...prohibits an organization's capacity to compete, solve problems, innovate, meet challenges, and achieve goals” (Bennis, “Creating a Transparent Culture”). Though an employee misunderstanding a meeting decision or discussion item isn't necessarily an example of the manager blocking the flow of information, not ensuring that everyone is on the same page through a follow-up summary most definitely is. Sending out summaries and follow-up assignments ensures open communication and can also inform employees who did not attend the meeting what took place and what decisions were made.

## CONCLUSION

Meetings can reach their full potential in many ways, but it is ultimately up to managers to act as the mediator and chairman. Managers need to do a lot of pre- and post-work to make sure the meeting is set up for success and will fulfill its promises. While employees need to contribute ideas and spark debates, attending a meeting is, in a way, giving over individuality to a group consensus. Employees show up to make sure their ideas are heard, but (ideally) their presence indicates that they will follow-through with whatever decision is made—even if they don't agree with it. This ideal of total trust can be achieved if managers take steps to ensure that meetings are purposeful, goal-oriented, stick to an agenda, and employee-centric.



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