



MAKE MEETINGS WORK!

It's important, but we know it's not new

During the Dutch revolt in the 16th Century, five articles were created to regulate emotional behaviour in Church Council meetings. Amongst them was Article 5:

'Anyone who is engaged in swearing, larking around, quarrelling, dozing, chattering, lying down, walking around etc' will be punished with a monetary fine.

Further fines would be imposed on anyone who 'resentfully, foolhardy and vehemently' wanted to impose their own opinion and anyone who spoke to another in 'an unseemly, derisive or unedifying manner'.

Rules like this have been in existence since people began to use meetings rather than armed conflict to resolve disputes. The earliest rules involved the creation of specific places to hold meetings where swords and other arms were not permitted. If talking failed to resolve the issue, then of course violence was a likely next step.

How much and how little has changed.

If you've ever worked with ORConsulting then you know we are consistent in creating a 'working environment' at the start of our workshops. Asking people how they want their interactions to be and what sort of culture they want to create has nearly always produced a conducive atmosphere during which we have helped resolve some entrenched and difficult problems.

It amazes us then, that so few meetings in organisations adopt the same, simple, no-cost idea. Ask people at the start of a meeting how they want it to be. Create the culture you want rather than allowing a potentially less effective culture emerge by accident.

Have more meetings not less.

This counter-intuitive idea featured in Patrick Lencioni's book (Death by Meeting!) is brilliantly simple. By not really thinking about their meetings, many teams create 'meeting stew' – an uneasy mix of long term strategic questions and short term tactical ones, the 10 year vision mixed in with concerns about car parking and where to go for the team Christmas dinner. Separate these issues out. Have daily 5 minute check-ins. Have weekly 90 minute tacticals. Have monthly half-day strategic meetings (limited to one or two topics) and quarterly off-sites (trends, strategy but do not overburden the agenda). The key being not to mix the issues.

Use the GROW model

Use GROW to be clear about the **Goal** of each meeting point (is it for info, decision, debate?), to appreciate the **Reality** (perceptions, facts) of what is going on, the **Options** for resolving the issue and clarity about the **Way forward** (who is doing what, when). This sounds so simple but many meetings we observe lack focus and structure – people just launch into items and the rest of the meeting has no idea when its going to end or what the purpose is.

Do the difficult stuff first.

You might know this as 'eating the frog first' (if you've read that book!) – psychologists know it as the Premack principle based after David Premack's research that pleasurable tasks can be used as a reward for doing less pleasurable tasks. People perform better (quicker, more accurately, with more energy) when they tackle the harder tasks first and the reward themselves with the tasks they enjoy. Don't do it the other way round.

Who's in and who's out?

In large-scale video or telephone conference calls it really helps to ask who's in and who's out at the start of each topic. Being 'in' means that you have a vested interest in the topic and /or something to contribute. Being 'out' means it's less relevant and you now have 'permission' to continue working on other things whilst the call proceeds. It's an honest thing to do because that's what people do anyway - they just feel guilty about it or spend huge amounts of energy pretending to be interested.

Reward progress with a mobile phone fix!

So cynical but it really does work! Once a given issue has been resolved (using GROW) then reward them with a five-minute phone fix. This stops them doing it during the discussions but reassures them that they will get their fix.

It's a no cost idea

Run your meetings standing up. Keep presentations to a 15 minute limit. Use visuals only. Start meetings at 15 minutes past the hour to give people time to get from their last one. There a lots of ideas to make meetings work.

We encourage you to give it some thought but please don't put up with poor meetings because there are things you can do and there isn't really much excuse for not doing them.

But if all fails, please give us a call before warring departments meet in the car park to fight it out!