



June 2009

MAKING MEETINGS WORK

Improving problem solving in meetings by revealing intentions

1. Share the way you are thinking about an issue.
2. Encourage listeners to challenge your thinking.
3. Encourage listeners to share the way they're thinking.
4. Check that you've understood their underlying meaning.
5. Ask about what's led other people to their current view.
6. Provide examples to bring your thinking to life.
7. Explain why you're asking something and reveal any emotions behind a question.
8. Clarify the relevance of what's being said to the current topic.
9. Clarify what the speaker expects of you.
10. Clarify the stage the conversation has reached.

Have you been to any good meetings lately?

For many of us, that's like someone asking if we've had a great time at the dentist! The truth is most people hate meetings, yet they dominate our working week and are central to how things get done. As one of our clients complained, "A meeting brings together a group of the unfit, appointed by the unwilling, to do the unnecessary!"

Why is it that so many meetings are so bad? What goes on and goes wrong when people meet to solve problems and make decisions together?

At UGM, we get regular requests from clients to help them improve the quality of their meetings, so we decided to research the issue and come up with some practical ideas for making meetings more productive and more rewarding.

We took cameras into 18 Australian organisations and filmed 262 people in 55 regular meetings. All up, we collected more than 70 hours of footage, together with another 20 hours of interviews. In these, we asked the people we'd just filmed to tell us what they'd been trying to achieve and whether they felt they'd succeeded.

So what did we find?

The first thing this research shows is that most people in professional jobs spend around 69% of their week in meetings but this goes up, as you become more senior. Towards the top of organisations, executives can spend 86% of their week in meetings of one kind or another, from the informal to the very formal.

We also took a close look at the type of talk going on in these meetings. Only a small percentage was social. The rest was task-focused talk of three kinds: exchanging information, giving and receiving instructions, and solving problems. Of these, the bulk of the time (around 65%) was spent solving problems and making decisions. It was also this category that was judged by those we filmed as being most important overall. In fact, they overwhelmingly agreed that they get paid to solve problems and make decisions.

Given the importance attached to problem solving in meetings, you might imagine a great deal of effort is put into doing it well. But of the 55 meetings we filmed, only 9 actually succeeded – where 'success' is defined as achieving the meeting objectives and believing the time was well spent. A further 12 meetings were judged as partially successful. But a whopping 34 emerged as having been pretty much a waste of time!

These are disturbing statistics. In tough times, think of how much this might cost your organisation. Time not wasted could be better invested.

What makes meetings so hard?

Thinking alone about a complex issue is challenging enough, but thinking together can be really tough. Our education system teaches and rewards thinking alone, yet in a knowledge economy, the kinds of problems organisations confront are typically complex and non-routine, with a lot at stake if things go wrong. In these circumstances, it can be risky to leave things to a single individual, no matter how talented. In fact, we actively want to focus multiple brains and diverse kinds of expertise on the tricky issues we face. But where collaboration is concerned, every dimension of difference in a team ratchets up the degree of difficulty. This includes differences of personality, culture, gender, generation and function.

Meetings as a status arena

As if that wasn't enough, we found that meetings are also a status arena where people compete for visibility and their leadership potential is continuously evaluated. Emotions, bias and politics season the mix, making for a heady brew!

In the absence of what we came to term a 'meetings capability', rapport goes down and the risk of being cognitively at cross purposes goes up: sounding the death knell of innovation and cognitive sharpness.

Instead of a team of clever professionals powering through a tricky issue, what we observed all too often was a disconnected group of 'cabaret performers', with the same few people dominating proceedings, at the expense of high quality collaborative thinking. In meetings involving Australians working in Asia, things were even worse. Australians took as much as 84% of the air time, leaving their Asian colleagues or counterparts feeling frustrated and conversationally bullied.

Putting things right

Our research has helped us to demystify meeting success for our clients operating here and across the Asia-Pacific. Based on our findings, we've designed a meetings toolkit that supports collaborative problem solving. When people start to notice what's going on and going wrong, they become motivated to put it right.

You could start by getting people to review regular meetings that take up so much of your time. We've made a questionnaire to help you do this – email us, if you'd like a copy. The side box has ten useful tips, drawn from behaviours in the successful meetings.

Meetings are the lifeblood of organisations in a knowledge economy. In an important sense, organisations are talked into being during meetings and business success is fuelled by the quality of this talk. Meetings matter!