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Managing Meetings

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The concept of “management by meetings” (MBM) is so well enshrined in corporate life today and will continue to play a prominent role in organizational behaviour going forward, especially as more organizations transition to remote and hybrid workplaces. The truth is that most executives now spend up to 70% of their day in meetings, and these meetings must be managed effectively so that the time spent in them is worth it.

We have spent the last decade supporting organizations and leaders in managing meetings and our experience suggests that leaders and organizations need to firstly identify some of the ineffective practices that they currently have as regards meetings and try to unlearn some of these practices very quickly.

Then, they need to create a culture of effective meeting management by building and incubating the skills for planning meetings; managing meeting proceedings; keeping proper records of meetings; and ensuring that meeting outcomes and actions are implemented. This final part is very important because meetings serve an important purpose, they are not meant to happen ‘just because’. If the purpose of a meeting is to drive certain actions, then your culture of managing meetings should also focus on ensuring that the actions arising from the meetings take place – if not, the whole purpose of having the meeting will be defeated.

Our experience both within our firm and in supporting others shows that when meetings are not managed properly, participants become cynical about the meetings and their engagement/participation in the meetings dwindle in a manner that is detrimental to the overall health of the organization. We believe that by applying some of the ideas that we will

be sharing, you will increase the level of employees' engagement and participation in meetings and the Return on Investment (ROI) of your meetings.

Common Meeting Mistakes

The most common mistakes that organizations make with meetings include not planning meetings properly; having an inconsistent schedule of meetings; allowing the proceedings of meetings to be disorganized; using ineffective means to capture the minutes of meetings; and failing to hold people accountable for meeting outcomes.

Some of these mistakes are cultural – they have to do with the way the organization runs. For example, organizations that are wrapped around the lives of the founder/entrepreneur where the power to make decisions have not been properly devolved will no doubt struggle with some of these challenges. Also, organizations that have a general laissez-faire attitude towards work and holding each other accountable will certainly not make the most out of meetings.

In addition to these and other cultural factors, a lot of these challenges persist because of a lack of capacity – leaders and professionals just do not know any better. In addition, they do not know how wasteful it is to have ineffective meetings and have never actually counted the cost in terms of lost man hours and productivity that such meetings create – they are not conscious of the real cost of wasteful meetings.



Planning Your Meetings

Once you begin to improve the consciousness of your team regarding the cost of ineffective meetings and start to address some of the cultural impediments to effective meetings, you can start to build the discipline of meetings in your organization by applying some tools to planning your meetings. An important part of your meeting planning toolkit must be setting clear objectives for the meeting. This should come from the organization's strategy that would have necessitated convening this meeting in the first place.

Once you are clear about the objective and purpose of the meeting, then you can now start to make decisions about how often the meeting should take place; the people that should attend the meeting (making the distinction between those who are essential and those who will play a supporting role). You should also plan the meeting agenda, and indicate whether the agenda will be fixed, flexible or a hybrid. The governance process of each meeting will have to be decided in terms of who chairs the meeting; quorum required and the secretariat for the meeting.

Managing Meeting Proceedings

In addition to all the steps taken in planning your meeting, you also must ensure that the proceedings of the meeting are effective. Participants at meetings should be notified ahead of the meeting and the agenda for each meeting should be circulated in advance to help participants prepare adequately.

If reports are required from participants, a standard format for the reports should be used and participants should receive training on how to use the formats properly. There is nothing more time-wasting than different participants having different formats and not ensuring that the minimum information/disclosures required are captured in their reports.

Start and end times of meetings can make or mar your meetings, so please ensure that you stick to these times religiously. Often, it is required for meeting participants to read some pre-meeting briefs or documents ahead of the meeting. This helps in reducing the amount of time spent in reviewing such details within the meetings.

For example, no one should still be reading through the minutes of previous meetings and correcting typos and mistakes during subsequent meetings. This is an absolute timewaster that should be avoided. If professionals in your organization have not imbibed the discipline of pre-

reading and your leadership and performance management system does not address this, you will struggle with keeping to the allotted time for meetings.

I recall working in team some years ago, where once the allotted time for a meeting was over, participants will simply get up and leave the meeting – this was because, we typically had meetings booked back-to-back each day in a team that almost 90% of the work was done during meetings.

Minutes and Records of Meetings.

Some years back I was inspired by a meeting management trick from a Catholic Bishop in the United States from the early part of the 20th century. He would use carbon paper to create instant copies of all the discussions at each meeting which he wrote himself and immediately hand them out to the participants in the meeting, while retaining the original copy. This way the minutes of each meeting were produced immediately, and everyone got a copy – no stories!

Some years ago, we successfully used a similar system in our Management Committee Meetings (MANCO) which we called the Self-Capturing Minutes Approach. We created a template for capturing the minutes and action points from our meetings and the template was printed for each participant before each meeting. Each participant was required to capture their own notes regarding each of the agenda items as the meeting proceeded.

At the end of the meeting, the CEO or whoever was chairing the meeting would randomly invite participants to summarize some of the action points from the meeting (particularly those related to departments other than theirs). This helped to ensure that MANCO members paid attention during the meetings and built some multi-disciplinary and general management skills.

In addition to this approach that drives accountability amongst participants, we strongly recommend that minutes of meetings are captured in the action-minutes format rather than in the compliance-minutes format used by board secretaries or court stenographers to capture the verbatim proceedings of meetings for legal or compliance purposes.

Your everyday Sales, MANCO or team meetings are not statutory meetings, so no need to have all that ‘the Chairman said’ ‘the manager responded’ and so on. The action-minutes format captures each agenda

item, a summary of the deliberations without any “he said” or “she said” and most importantly – the actions required, timelines for delivery and the person responsible for delivery. Your minutes therefore end up looking like a project planning/tracking document that will prove invaluable when it comes to following up on action items, rather than the lengthy prose of the compliance-minutes format.



Meeting Follow-Ups and Action

The final part of putting together an effective meeting is ensuring that meeting outcomes are achieved. There is no point spending two hours deliberating, only to come back after one month and realize that none of the agreed actions has taken place.

If you have used the action-minutes format, you already have a project plan that the secretary or chair of the meeting can use to follow-up with other participants after the meeting. If it is a statutory/compliance meeting and you have used the compliance format that I described earlier with plenty of prose, then you need to extract the action items and create the action-minutes for your meeting.

To make this work, minutes must be produced and circulated on time (the self-capturing minutes approach will help), then organizations need to assign someone with the responsibility for following up and all these need

to be reflected in the performance management system – there must be sanctions and rewards for those who meet the expectations set, including the person responsible for following-up and tracking.

You know that an organization or team has a broken-down system for managing meetings when action items come back undone at the next meeting or team members are scrambling the morning of each meeting to find out about action items and trying to rush through them. When you hear participants respond “I am on it” to items that are way passed the deadline, you know your meeting management system is broken.

The three Cs of Consciousness, Capacity and Culture are certainly lacking in such a team or organization and leaders have a responsibility to address those issues to get the maximum ROI from your meetings.

Meetings are an important tool for management succession planning, communication, and acculturation in every organization, but you cannot get the optimal ROI from this amazing tool if you do not pay attention to building and incubating the skills for planning meetings; managing meeting proceedings; keeping proper records of meetings; and ensuring that meeting outcomes and actions are implemented as we have described.

If you believe that you and your team need support in strengthening the culture and practice of meetings in your organization, please do not hesitate to reach out to our team of Organizational Development Consultants on +234 805 195 3276 right away to support you.