Reading

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Windschuttle, K., & Windschuttle, E. (1990). Decision-making meetings. Writing, researching, communicating: Communication skills for the information age (pp. 351-356). Sydney: McGraw Hill.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Decision-making Meetings

WHY HOLD MEETINGS?

Decision-making meetings are normally held for specific purposes: to make a decision, to solve a problem, to share information or to get something accomplished. Rather than having a regular schedule (like the formal meetings discussed in the next chapter) they are often held at fairly short notice whenever an important issue arises. They are not confined to commerce and industry—any type of organisation can and does hold them. Essentially, they are used to gain collective opinion on the issues involved.

A familiar complaint about meetings is that there are too many of them and they take up too much time. Some estimates claim that executives and officers of organisations spend between 60 and 70 per cent of their working hours attending them. Another familiar complaint is that they produce compromise decisions that satisfy no one. Most of us have seen examples of expensive but ungainly corporate and public buildings which, it is explained, were designed in committee meetings.

Meetings, however, have become part of our organisational culture for some sound reasons. Decision-making is, on balance, more effective in groups than individually. Research has indicated that ordinary people in groups usually make better decisions than brilliant people acting on their own. This is because most groups have a wider range of information and perspectives available to them than individuals. Most organisational groups are made up of people who are specialists in their own fields. This means they have one perspective that they bring to the meeting. The meeting is the place where the merging of specialist expertise and interests take place. Rather than being the scene of weak compromises, meetings should primarily be viewed as places where knowledge and expertise are pooled for the benefit of all.

Each participant in a meeting has his or her own perspective on the issues raised. By sharing these views, the meeting enlarges the number of possible approaches. More options will be available for consideration. With a variety of perspectives and knowledge, a more critical examination of ideas and proposals can

be made. Very often, instead of making a compromise that satisfies no one, a meeting will choose one of the options presented and decide against others. This way, it can have before it a wide range of possibilities and can choose the most effective path. In other words, rather than ruling out individual brilliance, the meeting has the potential to be the place where the best products of individual minds are aired and where the best paths from among them may be chosen.

There is also the question of an organisation's commitment to act on decisions taken. This commitment is always likely to be stronger when it is the subject of group deliberation rather than the views of one or two people. A well-organised meeting can be a forum for structured discussion that fosters cohesiveness, improves the relationships between the members of the organisation and provides an opportunity to maximise the involvement of those who take part in deciding the course of action to be followed. Without commitment of this kind, people feel less responsible towards the outcomes of the organisation and bring less energy and enthusiasm to their work.

Of course, as everyone who has attended them knows, meetings can also be the source of destructive relationships, petty and needless conflict, patronage and nepotism, as well as the wasting of enormous quantities of time. The effectiveness of meetings depends very much on the ability of those leading and participating in them. The rest of this chapter discusses techniques for maximising the benefits of meetings and minimising their destructive potential.

SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

The first thing to recognise about meetings is that people will have different perspectives on the issues raised and there will be degrees of conflict between these perspectives. A meeting that does not have some conflict has probably not brought out the real views of participants. The test of an effective meeting is the way it handles conflict—whether it turns it to destructive or creative outcomes.

There has been a wide range of research into the way that members of small groups relate and interact with each other. A number of stages of this interaction have been identified. They are familiarisation, conflict, reconciliation and reinforcement.

Familiarisation

If participants in the meeting are not known to each other, they use this stage to get acquainted, to see where each person stands on relevant issues and to size each other up. If members do know each other, it is the issues before the meeting that are the subject of familiarisation. Participants put forward their views on the subject cautiously, hoping to draw others out.

Conflict

Once members are confident they have the measure of others, they tend to argue strongly for their own positions, hoping to sway the meeting to their viewpoint. But as each person does this from his or her own perspective, there is an inevitable conflict when these views clash with those held by others. In some cases, strong disagreements may emerge.

Reconciliation

This is the most delicate stage of a meeting which can make or break it. The meeting needs one person or one small group to take responsibility for reconciling the differences and building on the points of agreement. This role is often taken by the chair but any member of the meeting may do it. It needs to be recognised as a highly political role that will confer leadership status on the person or persons who take it up. It means examining the conflicts to find an area of common ground and to develop that ground in a way that is acceptable to the group. The timing of this stage is often crucial. It must not be taken up too early. The conflict stage has to have emerged fully and to be somewhat exhausted. At this stage, reconciliation will be welcomed by most participants, but not before. Sometimes, the reconciliation will not be acceptable to a small minority of members. The meeting then has to express its disagreement with them, which it usually does by a formal vote on the issue.

Reinforcement

At this stage, the meeting accepts that a decision has been made to which all, or nearly all, members are committed. A proposal for further action is now very appropriate. This action should have the agreement of all concerned and should give most some role in bringing it about. This develops commitment and a sense of responsibility which acts to further the unity and cohesiveness of the group.

ROLES OF PARTICIPANTS

People who participate in meetings have their own responsibilities towards their success. Most of these are the normal courtesies we owe to anyone in a public situation but meetings add some conditions of their own.

Before the meeting, each participant should put in some preparatory work. This should involve familiarisation with the agenda and some research into the items on the agenda. Where research is not practical, the participant should at least think about agenda items and try to formulate an early position. This means that discussion can be on a basis of at least some evidence and reasoning and not simply off-the-top-of-the-head comments which are often irrelevant and which usually waste everyone's time.

At the start of the meeting, the chair should ensure that people know one another. If there are new members to a group that has met before, the chair should announce this, giving a brief background of the new person or persons. If the group is small enough, say up to ten members, the existing members can be personally introduced to the new one. With a large group, only the new member is introduced. Where all the members are new to each other, and the group is a modest size, say up to twenty people, it is often very useful to have everyone introduce themselves. This is done by seating everyone facing each other in a circle or semicircle and, in clockwise order, asking each person to state his or her name, relevant background and reason for attending. These statements should be no more than two or three sentences each.

During the meeting, participants should speak with a consideration for the attitudes and feelings of others. They should make their points firmly but not dogmatically. This is in all participants' interests because they may find they want to adapt or change their views later in the proceedings and it is often hard to modify a position that has been laid down in very absolute terms. It is perfectly acceptable to disagree with others, even in strong language, but the conflict should never be personalised through personal abuse or by ascribing personal motives to others. Other speakers should be heard without interruption—in other words, treat others the way you would like to be treated yourself. Humour may be used to relieve tension for the whole group but not to ridicule or humiliate opponents.

Role of the chair

The role of the chair is, first, to ensure that the above guidelines for decorum are maintained and, second, to guide the discussion towards achieving the meeting's goals. The act of guidance should not be conceived as one of dominance. In fact, the first thing that will happen should the chair attempt to dominate the meeting is that most participants will freeze up and not contribute to the best of their ability. Rather, the chair should keep track of the arguments and evidence presented and point out to participants where the discussion has been going and where it might be headed. This is best handled by taking the opportunity of summing up the progress of the debate at appropriate times and relating this to the initial question or problem. The most critical stage in a meeting or in debate on an issue is when leadership is needed to transform a conflict into an agreement about outcomes. The chair is the key person, though not the only one, in working this transformation and gaining commitment to the decision that the meeting needs to take.

In terms of maintaining decorum, the chair should intervene diplomatically but firmly whenever speakers become irrelevant, long-winded or aggressive. The chair should also keep interjections to a minimum and encourage contributions by some of the more reticent members of the group.

Meetings can be subject to a range of negative or obstructive behaviour which both the chair and individual participants should work to correct. There are many forms of objectionable meeting behaviour but the two main kinds are:

1. one person talks too much and tries to monopolise the meeting—in this case, the chair or other members are entitled to tell that person that he or she has had their say and someone else deserves a turn;
2. one person acts aggressively or unpleasantly to others—this is difficult to handle but one way of disarming such people is to ask them why they are behaving this way.

Finally, there are a number of individual responsibilities that participants should take upon themselves to ensure that the meeting realises its potential. The chair needs to provide a lead in these roles but all those attending should take them up. They include:

1. *Promotion of discussion.* This is primarily achieved when participants proffer information and opinions to which others are stimulated to

respond, but it can also include the seeking of information and opinions by asking for evidence and ideas from others in the group.

2. *Summarising.* This involves reordering the main points made and listing them in ways that show how they are related (or unrelated). It is often a helpful way of proceeding if the discussion has reached a stalemate or deadlock.
3. *Diagnosis.* This involves trying to analyse the problems that have emerged within the group, in either its personal relationships or in the way it has defined the subject it is tackling, and seeking to unblock them.
4. *Focus on reality.* Sometimes meetings concentrate so intensely on an issue that the real world tends to take second place to the dynamics between group members about the subject matter. Reminding members that their ideas have, in the end, to be practical and workable, and drawing comparisons with real situations can be an extremely useful function to keep the meeting on the rails.
5. *Awareness of goal.* It is sometimes necessary for comments to be made on the progress the meeting is making towards the achievement of the objectives it originally set. Meetings can often be diverted or simply lose sight of the initial goals so, by raising this issue, a member can perform a valuable function.
6. *Release of tension.* A hard-working meeting, especially if there is disagreement or conflict, can be tense and stressful in ways that impair best results. Mechanisms for release of tension should be adopted in these cases, including humour about the subject matter (not about individual participants) to bring discussion down to earth and—the most simple and effective method—taking a coffee break or another kind of adjournment to allow a cooling off period and a reappraisal.

One last point: there should be a record kept of every meeting. This means taking minutes of the major points made (not the fine details) and of decisions reached. Taking minutes can be a job for a secretary brought in just for this purpose. Alternatively, the meeting can delegate one of its members to take minutes, or else the chair can take the responsibility. Minutes are always valuable documents for an organisation and care should be taken in both recording them and filing them for future reference.

Exercise

This is an exercise for a classroom group of between five and twenty members. Choose a topic that has been in the news recently. Establish an objective of making a decision about an aspect of this topic. Schedule a meeting of between 30 and 60 minutes on the subject and give participants time to prepare for it. The goal is to reach a consensual decision, that is, one to which all members can have a commitment, not a simple majority. Determine your own method of electing or nominating a chair. As soon as the meeting is over, each member should complete a response form with comments recorded under the following headings: