



Paying Attention at Meetings

My Assignment

Help a client group reduce wasted effort and staff complaints about The System.

Project Phase #1:

Act as *Silent-Observer-of-Process* at their management meeting (14 people, approximately 95.27 minutes), to raise awareness of their unconscious group behaviours and unintended consequences.

Observations:

- A ratio of nine closed questions (and many unhelpful answers) is asked for every open-ended question. The questioners express frustration about not getting enough of the information they want, fast enough. Those questioned (sometimes with double-barreled or triple-barreled closed questions), appear confused or under interrogation and fazed.
- Negligible and clumsy paraphrasing of long-windedness or differences.
- Few progress-monitoring summaries of often-meandering dialogue.
- In the rush to *get through the agenda*, no opportunities are provided to *talk information into place* within smaller groups. At times people appear over-loaded or confused by TMUI: Too Much Unsorted Information.
- Problem-solving efforts begin by defining problems as the absence of (very specific) solutions. Then, heated arguments about those and other solutions. Stages of problem definition and the clarification of likely causes are completely by-passed.

Conclusions:

Nothing new, here. This group behaves as other organisations routinely do (in this case at meetings), wasting a great deal of potential energy, blaming one another for the consequences without understanding the causes and their own part in perpetuating them. They *get through the agenda*, but at significant cost.

What Should Change?

Constructive listening is the primary skill-set for effective participation in meetings, especially for resolving differences and problems. It facilitates understanding and helps people speak about their needs, interests and concerns with honesty, clarity and self-understanding. It helps make it safe for people to express themselves. These outcomes are wise and sensible precursors of whatever else may be necessary or useful: decisions, plans or actions, for example.

However, virtually every participant in my *Hear & Be Heard* workplace interpersonal skills-training programmes over the past 25 years or so (at all levels of organisational authority), has been shocked to discover how little real listening they actually do day-to-day and surprised by how much effort it takes.

Like most of us, they would claim to be really good listeners *When it's really necessary*, but of course they are not. Few people are. What we do every day is what we're most likely to do at other times. *Skill* means habituated behaviour

Fortunately, they quickly learn that simple and very effective improvements can be initiated by re-organising and using more intentionally many of the skills and interpersonal behaviour reference-points they already possess. They are often amazed at how much difference this makes.

Where to Start?

- 1 Learn how to have informed answers for these questions: *How good are your interpersonal skills? How do you know?* If your answers include, *Because no-one complains about me very much*, be aware of the absolute unreliability of what you are told by your staff about the quality of your people-skills and supervision practices. Research keeps telling us that people don't speak the truth about these matters until some months after having left the employer in question (and safely in other employment). Visit the Interpersonal Competence pages of this website.
- 2 Understand that the conventional approaches to problem-solving themselves generate very many workplace problems, if not most of them. If your approach to defining and resolving problems is anything less than by following a well-considered methodical process, you're very likely to a part of adding to confusion and dysfunction at meetings. Visit the Problem Solving pages of this website.
- 3 Learn to distinguish between a meeting's *purpose* and its *agenda*. As facilitator, chair or leader of a meeting, always begin with shared understanding of a clearly-stated and realistically achievable statement of purpose. Purpose is something **entirely different** from a meeting's agenda. This alone sharpens focus and would represent a significant breakthrough in many organisations. Observe, over the next week or two, how rarely it happens and how often the officially-stated purpose is in terms such as "Review meeting", "Work in progress meeting", "Monthly meeting", "Board meeting", "Management meeting", "Executive meeting" or "Team meeting".
- 4 Learn how to keep both *agenda* and *process* within your scrutiny during a meeting, adjusting process methodically. If you are the meetings facilitator (Leader or Chairperson), understand what it means to see this role as "guardian of the process". Study the other articles and discussion papers in this section of the subscriber pages (those presently there and forthcoming papers).
- 5 When asked to facilitate or when summonsed to a formal or informal meeting ask, *What is its purpose? What is it designed to achieve? If the answer describes a process or agenda rather than a purpose, ask So that . . . ? or What for?* Aim for a statement about a realistically possible outcome. Consider whether or not the processes selected are likely to achieve it.