

Does your meeting culture provide a competitive edge?



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Let's start with two simple declarations: First, meetings are either a competitive advantage for your organisation or a source of major frustration and a waste of time. Second, you are either improving this organisational competency or you are getting worse—there isn't any status quo, especially with the new onslaught of virtual meetings, technology, and additional stakeholders who want to be included.

I have a colleague, Dave, who accepted an 18-month lateral move away from operations to corporate strategic planning in order to broaden his knowledge of the business. On Dave's last day in strategic planning, the CEO's comment was telling. "For the first time in my tenure, I feel like we truly know where we are on each of our compelling aspirations and key projects. And this is directly correlated to the way that Dave designed and led our meetings!" Meetings are a competitive advantage for any organisation that masters the art of bringing people together to make progress on initiatives, goals, and projects. Sometimes, as with Dave's leadership, you have to see a really good meeting to realise yours are not.

Be careful, though. Don't judge your meeting culture based only on the meetings which you attend. I expect that many senior leaders have little sense of how much frustration about meetings might be running throughout their organisations. When you reflect on the conversations that make up an organisational culture, you'll inevitably encounter a litany of complaints about meetings. In addition, many employees are taking work home simply because they spend so much time in non-productive meetings that they can't get their work done, which takes time away from their families.

What is more interesting is that most organisations lack a compelling strategy to deal with these complaints. Many managers have focused on trying to have fewer meetings or designating meeting-free time periods. And while every attempt to reduce the amount of time spent in meetings is a step in the right direction—and at least signals that managers understand the wear and tear of meetings on their people—fewer meetings is not the best approach.

The most powerful strategy is simply to be extremely effective each time you meet—get together, get the work done, end the meeting, and then follow up to assure progress between meetings.

The skills to do this are missing in most organisations and the ability to design and lead meetings is rarely a competency listed on leadership development plans. The lack of effective process skills is a bigger issue than how many meetings we have. Surprisingly, not many organisations are working on gaining this competitive advantage.

How can this be? Perhaps people don't realise there's a better way. Or they've simply settled for less than what is possible. Or perhaps the problem seems insurmountable. It's not.

What visible changes have impacted meetings over time?

Technology is a relatively new factor that has brought us PowerPoint slides and virtual meetings and shared screens and documents. Technology can either aid the effectiveness of meetings or detract from it. Automatically doing what everyone else is doing with technology without determining value added doesn't make sense. For example: allowing people to bring devices and multitask during meetings is a distraction to both them and others. Technology has also given managers a safety net when meeting with employees as it displaces authentic conversation. And the use of PowerPoint slides reduces questions, which leads to less clarity and alignment. Rich conversation has a back and forth modality that is easily displaced by technology.

Another issue is the increasing size of meetings. The expectation and need for inclusion has swelled the size of meetings way beyond the optimal size of eight. Eight is not a hard and fast rule, but consider the impact of having twenty participants: conversations are reduced to information sharing or direction setting and participants do not have time to add value by asking questions or suggesting changes. Most resign themselves to passive listening—a few are not stopped by large group size, but they then dominate the conversation, and the notion of “the wisdom of the group” is lost. Small groups can literally think together in a way that new ideas emerge from the conversation—thinking that no one had when they entered the room.

What are the roles of technology, processes, and people in a meeting culture?

These days, most might rate technology as most important. People continue to be underrated. Still, organisations are made up of human beings who want to belong and contribute. When people in an organisation treat something as important—like safety, or quality, or diversity—it is obvious. When they don't, it's difficult to overcome. The same holds true for meetings. It's about the people who walk into the room: do they care, are they prepared, and will they participate?

Technology can enhance the experience of everyone if it is added after thoughtful consideration. Everyone seems to believe that multitasking is a strength and that technology enhances every conversation. The research says something different. Only 2 percent of people in the world are good at multitasking; quickly looking at something else carries a ten-to fifteen-minute residual distraction; even the presence of a smartphone reduces the depth at which people will share; and PowerPoints actually lead to less engagement. We certainly don't want to go back in time, but can we unplug when the conversation requires the engagement and wisdom of the group?

Effective meeting processes, on the other hand, can impel a meeting's progress forward dramatically. Having a clearly mapped-out path to follow when trying to align on a decision or resolve an issue keeps a conversation on track. This is a function of meeting design. Having a designated leader for the conversation also helps keep the conversation moving forward and out of the weeds. Having a process for closing the conversation means you leave the meeting knowing exactly who is going to do what by when—as well as knowing the value people are taking away.

Effective meetings maximise the influence of each person who attends—if the meeting is designed and facilitated in a way that leverages the talent and time of the participants.

One of the fundamental questions for each of us is: Does how we are spending our time honour who we are and our priorities? Without clear and relevant processes, our time in meetings will not support our goals, ambitions, and priorities.

High-performing teams have three elements: psychological safety, broad participation, and a high completion rate on actions between meetings. Every person who attends has unique views, ideas, questions and concerns. Every person wants to contribute to the organisation. In addition to their individual work, their experience of being in meetings adds to or subtracts from their experience of making a difference.

Why is alignment between people, processes, and technology important?

Processes and technology need to serve people. Technology must be designed to enhance the contribution and experience of people. Processes must empower people to be themselves at their best. Virtual meetings provide a way for people to attend more meetings—wherever they are. So it enables connection and knowledge sharing while reducing travel costs and broadening our ability to accommodate individuals and global work. Imagine if your meetings were designed and led so that each person could be their “best self”!

What processes impact time spent in meetings?

Three things directly impact the time spent in meetings: preparation of the participants, clarity about the conversational path that each topic will follow, and permission to manage the conversation rigorously. It also helps if each participant is aware of the value in speaking in a focused way: clear, concise, and relevant. I'm often reminded of Geoff Colvin's book, *Talent is Over-Rated*, which makes the case for deliberate practice being a correlate to success in any field. Learning to speak clearly and concisely takes practice.

A couple of others factors determine success: attitude, preparation, and work ethic. Each of these applies to meetings, with preparation perhaps standing out as most important and most often missing. Most executives do not have time to prepare for meetings, nor are they particularly fascinated by the task. If that's the case, designate a talented person to determine the agenda, plan the design, and execute the conversation. The practice of not preparing and walking into the meeting expecting to "wing it" is common—and ineffective.

What makes meetings time wasters and what can be done?

Here are the top seven problem areas; avoiding these will improve both time spent and reduce the number of meetings:

1. Calling a meeting that is not necessary
2. Putting things on the agenda that can be dealt with in other ways
3. No one clearly managing the conversation
4. Allowing people to dominate the conversation
5. People attending who are not needed
6. No clear next steps defined with who's responsible to complete them by a particular time
7. No follow-up between meetings to keep momentum going forward, leaving the group to have the same conversation next time

What strategies and processes of conducting meetings work best?

Here is the short list:

- Fewer topics on the agenda
- More time for each item
- Fewer people—strive for eight or less
- Someone given permission to lead the meeting rigorously
- No technology unless it is needed
- Setup-process-closure for each agenda item
- Psychological safety so that people will feel safe being authentic
- Broad participation so every perspective, question, and idea are considered
- Clear summaries so the work of the meeting lives on afterwards
- Tracking and following up between meetings so that commitments are kept

What should executives do during a meeting?

Executives play a much larger role than simply being the top person in a meeting. First, it's essential to listen with full attention because understanding, insight, and empathy are derived from taking everything in when someone speaks. For this reason, it might be best to ask someone else to manage the conversation so your focus can be on whoever is speaking. Second, ask for broad participation, even if it means calling on people. You want to create a sense of safety within which the wisdom of the group can emerge, and that only happens if everyone is encouraged to contribute to the conversation. Third, it's important for you to save your input for when it adds value to the conversation in a way that only you can provide because of your position power and unique organisational perspective.

Whenever an executive speaks, it carries a lot of weight, and all speaking is more impactful if it's deliberate and thoughtful. Speaking a lot or worrying about leading the meeting can get in the way of moving goals, projects, and culture forward. Fourth, watch people perform and interact. Developing people is best done by providing in-the-moment feedback based on interactions you've observed. Small things that the executive sees can keep a career from derailing. In summary, here are the elements most useful for executive focus in a meeting:

- Setting the stage for the meeting at the beginning
- Ensuring that everyone is heard when they speak
- Gaining broad participation so the wisdom of the group emerges
- Knowing when to add the "executive" perspective
- Listening for when the conversation has peaked and suggesting the next step
- Role modeling full attention, listening, and asking questions for clarity
- Sharing value they got after each topic and at the end of the meeting
- Acknowledging that they, themselves, are working on meeting and process skills
- Being clear with the group that progress is only made if people do what they say they are going to do between meetings

Why are executive meetings relevant?

Every meeting an executive attends should be relevant to his or her priorities. Most executives have a paper tucked away in a drawer or a journal that lists where they want the organisation to be in 5, 10, 20, or 50 years. Each year, they develop a more focused list that describes what they want to be true in 12 months that is not true now. I remember asking a CEO to speak at a leadership retreat. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a list of 20 priorities. "Paul, if you can show me how my speaking at this retreat will advance something on this list, I'll do it. If not, I respectfully decline."

Executives can also keep questioning the value added for every meeting which they attend. Often meetings get set up because it seems like the right thing to do. We need an advisory council, or we want to work on employee engagement, or we want to change the culture. At the time these meetings are first proposed, they make perfect sense. The question is, do they now? Are they still relevant? Is this a meeting we would create now if it didn't already exist?

Why are meetings essential to the work of executives?

Being available, responsive, and engaged is essentially what executives do. When they look at what honours their priorities, it's being in conversation with others. If we define a meeting in the broadest terms, this includes one-on-one conversations—in person or virtually.

Recent years have increased the emphasis on employee engagement and listening to and consulting with stakeholders. Expectations for being included, consulted, and impacting the executive suite have grown and show no signs of slacking.

Despite this expansion, most executives realise they are most effective in small groups of four or five. Larger meetings require more preparation and more skill at leading, so executives don't usually lead these larger meetings. They want to be attentive to each person who speaks and reserve their speaking for when the group needs either their unique perspective or their opinion on a decision. Executives who have mastered the notion of alignment and engagement have also made the connection between attention and caring. A simple nod or smile from them can mean the world to someone in the meeting.

Also, it can be lonely at the top, and the well-being of executives can be enhanced by having one-on-one conversations with confidantes and colleagues. This is a gift that executives can provide to others also.

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Paul Axtell is an author, speaker, and corporate trainer. He is the author of two award-winning books: 'Meetings Matter' and the recently released second edition of 'Ten Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids'. He has developed a training series, 'Being Remarkable', which is designed to be led by managers or HR specialists who want to support the personal development of their employees and take the organisational culture to a new level.