

Meetings: A Framework to Improve Effectiveness and Employee Satisfaction

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Abstract

Meetings are a necessary, but often unexamined part of organizational life. Meetings are used to make decisions, distribute information, brainstorm solutions, and report on progress. Meetings take up a massive part of a librarians or managers day, but we seldom talk about how effective meetings are, or how to properly run a meeting. This paper describes the role of meetings on employee satisfaction, employee attitude, and on meeting effectiveness. Drawing upon research and literature in the fields of business and LIS, the paper concludes with a framework and strategies to run more engaging and effective meetings.

Introduction

Meetings are an increasing part of organizational life. As much as 15 percent of an organization's collective time is devoted to meetings (Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Sands, 2016). However, as Peter Drucker once said, "time is the scarcest resource, and unless it is managed nothing else can be managed" (Huffstutter & Smith, 2007, p. 316). The question every manager faces is whether there is a good return on the massive amount of time devoted to meetings. If not, can meetings be improved?

Poorly run meetings have become so internalized into our society that entire TED talks are devoted to them. In a TED talk, David Grady (2013) introduces us to a sarcastic illness called Mindless Accept Syndrome (MAS). He defines MAS as "an involuntary reflex in which a person accepts a meeting invitation without even thinking why. A common illness among office workers worldwide" (Grady, 2013, slide, 1:42). It is very common for library professionals to accept a meeting invitation without knowing the purpose of the meeting.

In a YouTube video, Tripp Crosby and Tyler Stanton (2015) mock the typical meeting conducted over phone. It concludes with a common refrain. Tyler remarks, "Beth, you'll send out a recap email that could've basically taken the place of this whole meeting" (Crosby and Stanton, 2015, 3:09). As we will discuss later in this article, there is substantial evidence that suggests that meetings take place that never should have been held in the first place.

Jason Fried (2010), founder of Basecamp, a project management tool, once gave a TED talk on remote work. He likened the entering of the office to a Cuisinart. The moment you step foot in the door your time is shredded "because you have 15 minutes here, 30 minutes there, and something else happens, you're pulled off your work, then you have 20 minutes, then it's lunch, then you have something else to do..." (Fried, 2010, 3:04). Author Cal Newport (2017) suggests in his recent book, *Deep Work*, that this greatly reduces cognitive focus and the ability to engage in deep work.

An average employee spends about six hours per week in meetings (Allen et al, 2016). It is estimated that a mid-level manager devotes 11 hours per week to meetings (Mankins & Garton, 2017). Senior managers can spend 23 hours per week in meetings or preparing for meetings (Cohen, Rogelberg, Allen, Luong, 2011).

Meetings are designed to promote information sharing, enhance decision-making, promote problem solving, build team cohesion, and to reinforce organizational culture (Leach,

Rogelberg, Warr, & Burnfield, 2009). Meetings are part of everyday work. Meetings are an organizational tool that we all use, rely on, and participate in frequently. Meetings also can elicit all kinds of emotions. One can walk away from a meeting feeling energized and inspired, or walk away from a meeting feeling drained, demoralized, disempowered, and/or defeated.

Meetings can be very effective tools, but they can also be perceived as “notorious time wasters” (Sisco, 1993, p.63). MacLeod (2011) estimates that between 30% and 60% of time spent in meetings is wasted. While the average middle manager can spend eleven hours a week in meetings, half of that time is considered unproductive time. In other words, a middle level manager wastes almost 35 working days a year through unproductive meetings. In a recent study (Perlow, Hadley, & Eun, 2017), 65% of managers surveyed indicated that meetings keep them from completing their own job functions. The vast majority (71%) of the managers stated that meetings are unproductive and inefficient. Moreover, managers are spending 72% more time in meetings than they did five years ago, and they expect to devote even more time in years to come (Scott, Shanock, & Rogelberg, 2012).

Study after study show that numerous meeting participants send emails, surf the web, daydream, or engage in other activities during meetings. Such distracted focus can reduce a person’s IQ by 10 points, which in turn affects the organization’s decision-making (Mankins & Garton 2017).

Meetings cost organizations, like libraries, large sums of money. It is estimated that organizations spend \$37 billion annually on unproductive meetings (Baer, 2014). The true cost of meetings is becoming so important that organizations like the Harvard Business Review (2016) have created calculators so managers can see, in dollars and cents, the true cost of a meeting.

While we use meetings as an organizational tool with increasing regularity, we are almost never taught how to use them effectively. Andy Grove (2015), former CEO of Intel, once remarked, “Just as you would not permit a fellow employee to steal a \$2,000 piece of office equipment, you shouldn’t let anyone walk away with the time of his fellow manager” (p. 84.). For LIS continuing education, a search of WebJunction and the American Library Association’s eLearning reveal no topics on effectively running meetings.

“What makes a meeting great? Is there a secret sauce to running a great meeting? Are there strategies we can glean from research to improve the effectiveness of meetings? Is there a model we can adopt?” The answer is yes.

Literature Review

Poorly designed and managed meetings can waste organizational resources, namely time, but they can also have unforeseen effects. Poorly run meetings have long lasting impact on employee attitudes toward meetings, employee job satisfaction, performance outcomes, employee empowerment, and the ability for employees to engage in deep work (Geimer, Leach, DeSimone, Rogelberg, & Warr, 2015).

Meeting effectiveness often receives more negative comments than positive (Geimer et al., 2015). Positive comments address the need for meetings to achieve work objectives, disseminate information, and to build team cohesiveness. However, the negative comments relate to the structure of a meeting. For example, lack of a meeting planning or an agenda, information of low relevance, and unclear impact of attendance make up the majority of negative

comments. The overwhelming number of comments on how to improve the meeting deal with the structure and organization of the meeting.

Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott, and Shuffler (2010) demonstrate that meeting effectiveness is strongly correlated to job satisfaction. The researchers conducted two studies using the Job Descriptive Index (JDI), the most commonly used satisfaction survey. In the first study, the researchers used a convenience sample to distribute 232 surveys to participants in a variety of work settings. Using a simple linear regression, they determined that meeting satisfaction was a predictor of job satisfaction. The researchers then replicated and extended the study. In the second study, the researchers used a random sample method to survey 3,000 individuals. The second study attempted to control for other variables. For example, effective communications is often conducted through meetings.

The Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott, and Shuffler (2010) studies demonstrate that satisfaction with meeting effectiveness accounts for significant amount of variance in job satisfaction. The researchers state, "Meeting satisfaction matters, not only for those with frequent meeting activity, but also those with moderate levels of meeting activity. It follows that organizations should regularly assess meeting satisfaction." (p. 167).

Luong and Rogelberg (2005) studied the psychological effect of meeting demands (e.g., time and number of meetings attended). They examined meetings through the theories of attentional capacity and action theory. They found that daily fatigue and subjective workload were correlated to the number of meetings attended. The research suggests that the frequency of meetings is more important than the length of time spent in meetings throughout the day. More meetings results in greater fatigue: the "disruptive nature of meetings results in drained emotional or mental resources and subsequent fatigue..." (p.65). They conclude that both the quantities and qualities of meetings are important to consider from an employee well-being perspective.

While much of the literature on meetings is negative in nature, meetings can have a positive impact on employee empowerment (Allen et al., 2016). The researchers found that meetings have the potential to boost employee empowerment, as they may serve as a sense making experience. This study demonstrates that meetings can be more than a "nuisance or a waste of time" (p. 6), because meetings offer an employee access to information they need thereby improving an employee's sense of empowerment. The article concludes with this sage advice for managers, "To reap the benefit of satisfying meetings for employee empowerment, managers may simply ask their employees about their overt feelings about their meetings" (p. 4347).

One final area of the literature worthy of exploration is the scholarship on deep work. Newport (2017), in his book *Deep Work*, outlines the necessary elements to complete high cognitive demanding tasks. The number one ingredient is large stretches of uninterrupted time. Meetings tend to fracture a day, and as a result, fracture an employee's ability to enter deep work. This is confirmed by the work of Luong and Rogelberg (2005). Moreover, task switching and interruptions can take 23 minutes to recover from. Furthermore, Zijlstra (1999) finds that the frequency of interruptions leads to more negative consequences than the amount of time spent dealing with the interruption. As noted from Jason Fried above, meetings slice up a day and the concentration of employees. This leads to decreased productivity.

There is a growing body of research on meetings in the LIS literature. Bieraugel (2017) recently applied the liberating structures framework to academic library meetings. Liberating structures is a framework of 33 activities to facilitate conversations designed by Henri

Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless. Bieraugel's article breaks down meetings into five categories: status report, brainstorm, open discussion, managed discussion, and presentation. Kjellberg and Saxton (2006) provide a different, brief framework to improve meetings. This framework is referred to as POP (purpose, outcome, and plan). It highlights the importance of having an agenda outlining how to set a meeting protocol. The article suggests the importance of creating a scribe and setting a meeting flow. The article concludes with facilitation strategies.

Model

Patrick Lencioni distills important concepts down into a useful model to apply in any organization. We will explore meetings through a distilled framework of meeting effectiveness and employee satisfaction. This model is based on meeting design characteristics (Niederman & Volkema, 1999). These design characteristics are viewed as highly important for preparing and executing successful meetings. The framework outlined below draws from and expands on the design characteristics of (Niederman & Volkema, 1999). The framework contains seven key strategies to improve meeting effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

1. Determining if a meeting is the needed tool.
2. Know the meeting objective.
3. Determine the needed meeting type.
4. Establish who needs to be in attendance.
5. Build a powerful agenda.
6. Center the meeting on action items
7. Establish some ground rules and boundaries

Determine If a Meeting Is Needed

Before deciding to hold a meeting, someone needs to ask, "Is a meeting the best tool we can use?" Meetings have become a default tool for many organizations. As we will explore below, meetings should serve a purpose and lead to an outcome, however, sometimes someone needs to take a step back and ask whether a meeting is the best available tool for the task. Carucci (2018), in a recent Harvard Business Review blogpost, argues that implementing all of the best practices in running effective meetings will not "salvage a meeting that shouldn't be happening in the first place" (para. 2).

For example, passing along large amounts of information is not served well through a meeting. Caruth and Caruth (2012) encourage managers to determine the cost of a meeting by adding up the salary of each person in attendance and then estimate whether conducting the meeting is cost beneficial. Managers also should consider the emotional and morale costs of holding a meeting.

Many meetings serve no real purpose at all. A meeting might happen simply because it is the third Friday of the month, in other words, a regularly scheduled meeting. Other times, leaders rely on meetings as a crutch to avoid making a big or difficult decision. Lastly, meetings have become the de facto way to distribute information, even in today's rich information communication tool environment. A manager would be wise to consider the alternatives to holding a meeting as well. Sometimes, a survey or poll may be a worthy and effective substitute.

Other times, a well-written memo can serve as a replacement for an entire meeting, improving the cost/benefit of the meeting as well as improving information retention (Saunders, 2015).

Know the Meeting Outcome

Every meeting should have a destination, an outcome, a purpose (Gerwick, 2013). This single question can improve meeting impact and effectiveness many times over. Finalize summer reading program, or review and update our strategic plan are just a couple of examples of meeting outcomes.

A meeting purpose may be categorized into four main categories: brainstorming, decision-making, goal setting, or goal review. A brainstorm meeting is used to tackle problems. Its outcome is to come up with a list of possible solutions. A decision-making meeting focuses attention on selecting a solution for an opportunity. Decision making meetings can use either a democratic or a consensus-based process, but it is critical that everyone leave the meeting on the same page. A goal-setting meeting focuses on building a plan for the future, whereas a goal review meeting focuses on reporting progress on completing a previously identified plan.

Determine What Meeting Type Is Best

The meeting type is often determined from the meeting outcome. There are four main types of meetings: quick check-in, tactical, strategic, and review (Lencioni, 2004). The format of the meeting also needs to be determined, such as face-to-face, standing, digital, etc.

A quick check-in meeting often lasts for no more than 10 minutes. These are very succinct meetings. They often answer the question “what is most important for everyone to know today?” These meetings often occur daily and can be done quite effectively digitally using tools like Slack.

A tactical meeting is a meeting that lasts about 45 minutes. These types of meetings often are held weekly. The meeting is centered on goal review and progress reporting, and often has a lot of data and metrics. These meetings will also tackle tactical issues, but defer issues that are strategic in nature. For the sake of this framework, a strategy is what your organization is going to achieve, the how is a tactic.

A strategic meeting is longer in duration, typically 2-4 hours. These meetings focus on brainstorming, decision-making, and discussion. The scope of a strategic meeting should be narrow. A single issue should be addressed. These types of meetings often require participants to do some research beforehand.

The final meeting type is a quarterly review which focuses on shaping strategic direction. These meetings are typically an all-day affair, and often are held off site. This allows the participants to step away from the constant demands and distractions that all managers face. There is growing research that suggests that yearly planning is too big to tackle, but 12-week planning is a lot more manageable (Moran & Lenington, 2013). This is not the same thing as an all-day staff training day. These meetings really focus on who do we want to be, and how will we improve our community.

Establish Who Needs to Be in Attendance

The fourth strategy for effective meetings is to know who needs to be invited to the meeting. This is straightforward strategy. After you have established a meeting outcome and determined what type of meeting to have, it is relatively easy to know who needs to be in the

room and whose time will be wasted by attending. A key consideration is this: If someone sits through a whole meeting in silence, they probably do not need to be there, and you just wasted time and money.

Much of the literature suggests that employees' perceptions of meetings is highly negative when the employee does not feel they need to be in the room (Allen, Sands, S. J., Mueller, Frear, Mudd, & Rogelberg, 2012). One author likens it to special teams in football. He argues that a football team would not have a placekicker on the field for every play (Herold, 2016). So why do library teams have every member at every meeting?

Build a Powerful Agenda

The literature suggests that 32% of meetings occur without an agenda of any type. Twenty-nine percent of meetings occur without the agenda being sent to all participants ahead of time (Mankins & Garton). Macleod (2011) argues that a strategically planned agenda ensures that a meeting's outcomes and goals are met. The literature argues that creating meeting agendas provide structure and greatly improve meeting effectiveness and perception (Allen, et al, 2012).

If a meeting does not have an agenda, it really serves no purpose. It is also vital to keep the most critical topics of the meeting at the top of the agenda. By the time you reach the end of an hour two, people often are drained. This can lead to poor decision making.

Meeting agendas are strengthened when they are constructed collaboratively. In other words, the meeting outcome has more buy in if the committee group constructs the agenda (Schwarz, 2015). It should be a general practice to request agenda items at the end of the previous meeting or in the week leading up to the meeting.

Meetings are improved if attendees have had time to digest and ponder the information provided for a meeting. As a result, agendas and meeting packets should be provided at least three business days before the meeting is scheduled. If they are not, the facilitator runs the risk of participants not being prepared for the meeting.

Agenda topics should affect everyone present. This relates to the section above about ensuring the right people are in the right seats, on the right bus, at the right time. Moreover, agenda items should be listed as a question. Lastly, agenda topic questions should include a process for arriving at an answer.

Other common agenda items might include: a review of the library or department mission, vision, meeting objective, and the previous meeting minutes at the outset of the meeting. The end of meetings should also have common agenda items. The next meeting time should be agreed upon. This eliminates the need to use Doodle polls or email chains to schedule a meeting. The meeting should also be evaluated. At the end of the meeting, participants can give the meeting a simple rating of 1 to 5. The facilitator might also ask what worked well and what could have been improved. It is also important to note that following a meeting agenda improves perceptions of meeting effectiveness (Nixon & Littlepage, 1992), so it is critical that a meeting facilitator stay on course.

Center the Meeting on Action Items

Meeting effectiveness is improved when meetings are centered or grounded in actions. Much of the literature discussing the negative perceptions of meetings is a result of meetings that serve no purpose, so keeping meetings focused on accomplishing actions eliminates the

purposeless meeting. Beyond the meeting outcome, each item a meeting agenda should start with an action verb. These action verbs can be brainstorm, review, plan, decide, discuss, etc. By centering a meeting on action items, it controls ramblers and reduced tangents (Gallo, 2013).

Centering a meeting on action also includes setting specific deliverables. These deliverables are observable behaviors. For example, a meeting whose objective is to plan summer reading could include deliverables such as select summer reading prizes, determine kickoff performer, or gather potential donors before the next meeting.

Each action item on an agenda should include a single responsible person. When a task is delegated to a group or committee, it is better to list the chair of the committee as the responsible person rather than the committee itself. This eliminates the passing of the buck and reduces ambiguity. Every task or action coming from the meeting should also include due dates. Again, with the summer reading example, if an action from the meeting is to create summer reading promotional material, it should include a due date, like December 1.

Establish Some Ground Rules

Task effectiveness improves when everyone is on the same page. Meeting productivity and satisfaction are improved when there are some ground rules that everyone has agreed to. This is part of the forming-storming-norming group development process outlined by Tuckman (1965). The forming of ground rules add to group cohesion and focus on task.

One ground rule to consider is reducing the use of technology while in a meeting. Many meeting participants are never actually present in a meeting because they are busy checking email, surfing the web, or engaging in other activities. As stated above, it can take up to 20 minutes for the mind to switch from checking email to being present in a meeting. As Leroy (2009) findings “reveal that the act of transitioning between tasks has implications on how people engage in a subsequent task; switching attention tends to be difficult for people and subsequent task performance easily suffers” (p. 178).

A second important ground rule to establish is to agree on engaging in one conversation. A recent Forbes (Ryan, 2017) article declared holding side conversations as one of the top ten most annoying things people do in meetings. Regan (2017) suggests that side conversations distract from the main meeting topic, and presents a few tips to prevent this.

It is also important to establish some boundaries. It is vital to start and end on time. Do not penalize the punctual attendees and reward the tardy ones by starting late. It is also just as important to end the meeting on time.

Conclusion

Research supports that improving meeting planning, execution, and implementation can have widespread organizational benefits. A recent study showed that improvements in meetings can have a 42% increase in team collaboration. Moreover, team performance can improve by 25%. Lastly, work-life balance can be improved to 92% (Perlow et. al., 2017). In other words, improving how libraries handle meetings can be a major improvement to the overall library.

Libraries and library staff are starved for time. Economic realities and service expectations have highlighted the need for more staff time in every library. Meeting effectiveness can help improve staff morale, job satisfaction, and can provide management with a strategy to gain back that precious commodity, time. For example, at my institution, we have adjusted our program meeting schedule from meeting for 120 minutes to 90 minutes and from

meeting 12 times a year to seven. In other words, we have moved from meeting 24 hours per year to 10.5 hours. Each participant has 13.5 hour or almost two additional working days to focus on deep work. That's by just applying this framework to one routine meeting.

Staff report feeling better prepared for meetings and that their time is more valued by following this model. Employees feeling that their time is valued has poured over into overall job satisfaction. They also report that meetings staying on task has improved their satisfaction with meetings and has reduced their negative perception of meetings. Assessing the usage of meetings, their effectiveness, and applying this framework can greatly improve the library's organizational health.

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Published: February 2019

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