

MAKING MEETINGS EFFECTIVE and FUN!

We are all busy, and too often come away from meetings feeling they have been a waste of time, and saying: "This is the last time . . .". At 'Thank You 2007' I shall be running some workshops on meetings, and this piece is a taster to get people thinking about the subject.

Meetings can be effective and enjoyable, or can waste time and leave people feeling thoroughly fed up. Whatever the purpose of the meeting, if we are to continue to give of our best, outcomes from meetings must be useful. However, in order for this to happen, the way we interact with each other needs to be well managed.

Some meetings - especially where the aim is to stimulate creative thinking - may have a very open format - but most meetings work best when they are carefully structured. An intelligent structure encourages all parties to input fully, and allows the unexpected to happen, whilst ensuring that necessary outcomes are achieved.

There are three basic aspects to meetings – the preparation beforehand, sorting out the process, and how people behave and react on the day. Careful consideration of each aspect can make all the difference.

When preparing for a meeting, its purpose will have been established, what outcomes are required, and who is needed to make and implement decisions. An agenda will have been circulated beforehand, but it is worth checking this on the day to clarify priorities, and adjust as needs be. Background material will also have been circulated, as - if reading material is handed out at the beginning of a meeting – peoples' eyes and minds will be there, rather than being engaged and interacting with each other.

The physical environment of a meeting does make a difference. We have all experienced good meetings under bad conditions, but tranquil surroundings, comfortable furniture, good lighting, fresh coffee and enough water all help. It is worth arriving early to check situation, especially if electronics are being used. Where you sit can impinge on your input into the meeting, so choose the middle of the table if you want to make sure you have your say.

The coordinator may act as chairman, or moderator, and all participants can help facilitate useful outcomes through helping others express themselves. Meetings

may be very open and non-hierarchical, but someone is needed to be in charge at some level to ensure the business gets done - like mentioning 'ground rules'.

Start with a short quiet, and then remind people of the 'rules' for the meeting. People forget, and new people arrive, so it is worth always touching on the 'rules'. Rules include punctuality, turning off mobile phones, being respectful of others, listening actively, not interrupting and trying to understand, being succinct and sticking to the point. Sometimes – particularly when the situation is tricky - it may be useful to start with something quite different to 'flag' the situation. This might be asking each person to share something funny that happened to them during the last week

The final agenda will be agreed, with a time scale, and actions from previous minutes checked. On priorities, it is probably worth starting with major topics whilst people are at their freshest, though it can be argued that getting more minor items satisfactorily covered encourages energy flow. Keep an eye on the time to make sure that some critical person doesn't suddenly stand up and say: "I have to go now"!

Minute writing is an art, in that apart from possible legal implications, what minutes say is often what people reckon happened. Keep to essentials, only covering discussions when really necessary. List decisions, actions, responsibilities and time-scales, and check next time to make sure things have been done. If you are dealing with people who tend not to read minutes, it may be worth quickly photocopying draft minutes and handing them out as people leave the meeting, posting the final ones later.

Meetings are about people interacting, and ensuring that they interact in the best possible way demands great skill. When resolving issues, it helps to start by being 'divergent' – letting everyone have their say (succinctly), before then becoming 'convergent' to agree a solution. Even if a participant's viewpoint is not relevant, it may be important that they have the chance to be heard, and to feel heard. When discussing issues, asking 'open-ended' questions, will elicit more useful information than asking 'closed' ones where the answer is simply 'yes' or 'no'. If someone says something negative, reframing the comment to put it into a positive context can help the process continue smoothly, as can remembering that everyone has a 'positive intent' from their viewpoint.

Dealing with tricky behaviour is never easy, but allowing it to disrupt proceedings is doing no-one a favour. Understanding that someone is angry because of a row with a spouse earlier, or from feeling frightened of what may happen, or are simply determined not to be left out, all help avoid conflict. Hidden agendas can cause havoc, and can – to some extent be avoided – if people are encouraged to talk from their own experience, to speak from 'I', not in abstract.

When a person displays a negative emotion, the impact of this will be minimal if there is minimal reaction. Leaving the ball to drop to the ground, rather than being drawn into an argument, allows the emotion to disperse. It may be that just expressing the emotion was all that was needed. Differentiating between facts and feeling allows a tough attitude toward the fact, but a soft one toward people.

When considering communication – and that's what meetings are all about – there are the intellectual and emotional elements, but also there are the physical ones. The body is a powerful tool, in how it is used, how it stands, how clear the voice is, how the eyes engage and the way hands are used for emphasis. The tone of voice is far more important than the words that are used, and non-verbals generally communicate most – not those carefully chosen words! Talk quite fast with energy, but pause between ideas to allow time for assimilation, especially when speaking a language which is not the first language of others.

So this meeting that has been conducted along these lines has been a highly creative meeting, where everyone has contributed fully. There has been in depth discussion, with tough facts being exchanged, but in a way that has been acceptable. 'Win-win' conclusions have been reached which are reasonably satisfactory for everyone. Each person knows what their on-going tasks are. So now – at the end of the meeting – there is another little quiet (even in an everyday situation) and each person is asked to express in three words 'how they feel now'. This finale will show whether the time that has been spent together has indeed been both effective and enjoyable.

Santa Raymond is an architect and interior designer who now runs workshops on communication and presentation skills, mainly for architects, but also for those from other disciplines.