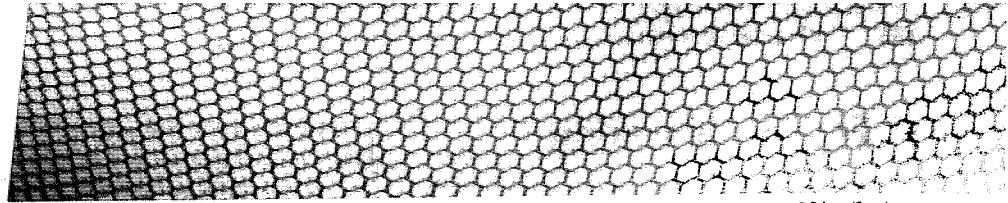


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CHAPTER 20

How to Arrange and Conduct Effective Meetings

Meetings: Where you go to learn how to do better the things you already know how to do anyway, but don't have time to do, because of too many meetings.

—Anonymous

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Characterize various types of meetings by the purposes for which they are held.
- Provide guidelines for determining the need for a meeting and for preparing to conduct an effective meeting.
- Offer suggestions for leading a meeting in such a way as to obtain maximum benefits from the process while consuming the least possible amount of the valuable time of those attending.
- Place meetings in general in perspective as an often misused but potentially effective management tool.

KEY TERMS

- Correctly run meeting—no participant should leave without a full understanding of the decisions made, the actions to be taken, the people responsible for implementation, and the timetable for implementation.
- Videoconferencing—a practice that permits people at two or more locations to interact by way of two-way video and audio transmission, enabling the conduct of meetings involving participants located some distance from each other.

► For Consideration: The Conference

This is about a conference involving the following five people:

1. Dan Andrews, administrative assistant. He functions in a staff capacity and has no direct employees except for his secretary, Susan. One of his assignments is a long-term project intended to determine some of the reasons for employee turnover. He called the meeting approximately 10 days ago. Two of the other people in attendance he notified by telephone, and the other two people he invited in person.
2. Harry Robertson, human resources director.
3. Jane Dawson, director of nursing service.
4. Arthur Morey, director of environmental services.
5. Arlette Wilson, director of food service.

The meeting was scheduled for 1:00 p.m. in Andrews's office. Andrews returned from lunch at 1:08 p.m. to find Robertson and Wilson there waiting for him. At 1:12 p.m. Dawson entered and Andrews said, "I'd like to get started, but where's Morey?"

"I don't know," somebody answered. Andrews dialed a number and received no answer. He then dialed the switchboard and asked for a page. A moment later a call came in and Andrews spoke briefly with Morey.

Turning from the telephone Andrews said, "He forgot. He'll be here in a minute."

"Dan, I wish you had a larger office or a better place to meet," said Dawson. "I don't know how we're going to fit another person in here."

"I know it's small," Andrews answered, "but both conference rooms are tied up and I couldn't find another place. Say, holler out to

Susan and tell her to find another chair—we're going to need it."

Arlette Wilson said, "Dan, can you open your window a little? It's already stuffy in here."

Dan responded by opening the window a few inches. Then the environmental services director entered, squeezing into the office with the chair that had just been located. It was 1:18 p.m.

Andrews said, "I guess we can get started now." He shuffled through a stack of papers before him and said, "I've got a copy, if I can, ah—oh, here it is—of a recent turnover survey done by the human resource directors in the eastern region." Looking at Robertson he asked, "I assume you have this?"

"Yes, I have it. There's a copy in my office, but I didn't know I needed to bring it with me."

Andrews said, "Well, I think what we can get from this thing is —"

The nursing director interrupted, "Dan, wouldn't it be better if we all could see it? Then you could go down it point-by-point."

Dan said, "I guess you're right. I just have this single copy." He turned toward the door and hollered, "Susan, can you come here a minute?"

Susan entered and Dan instructed her to run four copies of the survey at once.

Turning back to his pile of papers Dan said to the group in general, "The last time we got together there were a number of things we decided to look for. I don't remember just what we assigned to whom, but I've got it here somewhere."

For a half-minute or so Dan leafed through the papers before him. Then he turned to the file drawer of his desk and began to go through folders.

While Dan was looking, Jane Dawson turned to Robertson and said, "Say, what have you been doing about finding that new in-service instructor we need? We notified your employment section three weeks ago, and Eleanor is leaving in another week and we still haven't had any candidates to interview."

Harry Robertson responded. His tone sparked a defensive reaction and a lively discussion began.

Andrews located the paper he was seeking and Susan returned with the requested photocopies. Andrews distributed the copies and fixed his attention on the nursing director and human resource director as he waited for an opening in their discussion, which was now something between a conversation and an argument. At approximately 1:32 p.m. they managed to return to the subject of employee turnover.

"Now, about this eastern region survey," Andrews began.

Arlette Wilson said, "What about the survey? I thought you wanted to start with the things we agreed to do the last time we were together."

"Who cares," said Robertson. "Let's just get started."

The nursing director looked at her watch and said, "We'd better hurry up and get started and finished. I have a staff meeting at 2:00 p.m."

The meeting settled down to a discussion of the eastern region survey and the preliminary data each person had gathered since the previous meeting. At exactly 2 minutes before 2:00 p.m., the nursing director excused herself to attend her meeting. At 2:08 p.m. Morey was called over the paging system; he left Andrews's office and did not return.

At 2:12 p.m. Andrews said he felt they had tentatively decided on their next step but required some input from the two parties who had already left. He then started to excuse the other two participants with the suggestion that they get together again after 2 weeks.

At that point Andrews's telephone rang. He answered it himself, his usual practice, and talked for some 4–5 minutes before returning his attention to the two persons left in his office. He said, "I guess that's about it for this time around. I'll get back to you and establish a time for the next meeting."

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Arlette Wilson said, "Dan, can you open the window a little? It's already stuffy in here." He responded by opening the window a few inches. Then the environmental services director, squeezing into the office with the air that had just been located. It was 1:11 p.m.

Arlette said, "I guess we can get started now." He shuffled through a stack of papers behind him and said, "I've got a copy, if I can, although here it is—of a recent turnover survey by the human resource directors in the eastern region." Looking at Robertson he asked, "I assume you have this?"

"I have it. There's a copy in my office, but I don't know I needed to bring it with me," Andrews said. "Well, I think what we can get in this thing is —"

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Returning back to his pile of papers Dan said the group in general, "The last time we sat together there were a number of things we decided to look for. I don't remember just who assigned to whom, but I've got it here on a separate sheet."

At a half-minute or so Dan leafed through the sheets before him. Then he turned to the file folder of his desk and began to go through the folders.

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When the last of the participants had left, Andrews's secretary came into his office and

asked if they were finished with the extra chair. Andrews indicated they were, and as Susan removed the chair, Andrews thought gloomily of how difficult it was to get anything done in this hospital.

Instructions

At whatever point in the chapter you feel comfortable doing so, perform a detailed critique of "The Conference." Make a list of points you consider errors and omissions in the way this meeting was arranged and conducted, and indicate what positive steps could have been taken to avoid each of the errors and omissions.

► "Let's Schedule a Meeting"

Whenever a meeting of any kind threatens to land on your schedule, your first thought should often be some consideration of whether you can find a way to do without the meeting. Not that you will always, or even frequently, succeed in doing so, but the amount of management time consumed by meetings is more than enough to prompt us to ask of each potential meeting: "Is this really necessary?"

Therefore, when a meeting looms, the proper order of essential steps is (1) consider possible alternate means of accomplishing what the meeting would supposedly accomplish, and (2) having concluded that a meeting is the best way to do what needs to be done, then plan, schedule, and conduct the meeting in such a manner that maximum possible output is obtained with the least possible time and effort.

Can a Meeting Be Avoided?

For the most part we decry the frequency, number, and length of meetings, yet we continue to hold them and attend them in the

most unnecessary or questionable meetings would have to be reckoned in terms of lost productivity. What would these people be doing had they not been involved in a meeting?

Only when it is determined that a meeting is indeed necessary should one be scheduled. And once scheduled, it should be conducted in such a way as to secure maximum value from the time and efforts of the participants.

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Meetings often represent the best available technique for arriving at joint conclusions and determining joint actions. It is often possible to accomplish results in minutes that would require hours, days, or weeks by other means.

Meetings are also essential to consultative and participative leadership styles. Joint decisions and actions take longer to formulate than do unilateral decisions and edicts, since true two-way communication including discussion and feedback requires more time than one-way communication. However, the extra time spent in meetings can represent a small price to pay for the benefits afforded by an honest, open, participative style.

Prevalent in business activities of all kinds, in recent years meetings seem to have become an even greater concern for their frequency and complexity. Certainly the total quality movement and the greatly increased use of employee teams and work groups have added to the impression of endless meetings. And the increased numbers of meetings have led to the increased impression that it is now groups—committees, if you will—that make decisions, not individuals.

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Directed Discussion

A directed discussion meeting may be appropriate when a conclusion, solution, or decision is evident. The conclusion has already been determined, yet it is not simply being relayed to the group as straight information. It is the leader's objective to gain the participant acceptance of the solution. In effect, a directed discussion is a sales pitch.

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The information meeting is held simply for the transfer of information. You have something to pass along to others and you choose to do this with a meeting rather than by some other means. The basic purpose of any information meeting is to transfer information to the group, and in this setting the leader may most or all of the talking. Although there are usually questions and discussion for the sake of clarification, the transfer of information is essentially one way.

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Prevalent in business activities of all kinds in recent years meetings seem to have become an even greater concern for their frequency and complexity. Certainly the total quality movement and the greatly increased use of employee teams and work groups have added to the impression of endless meetings. And the increased numbers of meetings have led to the increasing impression that it is now groups—committees, if you will—that make decisions, not individuals.

"Management by committee" may be a widespread and not completely unavoidable perception that falls out from the reality of numerous meetings. While a group may provide information and recommendations,

however, the ultimate responsibility for any specific decision usually resides with an individual.

► Types of Meetings

Information Meetings

The information meeting is held simply for the transfer of information. You have something to pass along to others and you choose to do this with a meeting rather than by some other means. The basic purpose of any information meeting is to transfer information to the group, and in this setting the leader may do most or all of the talking. Although there are usually questions and discussion for the sake of clarification, the transfer of information is essentially one way.

Discussion Meetings

The objective of a discussion meeting is to gain agreement on something through the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. The essence of the discussion meeting is interchange; the exchange of information must be established between and among all participants.

Directed Discussion

A directed discussion meeting may be appropriate when a conclusion, solution, or decision is evident. The conclusion has already been determined; yet it is not simply being relayed to the group as straight information. It is the leader's objective to gain the participants' acceptance of the solution. In effect, a directed discussion is a sales pitch.

Problem-Solving Discussion

This type of meeting is held when a problem exists and a solution or decision must be determined by the group. Although the answer determined by joint action may well turn out

to be based on the ideas of a single participant, at the outset it is apparent only that there is a problem with which several parties could reasonably be concerned.

Exploratory Discussion

The purpose of an exploratory discussion meeting is to gain information on which you or others may eventually base a decision. The objective is not to develop a specific solution or recommendation but rather to generate and develop ideas and information for someone (perhaps yourself, but possibly your boss or some other manager) who must make the decision.

A Special Case: The Staff Meeting

The staff meeting may be an information meeting, a discussion meeting, or both. A staff meeting is usually held for the purpose of communication among the members of a group. Staff members may report on the status of their activities, and thus each may be required to effect the one-way transfer of information to others. This meeting form is also used to solve problems, sell ideas, and explore issues, and, depending on the business at hand, it may take on any or all of the three forms of the discussion meeting.

► Meeting Preparation

A few of the following suggestions are most pertinent to discussion meetings convened for dealing with specific situations. Most, however, apply generally to all types of meetings.

Defining the Problem

To enable a group to begin dealing with a situation it is necessary to establish the nature of that situation. The first step, then, in preparing for a meeting is your identification of the meetings intended focus. Before your invited

participants attend the meeting they must understand what they are going to discuss when they get there, so you must be able to supply a concise statement of the problem or other reason for the meeting.

Confirming the Need for a Meeting

In addition to what was said in earlier paragraphs about determining the need for a meeting, it is also suggested that the decision of whether or not to involve several people in a meeting may not be yours alone. Confirming your thoughts with a few potential participants can be helpful. If, in addition to you, two others believe it can be done without a meeting, you are fairly secure in using other means. However, if you stand alone in your opposition to a meeting, there may be aspects of the situation that you are overlooking.

Deciding What Should Be Accomplished

Before you convene the meeting you should have a clear idea of what you want to achieve. As your definition of the problem provides the starting point, so does your meeting provide a target. At a minimum, and before calling people together, you want to be able to say whether the meeting should give you the solution to a problem, the group's acceptance of an idea, some significant decision-making information, or other such results.

Selecting the Meeting Type

Based on your determination of what should be accomplished, you should then decide what type of meeting you are going to have. There are some broad differences between information meetings and discussion meetings, but there are also significant differences in emphasis among the subtypes of discussion meetings.

Your clear understanding as to whether the discussion should be directed or should be oriented toward problem solving or exploration will assist you in controlling the meeting and keeping the discussion headed toward the result you wish to accomplish.

Selecting the Participants

Again based on your best determination of what is to be accomplished, next you need to determine who should attend the meeting. This determination should be based on your best assessment of who has the knowledge to deal with the problem and the authority to make decisions and commit resources to solve the problem. Your objective in selecting people to attend the meeting should be to secure the broadest possible coverage of the problem without overloading the meeting. Overloading can present a number of problems. Having too many participants makes a meeting more difficult to control, and although some participants may be only peripherally concerned with the issue at hand, they can nevertheless impede progress and increase the difficulty of reaching conclusions or recommendations. Generally, the larger a group or committee, the more difficult and time-consuming it is to properly serve the intended purpose of the gathering.

Distributing Advance Information

All those invited should receive, along with the meeting notification, all information that would be helpful in preparing for the meeting. If you can give them only a statement of the problem, then let them know this is all you have. If you have background information in the form of letters, memos, or reports, send them so they can consider all aspects of the problem in advance of the meeting. Give them also your expectations of the meeting. At the very least, those invited should know both the problem and the objective.

Notifying and Reminding the Participants

Written notification of the meeting should include time, place, preparations to make or materials to bring, the statement of the problem, and the meeting's objectives. Ideally, you should provide written notification a week or more in advance and plan on telephoning reminders a day or two before the meeting actually takes place. Generally, the more important the topic of the meeting, and the busier the people you are inviting, the more advance notice you should provide.

It is also a good idea to clear the date and time in advance with the key people attending. Otherwise you are likely to find yourself having to notify everyone of a change in arrangements even though some have already cleared their calendars to attend. Remember that you are not the only busy person in the organization; it may frequently be necessary for you to bend your schedule to accommodate the availability of other people.

Arranging for Proper Facilities

This step should seem self-evident, but too often a dozen people find they are ready to meet but have no place to sit down. If you need suitable conference facilities, make sure you give them for the preferred date and time. Your notification goes out. It should also include, without saying—but nevertheless must be understood—judging from the number of times things go wrong—that you need sufficient space for all persons involved, reasonably comfortable surroundings, and reasonable freedom from interruptions. Also, advance arrangements should be made for needed equipment such as flip charts, chalkboards, projectors, and other aids.

Preparing an Agenda

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promises to be long and involved, the agenda should be worked out sufficiently in advance so it can be supplied to all attendees with the meeting notification. Whether or not it is supplied in advance, however, as meeting leader you need the agenda. It may consist of only a few broad points jotted in the corner of your note pad, but the process of writing it forces you to rethink your purpose in calling the meeting and consider how you will get from problem to objective. Although you will not think of every necessary step or essential question ahead of time, with an agenda you can at least remind yourself of certain important points. When the meeting is under way your agenda may well expand as issues are raised and information previously unknown to you is offered. This is all well and good, as long as all agenda additions or digressions contribute directly to moving the group from the problem toward the meeting's objective.

▶ Leading a Meeting

Start on Time

You may want to allow some flexibility in how closely you adhere to a rigid starting time. If the meeting is a one-time affair involving a number of people who are organizationally scattered, perhaps including some who are your superiors in the management structure, you may want to bend a few minutes on starting time. (In a practical sense, you are likely to wait more than a few minutes for a tardy person to show, especially if that person happens to be your boss.) Also, a one-shot meeting is not a regular part of someone's schedule or pattern of behavior. It is perhaps best to give yourself some slack in scheduling; for instance, you schedule a session for 1:30 p.m. although you know full well it will not start until 1:45 p.m. Try not to overdo this practice; it suggests disrespect for those who do show up on time and deference to the latecomers.

In the case of a regularly scheduled meeting (for instance, your monthly staff meeting held at 3:00 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month), begin precisely on time. The more you defer to chronic latecomers, the more likely these people are to remain chronic latecomers. Also, chronic tardiness can often be an indication of other problems, such as hostility, disrespect, lack of interest, or perhaps inflated ego.

Making it a habit of starting on time can go a long way toward curing chronic tardiness. If it is 3:00 p.m. and only half of your staff members are present, start the meeting even though you know the remainder will be trickling in over the next several minutes. Out of respect for those who show up on time, do not repeat what has already been said for the sake of the latecomers. Rather, let the late arrivers know they have to wait until after the meeting to find out what they missed from those who were present. Make it plain, also, that the content of the early part of the meeting is not always filler or "warm up" material that people can afford to miss. Make it a habit to start your regularly scheduled meetings precisely on time, and most chronic latecomers will change their ways as they get the message and become accustomed to your pattern of behavior.

State the Purpose of the Meeting

First tell the group why they are there and what they need to accomplish. Also, give them your best estimate of the amount of time the meeting should require. Ending time can be fully as troublesome as starting time in some situations. A meeting can be a form of escape for some people who lead busy, hectic working lives, and some people may tend to prolong the session with irrelevancies if progress is not well controlled. (It has been suggested that an effective way to get a 1-hour meeting concluded in just 1 hour is to schedule it to start an hour before lunch or an hour before quitting time.) In short, your first item of business should be

to advise those attending why they are there, what they are expected to accomplish, and approximately how long it should take.

Make Some Assignments

Some of the practical ideas coming out of the total quality management (TQM) movement and its emphasis on working with teams include guidelines for running meetings. You may have done everything yourself up to this point, but once the meeting is convened you are likely to find that you alone cannot do everything that ought to be done. It is time to involve some of the others in moving the meeting along by handing out some assignments. The common assignments for a meeting of reasonable size (say five, six, or more people) are recorder, scribe, and timekeeper.

Recorder

The recorder keeps track of what happens in the meeting for the sake of generating a written record of what occurs (meeting minutes). The recorder may actually create the minutes or simply hand the rough notes over to you. The point of having the recorder is to relieve you of trying to make a record of the proceedings while you are also running the meetings; you cannot do both together as well as you could do either alone.

Scribe

The scribe serves an important purpose if you have a need to capture points or ideas on a chalkboard or flip-chart. This is "talking material" that may evolve as you meet, so it may not be the same as what you might embody in meeting minutes. In a small meeting, the recorder and scribe might be one and the same, but the roles are really different and a meeting of as few as three lively contributors could readily overwhelm someone who is trying to fill both roles.

Timekeeper

The timekeeper is a person who keeps track of the time spent on each agenda item and keeps the group aware of where they stand relative to total allotted time, the clock, and the agenda.

Encourage Discussion

Do not allow the meeting to move in narrow lines that valuable input is lost. A for clarification of comments that are of direct questions, particularly of the few "sale ones" who may frequently populate your meetings. Remember, if you have structured your meeting wisely then everyone who is there for a good reason. It is part of your job as meeting leader to do everything you can to get even the ordinarily silent people talking.

Exercise Control: A List of Don'ts Of Yourself

- Don't let your ego get in the way simply because you are the meeting leader and thus automatically in control of the proceedings.
- Don't lecture or otherwise dominate the proceedings; the setting is a meeting, not a speech or a class.
- Don't direct the others by telling them what to do or what they should say to conclude. This would amount to one-way communication, which is only marginally appropriate even when the purpose of the meeting is purely informational.
- Don't argue with participants. Discuss yes—argue, never.
- Don't attempt to be funny. What may be funny to one person may not be to another. The best laughs generated at a meeting are those that arise naturally from the discussion.

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to advise those attending why they are there, what they are expected to accomplish, and approximately how long it should take.

Make Some Assignments

Some of the practical ideas coming out of the total quality management (TQM) movement and its emphasis on working with teams include guidelines for running meetings. You may have done everything yourself up to this point, but once the meeting is convened you are likely to find that you alone cannot do everything that ought to be done. It is time to involve some of the others in moving the meeting along by handing out some assignments. The common assignments for a meeting of reasonable size (say five, six, or more people) are recorder, scribe, and timekeeper.

Recorder

The recorder keeps track of what happens in the meeting for the sake of generating a written record of what occurs (meeting minutes). The recorder may actually create the minutes or simply hand the rough notes over to you. The point of having the recorder is to relieve you of trying to make a record of the proceedings while you are also running the meeting; you cannot do both together as well as you could do either alone.

Scribe

The scribe serves an important purpose if you have a need to capture points or ideas on a chalkboard or flip-chart. This is "talking material" that may evolve as you meet, so it may not be the same as what you might embody in meeting minutes. In a small meeting, the recorder and scribe might be one and the same, but the roles are really different and a meeting of as few as three lively contributors could readily overwhelm someone who is trying to fill both roles.

Timekeeper

The timekeeper is a person who keeps track of the time spent on each agenda item and who keeps the group aware of where they stand relative to total allotted time, the clock, and the agenda.

Encourage Discussion

Do not allow the meeting to move in such narrow lines that valuable input is lost. Ask for clarification of comments that are offered. Consider requesting opinions and asking direct questions, particularly of the few "silent ones" who may frequently populate your meetings. Remember, if you have structured your meeting wisely then everyone who is there is there for a good reason. It is part of your job as meeting leader to do everything you can to get even the ordinarily silent people talking.

Exercise Control: A List of Don'ts Of Yourself

- Don't let your ego get in the way simply because you are the meeting leader and thus automatically in control of the proceedings.
- Don't lecture or otherwise dominate the proceedings; the setting is a meeting, not a speech or a class.
- Don't direct the others by telling them what to do or what they should say or conclude. This would amount to one-way communication, which is only marginally appropriate even when the purpose of the meeting is purely informational.
- Don't argue with participants. Discuss, yes—argue, never.
- Don't attempt to be funny. What may be funny to one person may not be to another. The best laughs generated at a meeting are those that arise naturally from the discussion.

Of the Group

- Don't allow lengthy tangential digressions to pull you away from the subject of the meeting. Granted many legitimate problems are identified through tangential discussions, but, legitimate or not, if they do not relate to the problem at hand they are diluting the effectiveness of the meeting. Should a legitimate problem arise, make note of it but sideline it for action at another time or at another meeting and proceed with the subject at hand.
- Don't allow monopolizers and ego-trippers to take over. Although certain talkative people may have significant contributions to make, their constant presence center stage serves to narrow the discussion and discourage marginally vocal contributors from opening up at all. Overall, your effectiveness as a meeting leader will largely be determined by how effectively you control the discussion of the group.

Summarize Periodically

Agreement in a discussion meeting is usually not reached in a single, progressive series of exchanges. Rather, agreement accrues as discussion points are sifted, sorted, and merged, and a solution or recommendation begins to take form. Capture this by periodically summarizing what has been said, giving the group, in your own words, a recounting of where you are and where you seem to be headed. If they can agree with your summary of progress—essentially, their thoughts encapsulated and restated in your words—then the meeting is on the right track.

End with a Specific Plan

When the meeting is over you should be able to deliver a final summary stating what has been

decided and who is going to do what and by when. Far too many meetings are frustrating affairs that may feel productive while under way but afterward leave participants hanging with a sense of incompleteness.

It is essential that no one leave your meeting without full understanding of the decisions made, the actions to be taken, the people responsible for implementation, and the timetable for implementation; these are the requirements of the properly run meeting. If the subject is sufficiently complex, it may be to your advantage to call for understanding by going around the table, asking everyone for their interpretations of what has been decided and how they see their roles, if any, in the implementation of the decision. In any event, do not let the group leave without a clear understanding of what has been decided and what happens next.

Follow Up

As far as your authority over the problem extends, it is up to you to follow up to determine that what has been decided gets accomplished. It is also up to you to see that the minutes of the meeting, should they be necessary, are prepared and distributed; provide later assurance to all participants that what they decided has in fact been accomplished; and schedule a follow-up meeting should one be necessary.

► Cleaning Up “The Conference”

The errors and omissions in the way the meeting described “For Consideration” was arranged and conducted are numerous and, in most instances, glaring. For the most part, we know intuitively and by plain common sense that most of these are indeed errors, but nevertheless we often find ourselves allowing many of these to occur because we fail to take control of our own meetings.

In most of the following items, identification of the problem directly implies what should have been done:

- Andrews was late for his own meeting. It is questionable enough to be late for a meeting at which you are an invited participant, but, in the absence of some dire emergency, being late for your own meeting is inexcusable.
- Dawson arrived late, wasting several minutes of other people's time, and then expected events to turn upon her arrival.
- Andrews did not provide written notification of the meeting or reminders as the date neared. When meeting notifications are oral, they often do not make it onto calendars. Also, for an important meeting that is scheduled more than a few days in advance—say more than a week ahead of time—reminders are in order.
- A reasonable meeting space was not arranged in advance, and insufficient seating caused an added delay. Andrews used an inadequate space.
- The meeting began 18 minutes late. Need we reiterate the necessity of beginning scheduled meetings at the scheduled time?
- Andrews should have had his meeting material available and ready rather than having to shuffle papers and search for the proper documents.
- Andrews should have planned for meeting handouts, having them copied and ready in advance, rather than wasting time trying to secure copies during the meeting.
- There were apparently no minutes taken at the previous meeting, and apparently no one had kept track of who had agreed to do what. The file Andrews sought, the finding of which created another delay, should have been out and available before the meeting began.
- The participants permitted a digression of topic that threatened to become highly disruptive.

■ The group lost considerable time in agreement over what they were expected to be doing.

■ Although Andrews was in no position to stop those who left when the meeting had barely begun, he let them go with indication of what they should be doing concerning this group's mission.

■ Andrews took a telephone call while people remained in his office, putting them in an awkward position and wasting their time.

■ No advance consideration was given scheduling the next meeting. The best time to set a follow-up meeting is when you have all or most of the intended participants—and, we would hope, the calendars—in the same room at the same time.

■ Apparently no decisions were made at this meeting, and no specific tasks were assigned, rendering the meeting useless for all practical purposes.

■ In his gloomy thoughts about “how difficult it was to get anything done in the hospital,” Andrews seemed to have missed all consideration of what it was that made the meeting useless: people and, in this instance, primarily Dan Andrews.

► Videoconferencing

A videoconference arrangement allows people at two or more locations to interact by way of two-way video and audio transmissions, thus enabling the conduct of meetings involving individuals located some distance from each other. It is a step beyond telephone-calling in that it serves a group rather than just individuals one-on-one. Quite simply, it uses audio and video technology to bring people located at different sites together for meetings.

A videoconference can be as simple as a direct connection between two individuals, in their own offices or at some common location.

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A videoconference can be as simple as a direct connection between two individuals in their own offices or it can involve multiple

persons in conference rooms at several sites. In addition to meeting face-to-face, videoconferencing can be used to share documents and displays such as flip charts or slides or transparencies. Many of the earliest videoconferencing systems consisted simply of connected pairs of closed-circuit television systems.

The basic technology employed in a videoconferencing system is digital compression of audio and video by use of a coder-recorder. The other components used for a videoconferencing system include: some form of video input, either webcam or video camera; video output in the form of television, projector, or computer monitor; audio input (microphones); audio output (speakers); and some means of data transfer (Internet, digital telephone, etc.).

There are large-group systems that are nonportable, sizeable, and costly setups used in auditoriums and large conference rooms, and smaller, systems, both portable and nonportable, used for small meeting rooms. Individual videoconferencing usually employs portable devices with camera, microphones, and speakers integrated into the console. There are also desktop systems that are essentially hardware add-ons to standard personal computers. Videoconferences can be held involving a number of separate personal computers, a practice known in some quarters as *e-meetings*.

Some perceived problems that have been noted with videoconferencing include:

- **Expense.** Other than the simple webcam-based systems using individual personal computers, the technology is sufficiently costly to prohibit its use in many organizations that do not experience sufficient volume to justify the expenditures. However, full-blown dedicated systems can be cost-effective in a few organizations (many of these outside of health care) that are able to use videoconferencing to avoid costly travel.

■ *Eye contact.* Eye contact figures strongly in most aspects of interpersonal communication. However, some videoconferencing systems create the impression that one who is speaking remotely is avoiding eye contact. Eye contact will often be experienced by viewers who are directly in front of the image of a speaker who appears to be talking directly at the camera. However, the view of persons seeing the screen from any appreciable angle will be subject to the parallax effect and it will appear that the speaker is looking past them.

■ *Self-consciousness.* Some studies of videoconferencing have suggested that the presence of video may actually hamper communication for some people because of self-consciousness about being "on camera" and possibly even being recorded. This effect may not be present in certain other modes of communication; for some people, however, taking part in videoconferencing is apparently similar to being required to speak before groups when they are unaccustomed to doing so.

As far as meetings overall are concerned, videoconferencing has a legitimate place among the means of business communication. Sometimes it is neither possible nor practical to conduct face-to-face meetings involving two or more people. Yet sometimes a telephone conversation or conference call is adequate for the purpose, and at other times e-mail exchanges may fulfill the need perfectly well. Videoconferencing is but another possible communications alternative, one that might be considered when:

- visual information—charts, tables, illustrations, etc.—is an important part of the interchange;
- the persons involved are unable to convene at the same location but it is believed that a live conversation is needed; or
- the time or expense of travel is a consideration.

► Use or Abuse?

As with any other management tool or technique, meetings can be overused, underused, or used ineffectively. They can be expected to do far too much—meetings are certainly no substitute for effective individual decision-making in the presence of proper authority and responsibility—or they can be denied the opportunity to serve their purpose appropriately.

Whether the meetings you call are used or abused is largely up to you. Meetings are often an unwieldy way of doing business, and as such it is easy for them to become wasteful and ineffective. However, the properly conducted meeting remains one of the most effective available ways of accomplishing certain tasks. Whether meetings are effective or ineffective centers on the issue of control: If we fail to control our meetings, our meetings control us.

Questions for Review and

Discussion

1. Describe how you would suggest "drawing out" a particularly silent participant at a meeting you are chairing.
2. What is always the first question that should be asked, or the first decision that should be made, when you are considering convening a meeting for some purpose?
3. What do you see as the primary advantages of conducting business in the context of a meeting? The disadvantages?
4. Recognizing that many meetings take far too long and accomplish too little because they wander over a variety of subjects, suggest how to keep a meeting on track while still ensuring that any essential issues that arise are not lost forever.

5. What are the final points to be covered or actions to be taken at the end of meeting?
6. Comment on this quotation from C. Northcote Parkinson: "The amount of work accomplished by a committee inversely proportional to the number of members on the committee."
7. Describe how you would handle one of your employees who continually monopolizes most discussion during your department staff meetings.
8. Describe how you might attempt to draw a chronically silent individual into active participation in a staff meeting.
9. What do you believe to be the best means of notifying prospective meeting participants, in writing or personally by telephone?
10. What do you consider to be the most important aspect of follow-up after a meeting?

Exercise: "Minutes" for "The Conference"

Referring to the opening example presentation "For Consideration": Imagine yourself in the place of Dan Andrews and that you have unexpectedly been asked by your immediate superior to provide a written record of the most recent meeting of the group engaged in the turnover project. Recognize, of course, that this was not a formal committee meeting with motions and votes and such but appreciate also that your boss and the others who attended your meeting are entitled to record of who attended, what occurred, what was accomplished, and what the next step might be.

Do your best to report on the meeting for your boss. Keep in mind that even the bare bones meeting minutes usually include the why of the meeting, who attended, what was

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