Making the Most of Meeting Time

Senior-level managers spend 23 hours a week on meetings. Lower-level employees also put in long hours around the conference table. Here are three simple principles for making sure that meeting time is time well-spent.

t's 9:05 on Monday morning and you're in the office getting ready for the week.

A quick check of your calendar reveals a succession of meetings cutting across your schedule like a huge fault line, ready to consume your time, energy, and ability to perform. You're concerned, but now is not the time to think things through. You close the calendar and rush, five minutes late, to your first meeting.

Time well-spent?

The average senior manager spends 17 hours a week racing from one meeting to the next, plus 6 hours preparing and who knows how many hours recuperating. That's quite an investment for individuals and organizations!

By Peter M. Tobia and Martin C. Becker

Last year, *Fortune* magazine spent a day trailing Chrysler's chief operating officer, Robert Lutz. For almost 10 hours of an 11.5-hour day, Lutz was wrapped up in meetings. He was a virtual prisoner of a schedule that left little time for individual reflection or accomplishment.

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Middle managers spend about half as much time in meetings as do their superiors. Still, a sizable chunk of their working hours is spent preparing for meetings, attending meetings, and following up on meetings.

Time wasted in meetings is one of the biggest gripes of most managers.

Meetings and metaphors

Complain as we do, meetings are an organizational fact of life. Meetings are vehicles for the exchange of ideas, information, and advice. They are also metaphors for power relationships. Who gets invited to what meeting is the organization's way of reinforcing the existing structure of leadership. It is also the most accurate indicator of position in the pecking order.

In addition, a new urgency is connected with meetings. As participation becomes key to winning the competitive wars of the 1990s, companies have a greater need to improve the effectiveness of meetings. That is a tougher challenge than it might first appear. Managers are asking many technical people and workers at lower levels to participate in problem solving, decision-making, and planning meetings, but these employees have little experience working in group settings.

For example, in Du Pont's Control Systems Section, engineers spend most of their time interacting with

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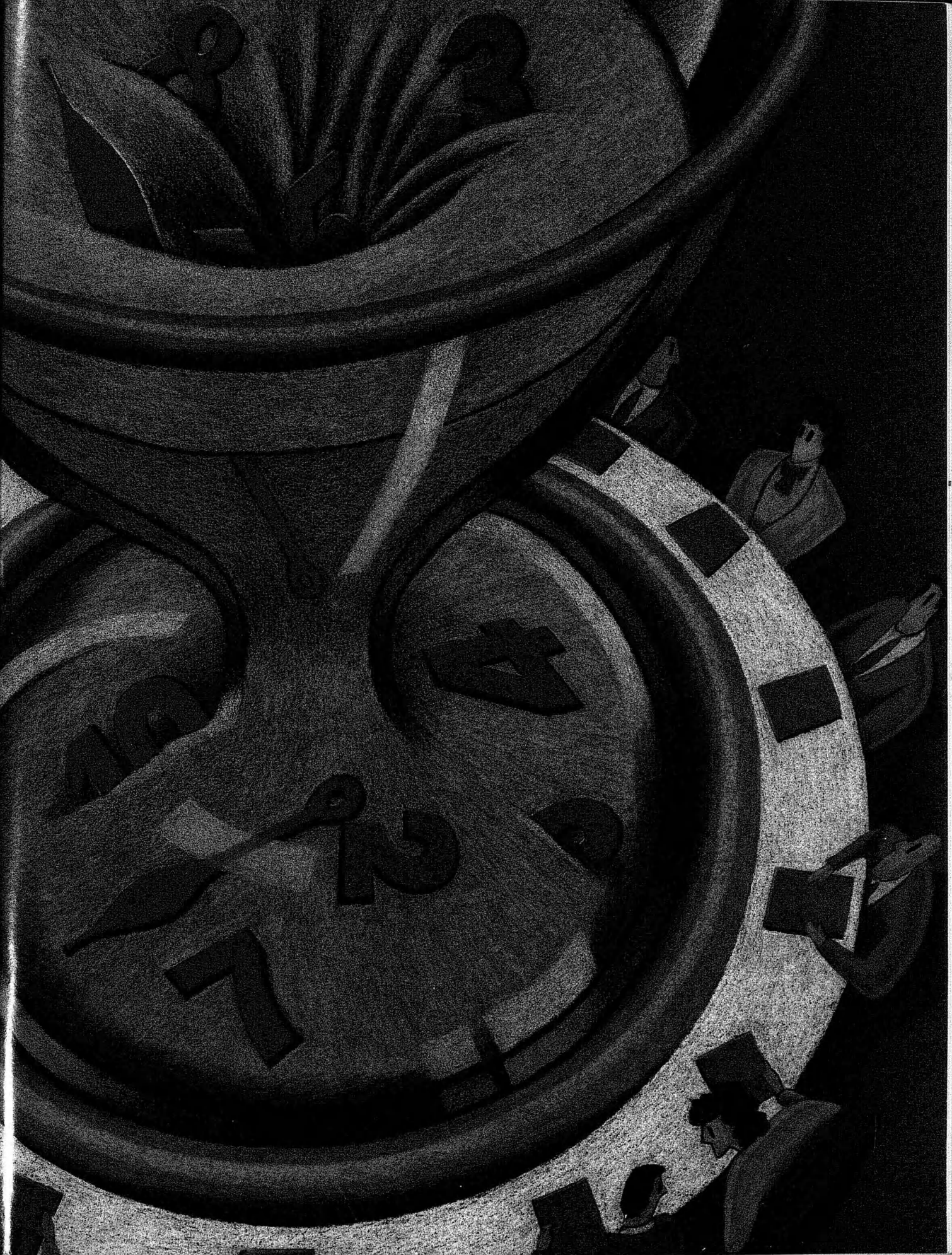
computers, not people. Their job is to design software for factory automation systems. Their high-tech orientation showed up in meetings that suffered from the usual litany of woes: side conversations, interruptions, arguments, lack of closure on issues, and little action planning. Not surprisingly, engineers complained that meetings were time wasters.

At Scott Paper, a union strike left the need to rebuild morale. The company reorganized operations to gain greater workforce involvement in problem solving and to empower employees. Work teams were formed and everyone applauded, but some problems persisted. Work-team meetings began late, roles and responsibilities were fuzzy, and two or three people dominated meetings.

Participation, empowerment, and autonomy have become the three horsemen of the current management apocalypse. Each carries the same price tag: more effective meetings. But how can we achieve that goal?

The examples from Du Pont and Scott Paper are instructive because of the turnarounds both companies achieved. The quality of meetings significantly improved when unit managers heeded three basic principles:
■ Effective meetings require skill.
■ Participants share responsibility for meeting success.
■ All meetings are a function of two different elements—content and process. Both must be managed carefully.

Skills for successful meetings

The first principle concerns skills for effective meetings. Three skills involving group interaction are crucial to a meeting's success.

The ability to handle disruptive behavior is the first key skill for successful meetings. Nothing can sandbag a meeting faster than a person who chases tangents or refuses to keep quiet. Confronting the disruptive participant could invite open conflict. Doing nothing could destroy the meeting. Between those extremes lies a middle ground: providing feedback.

For example, say, "Al, that's an interesting point you made, but we've just spent ten minutes on this issue and it's taking us far afield from our objective. Given the limited time, let's move on."

When giving feedback, follow a few basic rules:
■ Limit feedback to observable behavior.
■ Specify the effect of that behavior on the group or the objectives of the meeting.
■ Restrict comments to behavior that can be changed.

Does that sound like common sense? Sure, but unless the logic of common sense is made explicit, is understood, and is transferred to others, it often seems to be in short supply in meeting rooms.

Who Does What

When it comes to taking responsibility for the success of a meeting, many participants try to pass the buck to the meeting's leader. But the responsibility for a successful meeting is shared by all. People in three different roles share the burden for meeting effectiveness; with each role comes a list of responsibilities.

The chairperson
■ starts the meeting
■ is the key decision maker, although this responsibility can be delegated to the group
■ ends the meeting
■ checks and distributes the minutes
■ monitors follow-up.

The facilitator
■ assists the chairperson in meeting planning
■ takes notes and makes them visible during the meeting
■ models and coaches members in process behavior
■ models key communication skills
■ checks the group for direction and progress
■ handles disruptive behavior
■ manages conflict
■ seeks consensus.

The membership
■ does prework
■ remains attentive and participates in discussion and other meeting activities
■ provides accurate and complete information
■ commits to action plans
■ avoids disruptive behavior.

Active listening is a second skill for enhancing meeting effectiveness. That means paying attention to what is being said, of course, and also to the thinking and feeling behind the message. It also means listening to what is *not* being said, as well. Psychologist Theodore Reik calls it "listening with the third ear."

The active listener sits somewhere between displaying edge-of-the-seat attentiveness and being a lifeless form in a chair. She or he continually receives, decodes, and responds to messages. Body language can provide telltale evidence of active listening: the active listener displays open posture, eye contact, and responsive facial expressions.

Communication skills. Have you ever attended a meeting that was consumed by inarticulate participants? The third skill for effective meetings involves the ability to express opinions clearly and concisely. Oral communication is a skill that can be learned and improved.

For example, you can train meeting participants to take "pregnant pauses" before delivering their messages. A few seconds spent clarifying the intent and rehearsing what will be said can work wonders. So can "headlining," or featuring the main point and then embellishing it with short sentences.

Sharing responsibility

A second principle of effective meetings involves sharing responsibility for success. Many meeting attendants subscribe to the notion that the person who leads a meeting shoulders the responsibility for the outcome. Putting all that responsibility on one person lets everyone else off the hook, but it is the real killer of meeting success.

The burden of a meeting's success falls at three pivot points: the chairperson, the facilitator (if there is one) and the other participants. Meetings are the ultimate team sport; winning requires more than a good quarterback.

That is not to say that everyone plays the same role in a meeting. The chairperson, the facilitator, and the meeting attendants have distinct roles and responsibilities. See the box for a rundown.

Content versus process

Regardless of her or his role, every

meeting participant is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the meeting's content and the effectiveness of the group process that is used.

That leads to the third principle, which states that all meetings are a function of two different elements:
■ the specific content or task-related information of the meeting—the "this is what we are going to discuss" aspect
■ the process or methodology the group uses to tackle the task—the "here's how we're going to proceed" aspect.

Both content and process must be managed carefully.

Most meetings are content-driven. Content has a kind of seductiveness. No sooner does the typical meeting begin than we dive willy-nilly into discussion. After all, the problem must be solved, now.

But where to begin? How should information be organized and analyzed? How should participants interact with one another in resolving the issue? These are process questions and they provide the pathway to content.

In a process-driven meeting, the focus is on how to get started, and on how well the group is functioning.

The ideal meeting is one that balances process with content. The actual amount of time spent on process and content will vary from one meeting to the next, but both deserve careful consideration. Without an agreed-upon process to guide discussion and group interaction, the meeting has no road map. Without high-quality input—or content—it does not pay to make the journey.

Keeping meetings in focus

Quick response has become the latest management "Aha!" U.S. organizations are rushing to adopt "speed to market" and "fast cycle time" techniques to outpace sleepy competitors. Because meetings tend to imitate the state of management art, the pressure is on to make meetings more time-efficient. That, in turn, puts a premium on meetings with clear focus.

At a large equipment manufacturer, the production manager knew that every minute counted in the tough, competitive environment his company faced. Meetings were the organization's time bomb. The more time managers and workers spent huddled in meetings, the less time they spent

moving products off the plant floor and into the hands of customers. Any glitch in supply could send a good customer to the competition.

The production manager took a close look at the multitude of meetings held in his plants and found that many meandered aimlessly. He did more checking, and saw that the chief cause for meandering meetings was the ambiguity of targets for discussion. He asked himself, "What if every meeting could be bracketed with clear objectives?"

Meeting Facts

■ More than 33 percent of time spent in meetings is unproductive, costing businesses $37 billion.
■ Only 33 percent of business leaders surveyed have had formal training in how to run meetings.
■ Although 75 percent say it is "almost essential" to have an agenda, respondents indicated that they use agendas only 50 percent of the time.
■ Only 64 percent of meetings achieve their intended outcomes.
■ Almost 72 percent of business leaders surveyed currently spend more time in meetings than they did five years ago. More than 49 percent expect to be spending even more time in meetings four years from now.

The statistics were culled from a survey of 1,000 business leaders by Hofstra University and Harrison Consulting Services.

He encouraged managers to organize meetings around two kinds of objectives. The "primary meeting objective" is the goal that a meeting must accomplish. It should be important, specific, and measurable; once established, it has to be pursued by everyone with almost religious fervor. To ferret out the primary meeting objective, managers were taught to ask three questions:
■ What ultimately do I want to achieve by this meeting?
■ What, specifically, has to be accomplished by the end of the meeting?
■ When the meeting is over, how will I know whether the meeting was a success?

Other objectives may also be important to a meeting's success. They are called secondary objectives. For example, the production manager knew that in his environment, other important objectives included team building, commitment, individual development, and improvement of cross-functional relationships. So, he trained managers to probe for those as well.

Meetings at the manager's plant sites now take less time and get more accomplished, freeing up everyone to devote more time to satisfying customer demand. And that is what maintaining a competitive edge is all about.

The dynamics of discussion

Primary and secondary objectives provide compass points for a meeting, but improving meeting effectiveness requires more than clarity of purpose. Participants also must be sensitive to various underlying dynamics, which can best be expressed by several contrasting patterns.

Contrasting patterns give a meeting its personality. Being sensitive to them is a prerequisite for effective—and civil—discussion. Here are a few examples.

Participation versus influence. Many people assume a law of quantitative expression—in other words, the sheer amount of what is said determines outcomes. We then feel compelled to weigh-in with our contribution.

But a CEO's silence can have more influence on a decision than a multitude of other voices in the meeting room. So can such qualitative factors as the acuity of insight, the degree of expertise, the ability to ask penetrating questions, and the accuracy of information.

Silence versus agreement. Don't interpret silence as agreement. If group consensus is important, test the group to confirm that agreement exists before moving on.

"Do you agree?" posed to each participant is a foolproof way of reading the group. In one British company we worked with, failure to test group consensus about the firm's new strategy led not only to conflict in subsequent meetings, but to the ultimate defeat of the strategy. It was a high price to pay for silence.

Tentativeness versus assertiveness. Much of our speech is tentative and conditional; it clouds meaning and wastes time. Our parents' admonitions to "be polite" are probably the main culprits. Rather than stating our positions forthrightly ("I want to. . ." or "I think we need to. . .") we favor more weasel-worded contortions ("Don't you think we ought to. . .").

At times, rhetorical trial balloons are appropriate. But if you float enough of them in a meeting, discussion quickly gets airy.

"I" statements are the most effective—and honest. For example, "I think that we should first resolve the software issue," is more direct than, "Don't you think we first ought to resolve. . . ."

Intent versus effect. A while ago, we were asked to attend a meeting to

tive to the distinction between intent and effect, he undoubtedly would have changed his approach. And had the group been more sensitive, participants would have probed to discover the noble purpose behind the bluster.

"Why do it" versus "how to do it." "Why" is a powerful word that can create havoc when improperly wielded. Nothing kills a brainstorming session more quickly than the question, "Why should we do it that way?"

"Why?" is the ultimate attack question. It is designed to root out the causes of problems. That tends to put people on the defensive, which obstructs discussion.

"How" is more action-oriented. "That is an interesting idea, but how would you do it?" invites creativity and encourages the group to consider the action possibilities.

summary. Ask those involved to confirm or correct the summary: "Is that a fair assessment of your positions?" Confirmation sometimes leads to resolution without further intervention.

3. Discuss the effect on the primary meeting objective. This can provide motivation to resolve the disagreement: "I'm concerned that we're not going to make a decision today if we can't get this issue resolved."

4. Reconfirm points of agreement. This helps to focus on areas of agreement and clarifies the issue in dispute: "Are we agreed that we must have a system in place by year end?"

5. Clarify different points of view. Have all individuals or subgroups state their points of view: "Why don't each of you take a minute or two to explain your position." Occasionally, you'll find that opponents have been saying the same thing differently and are actually in agreement.

6. Involve the group in resolving the disagreement. If the conflict stems from different information, get more data. If the conflict results from differing opinions about the same information, search for a win-win solution. If the issue is relatively unimportant and time is tight, compromise may be in order.

Is this meeting necessary to achieve my primary objective? What are the consequences of not holding this meeting?

evaluate its effectiveness. Midway through the discussion the director of the department entered to consider the group's recommendation for a new product. His reaction was swift and negative. He felt the product idea was not innovative.

"Had you taken the time to read the professional journals," the manager concluded abruptly, "you would not have wasted your time." The sharp-edged remark cut the group's enthusiasm, killed the meeting, and damaged the future motivation of those in attendance.

Later, we questioned the manager and discovered that his real motivation was not to denegrate the group but to broaden its perspective. The manager sought to raise everyone's awareness about the need to keep abreast of the latest industry developments. Clearly, his heart, if not his tongue, was in the right place.

Had the manager been more sensi-

Managing conflict

Notice that the subhead does not read, "avoiding" conflict. Conflict is a fact of life, no matter how well-trained the meeting participants are, how clear the objectives are, and how sensitive everyone is to the dynamics of a discussion. Conflict occurs because people have different values, functional responsibilities, information, and needs. When disagreement threatens the primary objective of a meeting, conflict cannot be ignored; it must be managed.

Here are six handy guidelines that should keep the roof on the meeting room the next time a conflict arises.

1. Summarize the disagreement. Be objective and focus on issues, not personalities: "She is saying we can do it in six months and he maintains that it will take more than a year," rather than, "He's very cautious."

2. Confirm the accuracy of the

A final word

It takes time and energy to run and participate in meetings. Why not approach meetings with a zero-based budgeting attitude? Always ask "Is this meeting necessary to achieve my primary objective?" and "What are the consequences of not holding this meeting?"

If the answers to those questions suggest the meeting is a "go," then you have no alternative but to develop the meeting skills of your people, think through your objectives, thoughtfully manage discussion and conflict, and attend to all the details of meeting planning.

Mopping up from ineffective meetings is just too costly. When you do it right, that Monday morning check of the calendar may well present you with a kinder, gentler week ahead. Instead of a fault line, you may see a string of exciting opportunities for you and those around you to contribute the very best of what you have to give. ∎