

MEETINGS COST MONEY- MAKE THEM PAY OFF!

*some concerns about
the recent trends
in meeting and
conference methods*

As with politics, the proverbial pendulum seems to be swinging back toward the right with regard to meetings and conferences. Since the early fifties training programs have been emphasizing creativity, brainstorming and participative conferences. Increasingly managers are expressing concern about the large amount of time that they and their subordinates spend attending meetings.

As the problem is analyzed, it appears that the emphasis on participation and creativity has contributed to decreasing meeting effectiveness and efficiency, particularly when the people involved in the meetings are creative people. You might be alert at the next meeting you attend for symptoms such as:

1. Information being verbally conveyed that could more effectively and efficiently be covered in a *well written* report.
2. Meeting participants contributing nothing to the meeting (wrong people invited or no one needed from that department at all).
3. Large groups of people trying to solve problems at the meeting that should be solved in small groups or individually.
4. Responsibility assignment and commitment not clear as the meeting ends, or conclusions not clearly summarized.

To these symptoms, I'm sure you could add a number of your own.

This article has been written to help us examine ways to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings. The subject will be covered in the following order:

1. Defining meeting objectives and scope
2. Planning and preparation for the meeting
3. Conducting the meeting - meeting control
4. Conclusion - action - follow-up

DEFINING OBJECTIVES/SCOPE

So much has been written about defining organizational objectives. Equally important, and fortunately less difficult, is the definition of objectives for a meeting. Objectives may take whatever form most readily fits the subject matter and organizational environment of the participants. The objective can be simply a statement of what you hope to accomplish by having the meeting. After the objective has been defined, it should

be examined to see if having a meeting is the best way to accomplish the objective. Maybe a meeting isn't needed at all!

One engineering executive has established an interesting list of possible types of meeting objectives. These are:

1. To inform
2. To instruct
3. To define/plan
4. To clarify
5. To create
6. To resolve/decide

As you proceed from the top to the bottom of this list, he says, the number of attendees for an efficient meeting decreases. For example, large numbers of people may attend a meeting the primary objective of which is to inform. Most efficiently, only a handful should be involved in a meeting to resolve a problem. His definitions would seem to be particularly appropriate for the operation of an engineering department, but may be applicable to other situations as well.

The meeting may be designed to accomplish more than one objective; the way to profitable results is to define your objectives and then plan and control accordingly.

A corollary of the meeting objective is meeting scope. Scope is concerned with time and depth. Obviously, there will be a significant difference in the manner in which people prepare for a meeting and the manner in which the meeting leader controls the meeting, depending upon whether the meeting is to last half an hour and consist of six five-minute reports, or is scheduled for half a day and consist of five 40-minute reports. The definition of scope is particularly important to assist the attendee in planning for the meeting.

PREPARATION/PLANNING

A variety of matters must be considered in planning the meeting. The nature of planning will vary with the executive. As a minimum, objective, scope and other details should be mentally re-

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viewed by the executive who is calling the meeting and these matters should be briefly communicated to the attendees by whoever invites them to the meeting.

Most executives, however, find it more effective to prepare an agenda. The agenda should begin with the objectives and scope of the meeting.

Closely related to the objective is a definition of who is to attend the meeting, both as to functional area and level in the organization. Most executives with whom I have discussed this problem say they consistently err in inviting too many people to a meeting rather than too few. In addition, they indicate that they sometimes invite too high level executives on the basis that "these are the people who can make spot decisions." If the objective of the meeting is to decide, then the "decision maker" is the right person to invite. However, if the meeting has another objective, such as to create, the executives' subordinates may do an excellent job at the meeting. Frequently better meetings result when slightly lower level participants are invited because of their fluency with the matters discussed. A good agenda sent to participants before the meeting will permit the high level executive to decide for himself who should attend the meeting.

The order of approach to the subject matter to be covered at a meeting is usually the next step in planning the meeting. This is the most commonly utilized part of an agenda. Little needs to be said here except that a few moments spent in studying the order of subject matter may be useful, the timing of the introduction of various subjects can be extremely significant in the total communication process, as has been suggested by many other authors.

Don't overlook the mundane details of room location, audio-visual equipment available and adjournment time. With the increased utilization by executives of transparencies and slides, just mentioning that a transparency projector will be available in the room may save a number of phone calls by attendees or

their secretaries.

CONDUCTING THE MEETING -- MEETING CONTROL

Many of the articles written on the subject of conferences and meetings during the last two decades state that conference leaders' primary responsibility is to create an environment which will facilitate participation by all those present at the meeting.

I submit that the meeting leader's primary responsibility is meeting control!

People who attend a meeting are, in effect, delegating to the meeting leader a significant piece of their time for him to effectively utilize during the meeting. This delegation charges him with responsibility for efficient utilization of this time to accomplish the objectives defined for the meeting.

As one way of approaching the conduct of meetings, it may be helpful to break down the action processes which prevail at most meetings into three kinds:

1. Reporting
2. Discussion
3. Assignment/Commitment

If we stop and think about the processes of kinds of actions which take place during most meetings, these seem to be the major ones.

The reporting process seems to be pretty well understood. The pitfall for the meeting leader here seems to be too long reports. Agenda definition of time is helpful but the meeting leader owes it to the rest of the participants to bring long-worded reports to an end.

The discussion/interaction process has received more treatment by more articles than any other phase of meetings. I would only concur that if the discussion process is necessary to achieve the objectives of the meeting, the meeting leader must be sure that the ones with the *real knowledge* of the subject participate. If he does not, he is not efficiently utilizing the time delegated to him by all those attending the meeting. Conversely, the meeting leader owes it to the rest of the group to turn off the

"loud ones" who tend to dominate meetings. Advanced knowledge of these tendencies in the attendees is helpful to the meeting leader.

The assignment/commitment process in a meeting is the one which has received the least attention during past years. As previously implied, the solution of problems very frequently should be done individually or in small groups and not in large meetings; however, the assignment of responsibility for the solution of the problem and the *commitment by the individual or individuals responsible* at the meeting is extremely significant. Too often a great deal of the value of a meeting is lost because it is not clear who will take the significant actions which will make the time worthwhile. It is the meeting leader's responsibility to assure that the assignment is clear and the commitment is made!

The meeting leader should periodically review for the meeting participants the current status of the meeting, referring back to the objectives and the agenda, as appropriate. If the objective of the meeting is to clarify, create or resolve, it is the leader's responsibility to frame a tentative conclusion for the group to approve, modify or disapprove. We have all attended meetings that flounder until one of the group beautifully states the "question" or the "conclusion." *This is the leader's responsibility.*

CONCLUSION/ACTION/FOLLOW-UP

Minutes seem too formal and time consuming to many people who conduct meetings, but they are the assurance to all concerned that the objectives of the meeting will be achieved and, therefore, that the time delegated to the meeting leader was worthwhile.

When more than one person is involved in any communications process, there is not only the chance for error in understanding, there is the probability of it. Minutes of a meeting will significantly increase the probability of success in achieving the meeting objectives. Minutes can be brief! Surprising thought? Try it!