A Project Nerd's Guide to Value-Adding Meetings

by

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I know, guides to effective meetings are as ubiquitous on the internet as late-morning infomercials on cable TV. And yes, you will recognize most of the below from various other texts and places. Still, these are some thoughts and ideas that I have found useful over the years, in a world where almost nobody sees their own meeting culture as neither a comparative nor competitive advantage. The perspective here is the project perspective – viewing a meeting as a small project in its own right – which implies a focus on value creation, stakeholders, facilitative leadership, deliverables and SMART decisions.

The first thing to agree on is what is meant by 'effectiveness' in relation to meetings, and here we all differ. Some people thrive on meetings, they walk home satisfied in the afternoon sensing that they have accomplished something after a long day of interacting with others. Many of these others may instead feel that they have lost valuable and productive time on their own by having been forced into collective work sessions. And in between, we find the (not so silent) majority that indeed understand the need for meetings, but feel that there is just too many of them and that they are run in a sloppy and haphazard manner.

From my perspective, *a meeting should always add value*, to something or someone – preferably a collective of sorts. A meeting is an expensive way of working: you spend a lot of man-hours just by having people sitting through the event, whilst also preventing them from performing other (hopefully) value-adding work tasks. So the identification of what value(s) that are to be created by holding the meeting should always be the first thing to consider, along with alternative ways of achieving the same level of value creation. If the meeting is mainly about conveying information on new corporate practices and regulations, then it can be called into question. But if it is about developing something together or making decisions that will enable everyone to move on with their respective work tasks, then a meeting could be justified quite easily.

Once the value proposition of the meeting has been established, the next thing is to ensure that value is indeed delivered. Which means not only that the actual meeting delivers, but that the effects linger among participants. This can be achieved through the following:

Make sure only relevant stakeholders are called to the meeting. It is tempting to invite everyone in the team or department to a meeting. The more the merrier, and the best ideas does not always pop up amongst the usual suspects. Calling everyone also implies that you cannot be criticized afterwards for excluding people or running some sort of internal Illuminati conspiracies where only a chosen few are enabled to exercise influence and power. But, on the other hand, calling everyone is extremely expensive and disrupts the workflow for more people than necessary. The perfect balance is to *invite only those who can be considered stakeholders in relation to the items on the agenda* – that is, those who may affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of the meeting. Such a circle of stakeholders is usually wider than just the immediate project team, but narrower than 'everyone around' – which makes it a well-balanced compromise!

Simplify attendance and facilitate work for the participants as much as possible. Meeting participants are there to contribute their knowledge, their formal powers, their creativity and their commitment. Do not waste any of that by making it overly complicated for them to attend the meeting (physically or virtually), to obtain food and drinks, or to get hold of usual office equipment. Make sure projectors, web connections, loud speakers and other technologies are started and actually work when the meeting starts. If necessary, arrange furniture and equipment in a way that supports value creation – for example by providing project boards or enforcing stand-up meetings. If someone cannot make it physically to the meeting venue – due to family issues, travel or whatever – assign someone in the room to manage the

telephone/Skype connection to that person and to make sure her/his opinions are heard.

Plan the meeting as a mini project – agenda but also deliverables. An effective meeting need not necessarily to be as short as possible, but it should deliver upon its premises. Many emphasize the need for a pre-set agenda that is communicated to all participants well beforehand, and I would of course not argue against that. But I would also point at the need to include deliverables in the agenda, i.e. what should have been produced when the meeting is over. It could be decisions, it could be completed documents, it could be agreements or commitments explicitly made. The chairperson of the meeting should plan not only for how to move through the agenda, but also for how to ensure that deliverables are completed. Such planning may even entail dividing the meeting into smaller time chunks if necessary.

Handle issues along a prioritized backlog. An agenda is not only a manuscript for what is supposed to happen during the meeting and who is to play what role, it should also be possible to read as a priority list, as a backlog of tasks. Quite often, meetings tend to start with general information about whatever is on the chairperson's mind, including information from other recent meetings. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but there should be a deadline for these overtures. What has not been said before that deadline will have to wait until all the items on the agenda and the deliverables have been ticked off. After this first deadline, the agenda should list the issues to deal with in falling order of importance/value, so that the participants may *spend as much time as possible on the deliverables that adds most value*. If the meeting runs out of time in the end, the most important matters have already been attended to. An additional argument for this is that many participants tend to drop off from meetings towards the end, often in order to make it to other meetings. Make use of them while they are still there!

A parking space is not a burial ground. Despite well-prepared agendas and extensive documentation, unforeseen issues arise during meetings, issues that are of value to sort out. At the same time, you need to stick to your deliverables in order to be able to create the values already intended and expected by stakeholders. The well-established practice of "parking" emergent issues in a separate parking lot and return to them at a subsequent meeting is thus a good thing in general. Given that such subsequent meetings are actually booked immediately, of course.

Mini-breaks in the room. Sometimes, the parking space cannot be used, usually because postponing an issue to a later meeting would represent a significant loss of value. For project managers, the best decisions are just-in-time-decisions, made when there is a need for them rather than at the next tollgate session. In such situations, the organizer of the meeting must be able to give some leeway to the participants to discuss the matter in smaller groups for a few minutes in order to become informed enough to make the decision. No one is supposed to leave the meeting room during such mini-breaks, just move around in the room and informing each other.

Beware of power games. We have all been to meetings where a few persons claim all the space available through long rants, where people have been silenced, excluded and ignored. Most of us has also experienced how seemingly urgent issues are brought up from nowhere just before lunch, presented as necessary to decide upon and with only one inevitable outcome. As a chairperson, it is your job to recognize and prevent such things. Not only in order to stick to the ambition to create as much value as possible, but also to encourage those refraining from power games to continue attending your meetings. Try to distribute speaking time as evenly as possible, send the last-minute emergencies into the parking lot for a while. If the same small group of influencers always gather at the same corner of the table every time, find ways to break them up. Require civility even in heated arguments, do not tolerate personal attacks. Remember that a good meeting culture is built up successively over a long series of meetings, and that every meeting is an opportunity to reinforce old bad habits or to make new and better ones stick.

Enforced voicing when necessary. A simple technique to avoid that a few persons take command over the discussion is to enforce voicing, i.e. to require that everyone around the table shall make an oral statement on their opinion on the matter at hand. This also strengthens commitment to the final decisions; people tend to more compelled to carry out decisions afterwards if they have actually volunteered to be held accountable in front of others. The old (Swedish) proverb that "he who is silent, agrees" is, needless to say, both false and useless. Genuine acceptance is what you need, and only explicit statements can guarantee that.

Clear, unambiguous and SMART decisions. In a meeting, just like in any project team, you will find a lot of different people with a lot of differing

perspectives on the world and with a lot of different reasons for being there. Not only will they be from different departments of the same company, often they belong to different organizations and originate from different countries. When you make decisions, you agree to do something together in the future, you allocate resources, you make commitments. It is extremely important that everyone not only understand what the decision is and what it means, but that this understanding is as shared and as similar as possible across the team. Formulate SMART decisions – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely. Repeat the decision to everyone. Document it. Repeat it again. Repeat it again.

Document everything. Just as there should be agendas and documented information available before the meeting, there should be protocols, slide copies and other stuff available afterwards. As chairperson, it is your responsibility to ensure that, but the work can be done by someone else. If you are both trying to lead the meeting whilst documenting it in real time, you will probably not

sense everything that happens in the room. Meeting minutes should be short and informative, carefully defining the items processed and even more carefully outlining the decisions made, nothing else.

Retrospective. End the meeting not by trying to get through the final details while people are getting up from their chairs and reconnecting with their smartphones. End it by spending the last three minutes asking two simple questions: What went well in the meeting? What can be improved the next time? Don't make it personal, don't take it personally.

Good luck!!!

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