

Meetings, bloody meetings. So you think you can manage? (pp. 52-65).  
Methuen, London: Video Arts Book.

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### 3 Meetings, bloody meetings

Are you like Tim? If so, you spend a lot of time in meetings, usually late for the next because the last one overran. You'll have to work late into the night because the day was full of meetings: you may only have the energy to keep going because of the odd snatch of sleep you manage at those meetings ... Perhaps, like Tim, you actually chair



#### Before the meeting

The most important question you should ask is: 'What is this meeting intended to achieve?' You can ask it in different ways – 'What would be the likely consequences of not holding it?' 'When it is over,

how shall I judge whether it was a success or a failure?' – but unless you have a very clear requirement from the meeting, there is a grave danger that it will be a waste of everyone's time.

some of those meetings, but perhaps you haven't often asked yourself whether they are all necessary in the first place or whether you are running them effectively. Certainly Tim hasn't. Let's judge him in action through several examples and give a verdict after each. All of us will recognize that the verdicts could apply equally to many of our own performances! First, here he is, late as usual, for a weekly production meeting. His colleagues are waiting impatiently ...

Tim: Sorry I'm late ... just been to the bloody planning meeting ... went on and on as usual. Bloody waste of time. Well, nice to see you all again ... er ... now ...

Ian: How long is it going to take this morning, Tim?

Tim: Depends what we've got to discuss, really.

Ian: Do you mind taking the things you need me for first? I should be on the floor ...

Tim: I should think so. Well ... nice to see you all again. Gosh, is it really a week since we met? Seems like yesterday.

Jack: It was yesterday.

Tim: What?

Jack: We had to make a decision on the overtime rates.

Tim: So we did! Oh well ... Yes. Well, nice to see you all as I say.

David: What are we talking about this morning?

Tim: Yes, we'd better talk about that first. Ian's got to go pretty sharpish, so ...

Punctuality at future meetings can be wonderfully reinforced by the practice of listing late arrivals (and early departures) in the minutes. Its ostensible and perfectly proper purpose is to call the latecomer's attention to the fact that he was absent when a decision was reached. Its side-effect, however, is to tell everyone on the circulation list that he was late, and people do not want that sort of information about themselves published too frequently.



#### Functions of a meeting

- 1 In the simplest and most basic way, a meeting defines the team, the group or the unit.
- 2 A meeting is the place where the group revises, updates and adds to what it knows as a group.
- 3 A meeting helps every individual to understand both the collective aim of the group and the way in which his own and everyone else's work can contribute to the group's success.
- 4 A meeting creates in all present a commitment to the decisions it makes and the objectives it pursues.
- 5 In the world of management, a meeting is very often the only occasion where the team or group actually exists and works as a group, and the only time when the supervisor, manager or executive is actually perceived as the leader of the team, rather than as the official to whom individuals report.
- 6 A meeting is a status arena. It is no good to pretend that people are not or should not be concerned with their status relative to the other members in a group.

*So you think  
you can manage?*

Ian: Tim, what have you got?  
Tim: ... Er ...  
David: I'd like to talk about the night-shift standbys.  
Jack: That's OK, David, I had a word with Frank.  
Tim: Well, what else have we got? I always think it's very useful to get together like this, you know, to see ...  
Ian: If there's any point in having got together.  
Tim: What?  
Ron: Oh Tim, I saw Hawkins on Friday.  
Tim: What did he say?  
Ron: He thinks we'll be fine until the last quarter. But he did point out that the new cooling system's got problems.  
Tim: Well, I've been taking care of that.  
So, what else have we got to talk about?  
Ian: Nothing for me.  
Jack: No.  
Ron: No.  
David: No.  
Howard: No.  
Tim: Good. Right ...

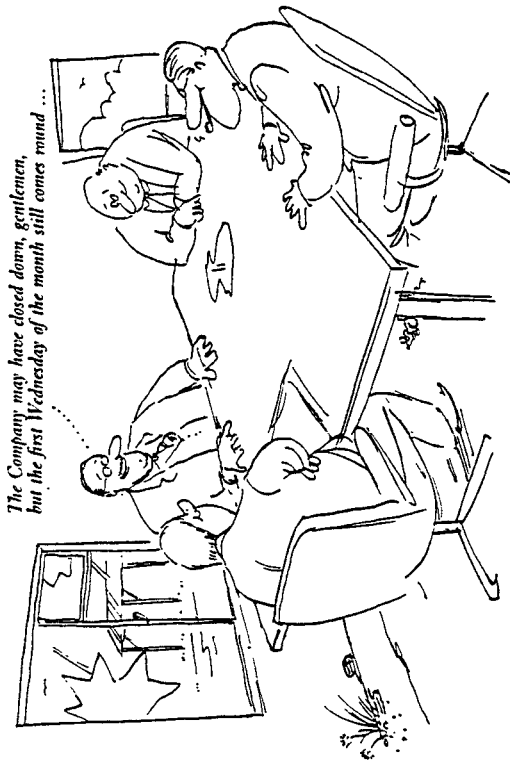
#### Verdict

A clear case of chairing a meeting without due thought and preparation. Nobody had anything they wanted to talk about; there was no agenda; the only topics raised were irrelevant to a *meeting*. They could have been dealt with on the telephone or in each other's offices. Yes, it was a regular weekly meeting but a little planning could have enabled Tim to realize that there was no point in having it *as such*. Never have a meeting just because, like Everest, 'it's there'. *Always cancel a meeting, even a regular one, if you can discover it will be a waste of everyone's time.* Ask yourself what would be the consequences of not having it. Remember that conducting a meeting means:



## Why have a meeting?

A great many important matters are quite satisfactorily conducted by a single individual who consults nobody. A great many more are resolved by a letter, a memo, a phone call or a simple conversation between two people. Sometimes five minutes spent with six people separately is more effective and productive than a half-hour meeting with them all together. But a meeting still performs functions that will never be taken over by telephones, teleprinters, xerox copiers, tape-recorders, television monitors, or any other technological instruments of the information revolution.



- 1 preparing yourself so that you are quite clear what the meeting is for
- 2 making sure that anybody else is clear as well.

Never have a meeting just because it's there.



## Define the objective

- 1 *Informative-digestive.*  
Obviously, it is a waste of time for a meeting to give out purely factual information that would be better circulated in a document. But if the information should be heard from a particular person, or if it needs some clarification and comment to make sense of it, or if it has deep
- 2 *Constructive-originaive.*  
This 'What shall we do?'

implications for the members of the meeting, then it is perfectly proper to introduce an item onto the agenda that requires no conclusion, decision or action from the meeting; it is enough, simply, that the meeting should receive and discuss a report.

function embraces all items that require something new to be devised, such as a new policy, a new strategy, a new sales target, a new product, a new marketing plan, a new procedure and so forth. This sort of discussion asks people to contribute their knowledge, experience, judgement and ideas.

**3 Executive responsibilities.**  
This is the 'How shall we do it?' function, which comes after it has been decided what the members are going to do. Here their contribution is the responsibility for implementing the plan.

**4 Legislative framework.**  
Above and around all considerations of 'What to do' and 'How to do it' there is a framework – a departmental or divisional organization – and a system of rules, routines and procedures within and through which all the activity takes place. Changing this framework and introducing a new organization or new procedures can be deeply disturbing to committee members and a threat to their status and long-term security. Yet leaving it unchanged can stomp the organization from adapting to a changing world. At whatever level this change happens, it must have the support of all the perceived leaders whose groups are affected by it.

Jack: No, no Ron, it's not the computer, it's the telephones. Look, every time we try to get through down there, they're engaged.

Tim: No it isn't.

Ron: What?

Tim: I'm talking about the staff briefing sessions. I how we brief the staff on this year's company results.

Jack: The company results? I thought you wanted an automated switchboard. You know the hold-ups we've been having down there.

Tim: Look. I'm talking about company communications.

Ron: So am I.

Jack: So am I. I how can we communicate if the phone's always busy?

Tim: Look, the whole point of this was to get ideas on how to brief staff on this year's company results.

Ian: Well, why didn't you say so?

Tim: I mean hasn't anyone done any thinking about this ... ?

## Verdict

Guilty of failure to signal intentions to the meeting. An agenda is not just a list of headings to remind the Chairman of the topics. It's not a crib card. It's a brief for all the others to work from. It has to define the direction and the area of the discussion and also its end purpose. Tim had an agenda all right, but if an item means something different to each person at the meeting it is worse than useless. The Chairman not only loses control of the meeting, but essential preparatory work will not have been done. All members must be *briefed* so that the agenda becomes common and instantly recognizable ground.

So, make it clear to everybody what is being discussed, why it is being discussed,



## Make preparations

### People

The value and success of a committee meeting are seriously threatened if too many people are present. Between four and seven is generally ideal, ten is tolerable and twelve is the outside limit. So the Chairman should do everything he can to keep numbers down, consistent with the need to invite everyone with an important contribution to make.

The leader may have to leave out people who expect to come or who have always come. For this job he may need tact; but since people generally preserve a fiction that they are overworked already and dislike serving on committees, it is not usually hard to secure their consent to stay away.

### The Agenda

The agenda is by far the most important piece of paper. Properly drawn up, it has a power of speeding and clarifying a meeting that very few people understand or

The second example finds Tim slightly better prepared. At least he has an agenda ...

Tim: Right. Everyone got the agenda?

Item One. Improving company communications. I think we all understand the problem. Ron?

Ron: It's a problem all right. It'll cost a lot of money to solve it.

Jack: You mean staff costs?

Ron: No, not staff. Equipment.

Tim: Surely it's management time at the root of it?

Ron: No. Equipment. At least six more video display units –

Tim: What?

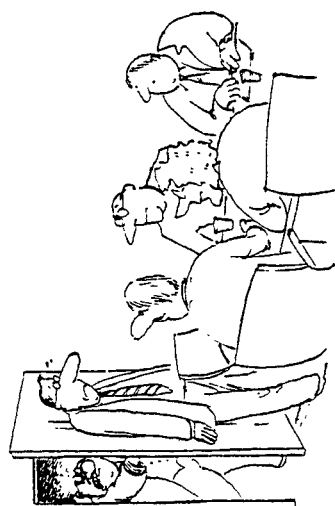
Ron: Well if you want Sales and Accounts to have direct access to data, the ...

Tim: Look, Ron, we may be able to deal with this later on if there's time, but can we take Item One now?

Ron: I am taking Item One. Improving company communications.

harness. The main fault is to make it unnecessarily brief and vague. The leader should not be afraid of a long agenda, provided that the length is the result of his analyzing and defining each item more closely, rather than of his adding more items than the meeting can reasonably consider in the time allowed. He should also bear in mind the useful device of heading each item 'For information', 'For decision' so that those at the meeting know where they are trying to get to.

The Chairman should not circulate the agenda too far in advance, since the less organized members will forget it or lose it. Two or three days is about right — unless the supporting papers are voluminous.



The leader may have to leave out people who expect to come to the meeting.

and what you hope to achieve from the discussion. Anticipate the information you and the others will need and make sure you all have them.

The third meeting sees Tim with a better-planned agenda:

Tim: Right, that's Item One. For decision, allocation of parking spaces in the New Park. Six spaces for Marketing and PR. Four each for Production Management and Works Management. And eight for Admin.

Marcus: For review after three months.

Tim: Yes, yes ... God! Did that really take fifty minutes? Right. Item Two. For decision, McKenna order for 250 L3s for delivery by 31 October. Do we accept the order or is 31 October too tight?

Marcus: The L3s are practically obsolete.

Tim: Marcus, they're not obsolete.

Marcus: Well we oughtn't to be selling them. The L5s are more durable, they're easier to ...

Tim: I'm sorry. I want to take this order.

Marcus: I think we're making a mistake.

Tim: Look, I'm sorry. It's ten to ...

Marcus: Well if we hadn't spent fifty

minutes discussing the bloody parking ...

Tim: That was urgent. The New Park opens on Monday. Ron, how can we do this McKenna job?

Ron: We'll have to do L3s on number 2 and 3 machine, tomorrow and Thursday.

Tim: Right, OK. That's it, then. Now Item Threc. For information. Forward Maintenance Schedules for batch-work machines. Ian?

Ian: Nice to get a word in.

Tim: You want to chair this?

Ian: Not now. I just want to say I've got to rewire number 2 and 3 machines over the next three nights.

Tim: Oh Christ!

Ian: I warned you last week.

Tim: Won't it wait till the weekend?

Ian: If you don't mind the place going up in smoke.

Tim: What about McKenna's L3s then?

Ian: Your problem.

Tim: Well, why didn't you mention this when we were discussing it?

Ian: I've been trying to.

Tim: ... What can we do, Ron?

Marcus: Not take the order.

Ron: We'll have to put number 4 on to the L3s. That'll mean more overtime.

Tim: Right. That's the plan. Any problems about overtime, Bert?

Bert: I'm not sure my members will agree to overtime. You see we're a bit worried about the bonus scheme.

Tim: Right, well ... we'll talk about the bonus scheme first now then. Then, if we can get that sorted out, we'll deal with the overtime. Then we can go back to Item Two ... and see ...

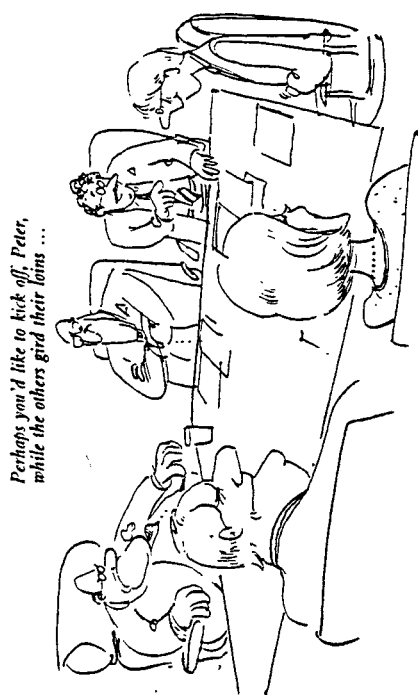
Marcus: Whether to take the McKenna order or not.



## Encourage the clash of ideas

A good meeting is not a series of dialogues between individual members and the Chairman. Instead, it is a crossflow of discussion and debate, with the Chairman occasionally guiding, mediating, probing, stimulating and summarizing, but mostly letting the others thrash out ideas. However, the meeting must be a contention of ideas, not people.

Remember that once someone of high authority has pronounced on a topic, the less senior members are likely to be inhibited. If you work up the pecking order instead of down it, you are apt to get a wider spread of view and ideas. But the juniors who start it off should only be asked for contributions within their personal experience and competence.



Work up the pecking order.



## The Chairman's job

If the Chairman is to make sure that the meeting achieves valuable objectives, he will be more effective seeing himself as the servant of the group, rather than as its master. His role then becomes that of assisting the group toward the best conclusion or decision in the most efficient manner possible: to interpret and clarify; to move the discussion forward; and to bring it to a resolution that everyone understands and accepts as being the will of the meeting, even if the individuals do not necessarily agree with it.

minutes.  
 David: Well you expect a bit of that. How much is it going on?  
 Marcus: Enough.  
 Ron: My problem is that people are still clocking on for each other.  
 Ian: What your lads need, Ron, is a bit of discipline.  
 David: It depends what you mean by discipline.  
 Marcus: I'll tell you what I mean by discipline. Nailing a few of them to the front gates – that's what I mean by ...  
 David: Oh shut up, Marcus. What I'm getting at is there won't be much of your kind of discipline till we get the hygiene factors right.  
 Ron: Well, which ones are still wrong?  
 David: Look, are we talking about problems or solutions? Because if it's solutions, we should start with trying to shorten discipline procedures.  
 Tim: Well, I think we've got to review the problems first.  
 Ron: OK. Well, here's one. Now can we really expect a supervisor to control a group of forty-five?  
 Marcus: I'll tell you the problem. We can't even control the bloody supervisors.  
 Ron: They're all right.  
 Ian: So are mine. Good lads. I scratch their backs and they scratch mine.  
 Ron: No, it's much more a question of giving them fewer men to supervise.  
 Marcus: I'll tell you what's the problem. They're bone bloody idle. We ought to sack a few. That'd wake them up.  
 David: And get another Jones case.  
 Ron: Amazing, wasn't it? He was absolutely useless.  
 David: But we couldn't prove it, could we?

## Verdict

Negligent ordering of agenda and criminal misallocation of time. Of course parking spaces were urgent and should have been Item One, but not being *important*, they should have been polished off in five minutes. The Chairman could even have put 'five minutes' against it on the agenda. Far worse was Tim's attempt to decide whether to accept an order before establishing that the men and machines were available to do it. Always look for logical connections between different items *and arrange them in the necessary order*. And allocate time so that the important items, even if they are the least urgent, get the fullest discussion.

The next example shows Tim handling a difficult problem:

Tim: Right, Item Four. Discipline. I don't think there are too many problems but I've got to review the discipline agreements with Bert this week, so what does anyone think?

Marcus: Well, they're still nicking knives and forks from the canteen.

David: I thought that had stopped.

Marcus: Oh it stopped, yes, for about ten

*So you think  
you can manage?*

## Verdict

A total neglect of structure and control. Tim hasn't presided over a discussion at all, it was more like a group therapy session. Discussions have to be structured, from the chair. First, state the proposition; second, produce



## Structure the discussion

It may seem that there is no right way or wrong way to structure a committee-meeting discussion. A subject is raised, people say what they think, and finally a decision is reached, or the discussion is terminated. There is some truth in this. Moreover, it would be a mistake to try to tie every discussion of every item down to a single immutable format.

Nevertheless, there is a logical order to a group discussion, and while there can be reasons for not following it, there is no justification for not being aware of it.

A simple example – if the item is at all complex or especially significant, it is important for the Chairman not only to have the proposed course of the discussion in his own head, but also to announce it so that everyone knows.

Perhaps one of the most common faults of chairmanship is the failure to terminate the

discussion early enough. Sometimes Chairmen do not realize that the meeting has effectively reached an agreement, and consequently they let the discussion go on for another few minutes, getting nowhere at all. Even more often, they are not quick enough to close a discussion before agreement has been reached.

At the end of the discussion of each agenda item, the Chairman should give a brief and clear summary of what has been agreed on. This can act as the dictation of the actual minutes. It serves not merely to put the item on record, but also to help people realize that something worthwhile has been achieved. It also answers the question: 'Where did all that get us?' If the summary involves action by a member of the meeting, he should be asked to confirm his acceptance of the undertaking.

the evidence and by all means allow arguments about what the evidence proves; third, come to a conclusion, and only then is the meeting in a position to decide on the action which should be taken in the light of that conclusion. Evidence must come before the interpretation of evidence, and interpretation before a decision on action. It is vital to keep these stages separate and to prevent people riding pet hobby-horses or going over old ground without regard to the proper sequence.

Finally, let's see how Tim handles a meeting which depends on the accurate recording of information and decisions deriving from a previous meeting.

**Tim:** OK. Last item. Ian, can you bring us up to date on progress on the pay structure review?

**Ian:** Well I haven't been able to take it any further really. I can't till the joint negotiating committee meets and decides about the regrading claims.

**When are they going to meet, David?**  
**David:** But George was going to arrange that, wasn't he? He wanted to be there to put his case.

**Tim:** Ian, I thought you were going to fix a meeting quickly as you needed to know.

**Ian:** But Ron usually does that.

**David:** Usually, yes, but as George said he wanted to be in on it we said we'd leave it to him.

**Ron:** That's what I thought. We left it to George.

**Ian:** But George isn't here. I thought it was you, Ron.

**Ron:** No. George.

**Ian:** Would you like to take a vote on it?

**Howard:** Surely we decided that Ian would coordinate with George and Ron?



## Kinds of meetings

**1 The daily meeting**, where people work together on the same project with a common objective and reach decisions informally by general agreement.

**2 The weekly or monthly meeting**, where members work on different but parallel projects and where there is a certain competitive element and a greater likelihood that the chairman will make the final decision himself.

**3 The irregular, occasional or 'special project' meeting**, composed of people whose normal work does not bring them into contact and whose work has little or no relationship to the others. They are united only by the project the meeting exists to promote and motivated by the desire that the project should succeed.



## Record the meeting

Although the Chairman is unlikely to take them personally – indeed it is usually better if he doesn't – he is nonetheless accountable for the minutes. They can be very brief, but they should include these facts:

- 1 The time and date of the meeting, where it was held and who chaired it.
- 2 Names of all present and apologies for absence.
- 3 All agenda items (and other items) discussed and all decisions reached. If action was agreed on, record (and underline) the name of the person responsible for the assignment.
- 4 The main arguments leading to decisions.
- 5 The time at which the meeting ended (important, because it may be significant later to know whether the discussion lasted fifteen minutes or six hours).
- 6 The date, time and place of the next committee meeting.

Tim: We agreed to take the necessary action.  
Jack: Which meant Ron would make sure the committee consulted George.  
Ron: Not in this case. It was George's job.  
Tim: Next item. Item Eleven. To discuss and decide exactly what we did discuss and decide at the last meeting.  
Ron: Before we decide that ...  
Tim: Well?  
Ron: ... oughtn't George to be here?  
Tim: But I thought everybody knew what had been decided ...

### Verdict

A clear case of failure to summarize and record. Always summarize all decisions at a meeting, clearly and concisely, and make certain everyone has a chance to raise a point they are in doubt about. Then record the decisions immediately with the name of the person or group of persons responsible for any action. Ironically, a forum which, at its best, is a vehicle for communication can too easily become one which leads to the opposite.



## Golden rules

- Ask yourself what would be the consequences of *not* meeting.
- If you discover that a meeting will be a waste of time – cancel it.
- An agenda is not a crib-card for the Chairman.
- A meeting should be about a contention of ideas, not people.
- Arrange the agenda in a logical order.
- The Chairman is a servant of a group, not a master.
- Confirm the action points to be followed by members of the meeting, and record them.