

# Thriving Workplace

## Meetings: the Challenge and Potential

*During my 69 years in industry, I figure I have attended more than 40,000 meetings – an average of two or three per workday. About 30,000 of those meetings could have been shorter or not held at all. Half of our time is spent in meetings. If done better, you can get the time down by half.*

[Simon Ramo: *Meetings, Meetings, and More Meetings.*]

An average of two or three meetings per workday as Simon Ramo describes (above), may well be an out-of-date personal statistic for many managers. Those I know describe almost every working day as comprising wall-to-wall meetings. Meetings take up so much of their time, create so much further work and add so many extra problems, that they guiltily *steal* time during the working week or work well outside of normal work hours to attend to the principal matters for which they are employed. In many cases, “attending meetings called by others” is routinely given greater priority than developing their own craft and skills, reading, reviewing, reflecting, creative and strategic thinking, problem-solving, prioritising, planning, organising and preparing,

Well-facilitated meetings are a powerful tool for efficiency and effectiveness. They provide opportunities for practical collaboration, group problem-solving, teamwork and participative decision-making, the tapping of collective intelligence and creativity, for enhancing people’s development and their commitment to action-plans and results.

However, the customarily wasted human energy that to one degree or another detracts from efficiency and effectiveness in every organisation is nowhere more clearly evident than during their meetings. Confusion, misdirected effort, indecision, unresolved issues, recurring problems, wandering, inertia, apathy, boredom, resentment, mistrust, hostility, cynicism, factionalism and passive resistance - are just some of the common signs of this.

Why are there so many meetings and why, when asked about those they attend, do participants roll their eyes, sigh heavily and say, *Don’t ask!* Clearly, there are major opportunities for improvement. Something’s wrong, right?

What is required to conduct meetings in which participants function at high-levels; in which focus, energy, creative thinking, group achievement and collective satisfaction are universally high?

What is necessary for participants to fully understand the real purpose of meetings, for them to feel valued and confident, able to contribute to collective creativity, group problem-solving, teamwork and participative decision-making?

This discussion paper introduces some generic pre-requisites of constructive meetings, designed to direct improvement efforts. Other articles deal with the practical nitty-gritty and guides; you’ll find them elsewhere within this section of our Subscriber Library. I’ll begin by clarifying some terminology.

Given what people repeatedly report about meetings they attend, it must be easy to lead meetings in ways that leave people feeling patronised, demeaned, manipulated, cheated, frustrated, bored, bullied or resentful; or meetings in which sub-surface or *hidden* agenda effectively sabotage their intentions.

We can safely assume, given how common they are, that it is easy to run meetings characterised by under-achievement; in which distress or discomfort levels are high; in which people’s contributions are blocked; in which they feel unsafe, under-valued and therefore inhibited.

What do we know about what is required to do things differently?

## Definitions and Distinctions

**Meetings** are occasions in which at least two people gather to collectively achieve some purpose relevant to their intentions, interests or business. At least one person initiates the contact and the occasion involves discussion with at least one other person present. If only one person gets to speak about the issues, the occasion is best regarded as a *presentation* rather than a meeting, and to which different guidelines apply.

To help keep a focus on effective methods of conducting meetings, I find it helpful to describe the meeting leader or chairperson as the **facilitator**. It is a way of keeping to the forefront what the leadership/chairperson function involves:

**Facilitator:** the person with primary responsibility at a meeting to ease or manage the group processes and progress towards the meeting's purpose.

The purpose of a meeting always includes the stated agenda and may directly or indirectly include other goals, for example the cohesion, teamwork, cooperation and development of participants, where such things are valued and intended.

**Facilitate:** to ease, make easy, promote, help forward, create unimpeded opportunity for; advance, foster, encourage, enhance, forward, further.

The facilitator's role is to ease achievement of the group's purpose.

**Management:** the methodical planning, direction and measurement of desired performance. Managers oversee resources and people to achieve desired performance and ensure continuously improved performance. They: hold and balance the focus, think and act systematically, and establish clear accountabilities. They also: measure and continuously improve performance (against pre-determined indicators, at pre-determined regular monitoring and evaluation points) and foster efficiency (through continuous refinement of development needs and resolution of problems identified by methodical monitoring).

**Leadership:** Leaders inspire others to commit to and strive for shared aspirations. *Leadership is the art of inspiring others to commit to and strive for shared aspirations.*

The facilitator of a meeting may be and often is both its leader and manager.

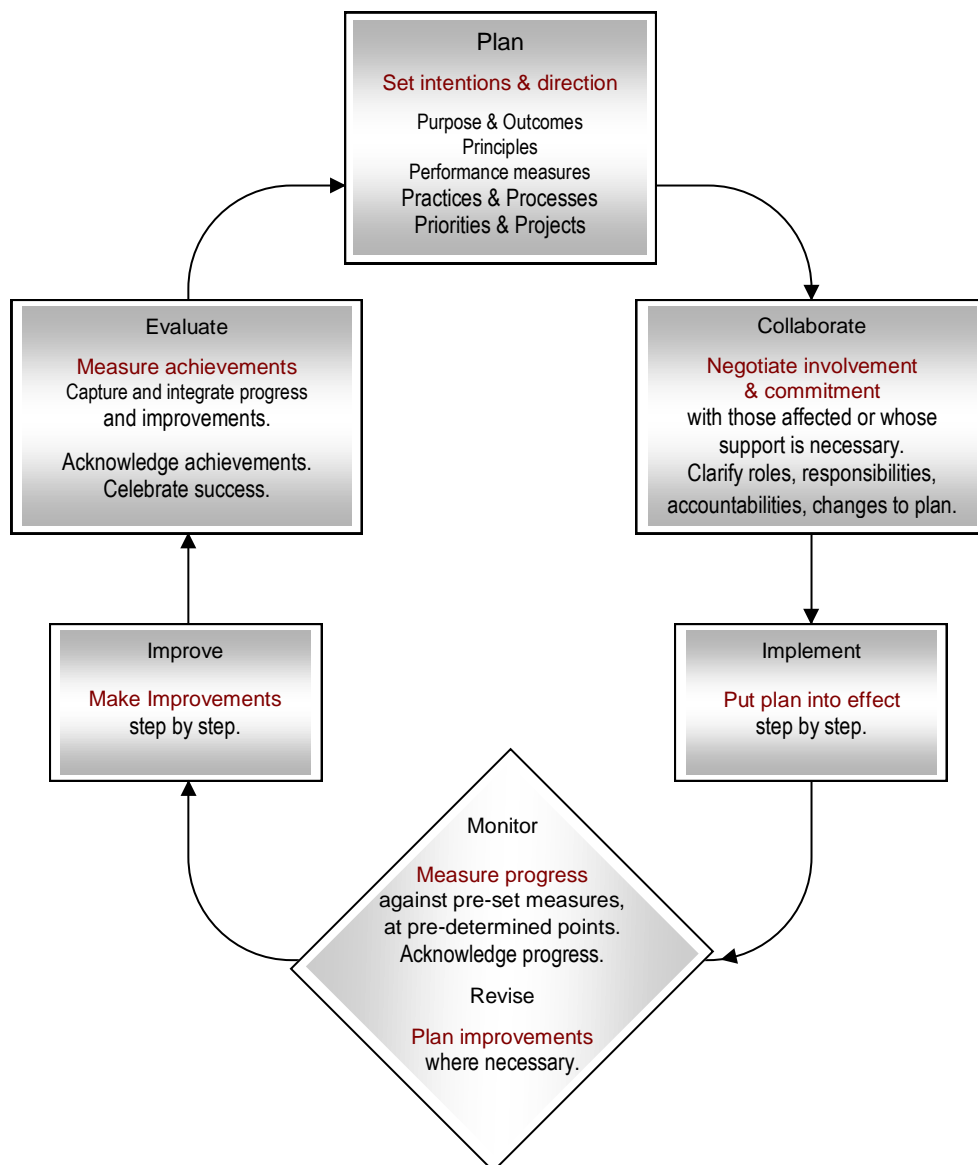
**Process:** In the context of leading and managing meetings, **process** is the means for ensuring the purposeful direction of all actions towards achieving the desired goals. Helpful or unhelpful processes are always at play within meetings. Process includes the methods by which:

- meetings are planned, conducted, monitored and evaluated
- ground rules and guidelines for other behaviours are made and safeguarded
- agenda items are determined and prioritised
- agenda (content or tasks) are approached/dealt with/worked on
- decision-making models are determined and exercised
- decisions and action-plans are made
- problems are clarified and resolved
- strategic action-planning is conducted
- conflict is resolved
- activities are methodically kept on target and up to requirement.

Where such things as trust, consensus, democracy, openness, honesty, teamwork, collaboration, full participation and consultation are valued, *process* is the means by which tangible expression is given to these aspirations and by which their presence or absence is monitored.

If you find the word **process** used as a noun to be unhelpful jargon, try *methods*, the “*how*”, or *the way we do things*. Whatever you call it, process is worth a lot of attention because it is always present and influential, good or bad. Very often, people at meetings are largely unaware of it, their attention being captured instead by the agenda , the *What?* rather than the *How?*

**Planning:** the methodical arrangement and sequencing (or *mapping*) of all the foreseeable activities, procedures and milestones necessary to achieve a particular purpose and its intended effects, monitor progress towards them and evaluate their achievement. The sequence of steps in a generic *good sense*, methodical planning (and plan management) process can be summarised in this way:



The principal distinction between common practice and what is *good sense* in the matter of planning and managing meetings, is the difference between hoping for improvisation to provide success, and methodically planning for success.

*90% of most executives' working days are occupied by meetings with at least one other person. Most other managers spend between 35% and 70% of their time at meetings. Face-to-face meetings between executives are amongst the most expensive activities in the western world. [Most] are doomed to failure because their purpose has not been accurately identified, the participants aren't sure where they're heading, they are not conducted properly, and their results aren't measured.*

[Terry Robins-Jones, University of South Australia]

**Effective meetings:** Meetings that are *fit for purpose* and are systematically managed to strike an equitable balance between achieving *task* or Primary Purpose goals<sup>1</sup> and developing the participants' capacity for Primary Purpose or task<sup>2</sup>.

An effective meeting has some prerequisites, including:

- 1 There is a facilitator (manager, chair, leader).
- 2 This person accepts responsibility for managing both the *content* (the **what** - purpose, task, agenda, business of the meeting) and the *process* (the **how** - methods used to achieve the purpose, deal with the agenda and each other). The facilitator acts as the guardian of these things on behalf of the full group.
- 3 The meeting facilitator is skilled in applying the particular methods to be used (safeguarding the *process*).
- 4 There is openness about both the *purpose* and the *process*.
- 5 Participants agree to abide by the nominated process and to be guided by the facilitator in its application, or to challenge it or negotiate around differences in accordance with some predetermined guidelines.

Basic elements of *process* about which there is clarity, openness and agreement, include -

- decision-making model(s)
- problem clarification and problem-solving methods
- conflict-resolution model(s)
- means of checking progress and for methodically evaluating meeting effectiveness.

**An effective meeting:**

- Balances attention to task, process and to the group's needs.
- Brings the unconscious process to participants' awareness.
- Applies processes that are guarded by the facilitator, who is skilled in their use and manages them openly.

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<sup>1</sup> What the organisation must do in order to survive; or the purpose and official business of the meeting.

<sup>2</sup> The human needs, including the quality of interpersonal relationships between and amongst these people.

## The 12 Characteristics of Really Effective Meetings

My bias as to what constitutes really effective meetings are fulfilled (that is, they proceed according to what I value about the conduct of meetings), when the following conditions are met:

- 1 Management is applied, i.e. the *process* and *content* are actively directed.
- 2 Management is applied contractually, i.e. in accordance with a mandate consciously chosen and explicitly agreed to by the participants.
- 3 The facilitation model is based on clear values, about which there is openness.
- 4 All matters of process are discussed, consciously chosen and agreed to by the full group, including ground rules for minimising conflict and encouraging participation and self-responsibility. The group has collective awareness of and clarity about, task and process.
- 5 The chosen process is designed to facilitate development (unfolding of potential) of participants - and there is openness about that intent.
- 6 All participants own and take responsibility for the agenda, through being involved in creating it and negotiating its priorities.
- 7 The meeting's agenda, progress on deliberations, action-plans and outcomes are displayed visually as they happen.
- 8 All action-plans, agreements and their timetables are specifically agreed to and recorded during the meeting, and all participants leave the meeting with this record.
- 9 At very least the facilitator and preferably all participants are skilled at listening, problem clarification and conflict resolution skills and processes.
- 10 The facilitator routinely seeks and receives specific, descriptive feedback from participants on matters of style, skill and facility with the agreed group processes, as a means of clarifying the facilitator's opportunities for improvement. The facilitator routinely *closes this loop*.
- 11 Facilitation is shared amongst participants over time, in order to develop the skills of the wider group.
- 12 Participants find the meeting constructive, for their work and for the wider purpose of the organisation - and feel positive about the experience.

What might you and your colleagues gain from determining your own criteria of effectiveness for the meetings arranged and conducted within your organisation? How might those meetings be improved by methodically monitoring the degree to which those qualities are present?

Tom Watkins