

Creating Dynamic, Energy-Producing Meetings

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You can probably remember attending at least one meeting that left you feeling energized, brimming with ideas, and eager to move ahead. If you're like most people, you probably remember many more meetings that left you feeling drained, numb, and wondering what it was all about anyway—or (if it was a meeting *you* called) disappointed that people seemed so bored and uninvolved.

We meet to share information, solve problems, make decisions, coordinate work, and create our future. These are important and potentially exciting tasks in the world of work, tasks that should generate energy and enthusiasm. Yet all too often meetings sap energy and enthusiasm.

We have a love-hate relationship with meetings. We like to meet because it is human to want to belong; we enjoy the human touch meetings can provide. Ever notice how meetings often start off with enthusiasm as colleagues greet each other, share coffee and doughnuts, and exchange stories and plans? Then the meeting gets under way, the PowerPoint presentation begins or the agenda is handed out, and, slowly but surely, the energy leaks out of the room. Why?

Meetings Are Powerful Rituals

What few managers understand is that meetings make use of stylized rituals for coming together. Practices become rituals over time, even if we do not intend it. Shaking hands, sharing coffee and doughnuts, handing out prepared materials, getting the word from the leadership, conducting PowerPoint presentations, and planning seating arrangements are examples of common meeting rituals. Human beings like rituals. They help us make meaning of what is going on and build bonds among those present. Unsuccessful meetings are often failed rituals.

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Here is an example. At a recent company meeting, Tom, the CEO, and his leadership team were discussing an important direction for the company. At one point in the meeting, one of the team members said, "I'm not sure why we are discussing whether to adopt this plan. We all know Tom is going ahead with it." This group's meeting ritual was that Tom presented a course of action to which he was already committed, the group discussed it for a while, and when Tom felt like he had heard from everybody, he announced his decision, which rarely deviated from his original plan. The group had developed a pseudo-involvement ritual. They all went through the motions of involvement but knew that their voices did not count.

Rituals can be highly elaborate or very simple. Some rituals, such as singing one's college song or reciting the pledge of allegiance, encourage group spirit. Others, such as graduation ceremonies or Sunday sermons, encourage people to be passive spectators or witnesses to a show that has been planned out ahead of time.

Most meeting rituals go unnoticed; they are just "the way we do things around here." Examining the meaning behind our rituals allows us to uncover hidden messages that may be working for or against changes we are trying to create. Some meeting rituals emphasize authoritarian behavior; others emphasize an egalitarian spirit. Handshakes prior to a meeting represent perfunctory connections between people. Hurried introductions followed by long leadership speeches put meeting atten-

dees in a spectator role and ritualize the lack of voice people will have.

Rituals do not care how they are used. They are neutral.

Some rituals produce negative outcomes, like coming to a meeting late and leaving early. Other rituals produce positive outcomes, like taking time at the end of your meeting to review the decisions made, assignments, and responsibilities. The important point is to recognize that rituals exist and are of our own making. We can create productive rituals and eliminate unproductive rituals. What is required is to identify them, discuss them, and decide what you want to do about them.

If you want to have meetings that involve people and gain their commitment, use involving rituals. If you simply want an audience for the latest policy announcement, use appropriate rituals for public speeches—or better yet, send e-mail. Keep in mind that meetings have highly symbolic value above and beyond the purpose they are called for.

Creating Involvement

Dynamic, energy-producing, exciting meetings that get things done use positive rituals that generate involvement. It is in meetings that people learn where the work is headed, decide if the work is worth doing, and find out if their voices count. It is in meetings that people decide whether to sit on their hands or put their wholehearted selves into the work. When people are involved, they contribute their time, their energy, their brains, and their brawn. When the



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work is complete, they experience the satisfaction that comes only from working with others to achieve a common goal. When people experience a ritual that leaves them feeling left out and uninvolved, they tend to find other ways to spend their time and energy.

Once we see meetings as involvement rituals, we can pay attention to the *kind* of involvement we want a meeting to generate. As the confusion at Tom's meeting shows, if you only want others to buy in to a decision that has been made, then the format of the meeting shouldn't suggest that you want people to be involved in making the decision. The kind of involvement needed should shape the meeting. In *You Don't Have to Do It Alone: How to Involve Others to Get Things Done*, we identify four types of involvement: *know-how involvement*, when additional skills, knowledge, or experience are needed to move your project forward; *care and commitment involvement*, when success depends on others' buying in; *teaching and learning involvement*, when you want to build knowledge and skills or explore the unknown; and *arms and legs involvement*, when you need to make sure the work gets done.

Know-How: Space to Share

A meeting focused on know-how involvement needs to be planned so that people have enough time to explain what they need to know and why they need to know it. Time should also be made available for the people with the expertise to describe what they bring and how it can best be used. Together the group should plan how to best leverage all the know-how in the room quickly and efficiently.

Often sharing know-how means presentations. Presentations can make or break a know-how meeting. They can be dynamic and engaging, with a lively discussion of questions. Or they can be lifeless, with requests for questions met by silence.

Here is a pattern we frequently observe. A presenter will spend 55 minutes of an hour-long meeting making a presentation. With 5 minutes to go, the presenter will ask, "Are there any questions?" Not wanting to be the person who keeps the group from getting out of the meeting on time, no one dares raise a hand.

We suggest reallocating time by taking no more than 20 minutes to present information and then using the rest of the hour for questions and answers and discussion. Before starting a question-and-answer session, have people discuss their questions together first. This process of reflecting with others before asking produces better questions and helps the process become a more lively conversation.

Another difficulty in know-how meetings is fitting in all the presentations. We have found learning fairs to be an excellent way to present information to large groups of people. At a learning fair, the presenters, instead of conducting "death by PowerPoint," have booths where they meet informally with participants and share information.

A public utility used this approach to cover the six important aspects of a new enterprise software system. Here's how: The participants, who were seated in groups of eight, first discussed what they already knew and what they wanted to know more about. They then assigned

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various group members to visit the different booths. After visiting the booths, they shared what they had discovered. The work took half the time of a normal presentation and the presenters, who wandered around the room during the debriefing, were astounded to hear the key points they had made being advocated so quickly by the people who had joined their sessions.

Care and Commitment: Give People a Voice

Leaders earn others' commitment only by demonstrating that they care about others and their concerns. Care-and-commitment meetings require conversations where people can voice their support *and* their doubts. My ability to say yes is only as good as my ability to say no. Consider how commitment was developed to let work groups self-certify the quality of their work at a manufacturing plant. Following a presentation explaining the new certification process, everyone was asked to identify the proposal's upside and downside. As a result of this discussion, the champions of the new process decided to add more training to handle the concerns people expressed and phase the rollout so that the change could occur smoothly. Because participants could say why they could not support the plan, they could eventually say yes to the new plan. If you can't say no, then your yes is counterfeit.

Tom, the CEO we mentioned earlier, did not give others a chance to say no in his management meetings. As a result, those meetings did not demonstrate that he cared about others' involvement and did not generate their commitment.

Here are a few meeting rituals that help generate commitment:

- Instead of selling your idea, ask meeting participants to identify why your idea won't work. Then listen carefully to what people say. This legitimizes the sharing of doubts and shifts the process from selling to cocreation.
- Give everyone a chance to speak by going around the room and asking where people stand on an issue. Many times conversations are dominated by one or two people. Hearing from everyone often shifts the conversation and allows you to bring closure to an issue.
- Separate understanding from agreement. Just because you understand someone's point of view does not mean you agree with it. Working for understanding means seeing the world through the other person's eyes. When you do this, you build trust and rapport with that person, and solutions become possible where none existed before.
- Make meeting reviews part of your agenda. Close each meeting by reviewing the decisions made and the follow-up assignments. This clarifies postmeeting roles and responsibilities, preventing misunderstandings. During your meeting review, identify what worked well during this meeting and what you need to do differently the next time you meet. If you make meeting reviews a regular part of your agenda, we guarantee your meetings will improve.

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Teaching and Learning: Allow Experimentation and Reflection

Teaching-and-learning meetings allow participants to learn from each other in developing new skills and in

exploring new directions for the organization. These meetings need to balance presentations with time to practice and experiment with new concepts in a risk-free environment. They also should accommodate the various learning styles: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. For example, an air force base was implementing a new supply chain system. The system developers knew that once people had hands-on experience with the new system, their resistance to the new procedures would go away. So they created a series of meetings where people could play with the system in an informal setting, and sure enough, when the system went live, no one fought it.

Sometimes you need teaching-and-learning involvement so that people can participate in care-and-commitment involvement. A consumer products company believed that if employees had a hand in creating the budget, they would be committed to it. So the company conducted budget preparation training sessions. This teaching-and-learning involvement provided the knowledge that enabled people to work together to produce the budget. And because they built the budget together, they supported it.

Finally, here is how a hospital system used teaching-and-learning involvement to help redesign its patient care process. At the start of a workshop attended by more than 250 people, participants met in their functional groups: emergency, radiology, and so on. Each group then explained to the other groups how work flowed through that department. This peer education created a knowledge base that became the foundation for cocreating the future patient care process.

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Arms and Legs: Let's Get on with It

Preparing and serving food at our local soup kitchen is no small task. There are salads to prepare, food to cook, tables to set, meals to serve, and, of course, cleanup to do. What makes this arms-and-legs work go quickly is that when the volunteers arrive, there is a short meeting to explain how the work is organized. Each person is then given a recipe card for a task that explains step by step what needs to be done. Within ten minutes, people know what to do and are busily at work creating a meal that will be served to more than 200 people within two hours.

A meeting to organize arms-and-legs involvement needs to be planned so that people can quickly get to work. It should clarify tasks, roles, and responsibilities and allow people to offer their unique contribution. People need to know the plan and their role in executing it.

Meetings focused on arms-and-legs involvement are perhaps the most straightforward—but only if people show up with the knowledge, skills, and commitment to do the work. (The people who show up at our local soup kitchen *are* committed and have at least the rudimentary knowledge and skills required for the tasks at hand.) When managers run into trouble with these types of meetings, it is often because they have rushed to the doing phase without first generating the other important levels of involvement.

In sum, productive meetings have a purpose that is clear, accepted, and understood by the participants. You know why you are there and what you want to accomplish.

Decision-making rules are made explicit throughout the meeting. Whether you are a leader or a participant, you know what to expect. For example, you may ask for people's input while reserving the final decision for yourself, or you may leave the decision up to the group. You may tell people what will be done or may ask them to shape the future. If there is one thing that makes people angry, it is to be in a discussion where they believe they can influence the decision only to find out later that the solution had already been decided.

Dynamic Meetings Have a Clear Shape and Flow

As you can see, agendas don't make meetings productive—*involvement does*. Turn your meetings into dynamic, energy-producing, exciting experiences that get things done—rather than time-wasting gatherings that people dread—by following these six steps:

1. *Start by making people feel welcome.* Whether you greet everyone with a handshake or a string quartet, make people feel special as soon as they arrive. Pay attention to the room and the seating, ensuring that everyone can clearly see and hear what's going on.
2. *Find ways to create connections among people.* Before people can work together, they must feel connected. Use personal questions to deepen connections: "Why did you come to this meeting?" "What are you willing to do to contribute to the success of this meeting?"
3. *Discover the way things are: build a shared picture of the current situation.* Simple updates help build a picture of the way things are. If you want to go deeper, ask individuals to explain how they do their jobs and what challenges they face on a daily basis. When people understand how the whole system operates, they are more willing to develop solutions that support the effective operation of the whole system.
4. *Elicit people's dreams: build a shared picture of where you want to go.* Ask people what they would like to cre-

ate as a result of their work together. Or ask them to imagine themselves five years from now. Then invite them to share their vision through drawing a simple sketch, creating a short skit, writing a quick paragraph, or participating in a discussion. When you establish a clear picture of the future you want, you can see possibilities you didn't see before.

5. *Decide on who does what to create the future you've agreed upon.* Know ahead of time *how* the group will make decisions, and make sure everyone understands the method. Identify *what* needs to be done by simple brainstorming. Then decide *who* will do what.
6. *Attend to the end: pay as much attention to endings as you do to beginnings.* If you don't want your meetings to end on a whimper, put as much thought and attention into saying goodbye as you did into saying hello. Take time to review decisions so everyone is sure what has been decided and what the next steps are. Find out what people appreciated about working together. Don't rush the ending nor drag it out.

The emphasis placed on each of these steps should vary according to the type of involvement needed. If you need arms-and-legs involvement, for example, you will want to emphasize step 5. If care-and-commitment involvement is the top priority, then taking your time on the first four steps is essential.

Conclusion

Meetings are powerful because our experience of each meeting lasts long after it ends. The bad news is that for many people, meetings are time-wasting, energy-sapping experiences. The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. You have it in your power to create meetings that are energetic, productive, and fun if you are clear about a meeting's purpose, have the right people in the room, know the decision processes you will use, craft your meeting to fit the type of involvement needed, and use the six steps we have outlined as your guide. ■