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MEETING OPENED, MEETING CLOSED

Are faster and better meetings a pipedream? **Ken Hudson** suggests a solution ... but make it quick!

MANAGEMENT

What is the most unproductive part of your day? If you are at all like the participants in my workshops you would have probably answered, meetings. How has it come to this, that such a basic activity in any organisation has such a bad name?

In a recent survey we conducted among a management team of an international service business we asked them what three words best describe meetings at their workplace. The most popular descriptions were: long, time-consuming, unnecessary, time-wasting, too many and boring.

But here is the rub – when I ask managers what they are doing or intend to do about the effectiveness of meetings that can take up to 50 per

cent of their time, there is a collective shrug of the shoulders. Perhaps it is too hard or they just love to complain about it! Whatever the reasons, surely in a time-poor world where more is expected from less, we need to do better. This article will give you some pointers on how to conduct a faster, better meeting.

We live in an age where teams are the new unit of production and the way that most work gets done nowadays. More teams mean more meetings. Hence meetings are not somehow separate to work but work itself. And like any form of work the aim should be to become more efficient and productive.

Managers and leaders therefore should be evaluated on how effective their meetings are. But first they need to break out of what I call the negative meeting mindset cycle. The cycle runs like this: "I believe that meetings are unproductive so I do everything I can not to go to any, or I arrive late and sometimes unprepared."

The trouble is that everyone else adopts the same attitude and behaviour, which means that meetings

never start or end on time, causing more frustration that only confirms what you thought about these in the first place. You want out and so does everybody else, unless, of course, it is your meeting and then you want everyone to feel energised and focused. This is a bad habit and leads to poor outcomes and an unproductive culture.

Managers and team leaders need to break out of this negative cycle. This is where a new mindset is needed. My approach of 'speed thinking' provides you with a new way to view this activity and doing so has the potential to make meetings more efficient, productive and enjoyable.

The insight for speed thinking came when I was working with managers over a number of years helping them to solve problems or create new products. I noticed paradoxically that when I gave them less time they often produced better results, ie the outcomes were more creative, original and energised.

Here are my recommendations to run more productive, quicker meetings.

Adopt Hudson's Law of Meetings

Hudson's Law of Meetings is an adaptation of Parkinson's Law, which states that: "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion". Hudson's Law suggests that "Meetings expand to the time set for the meeting". So the first step in designing a better, faster meeting is to simply reduce the meeting time.

In the service organisation where we are trialling these ideas we have reduced the meeting time from one hour (the default time) to 45 minutes with no reduction in output. Indeed there is a growing awareness that time is short so people must remain focused. For example, every 15 minutes a dedicated time keeper poses the question to the group that we are one-third of the way through the meeting - are we one-third of the way through the agenda? This reduction does not sound much but it means that you have reduced your collective meeting time by 25 per cent. This time saving enables people to get to the next meeting, make a coffee, answer some emails, prepare for the next meeting and be on time.

Keep it simple

Speed and simplicity have a symbiotic relationship. In trying to go faster you often have to simplify things. In simplifying a process or activity you can go faster. Hence with meetings it is a good idea to develop a standard agenda layout and format that can be used for most meetings.

In the service organisation, every department and it seems every manager had their own agenda layout. This slowed down comprehension and sometimes led to confusion with people searching for where to find information and what preparation they had to do.

Every meeting should have an agenda with the purpose and the desired outcomes clearly stated and sent out at least 24 hours before the meeting. In this way the logistics of the meeting (eg place, time, location, participants) are confirmed. Much like kids at school where no hats means no play - no agenda means no meeting should take place (unless in exceptional circumstances).

Collectively design meeting rules and stick to these

One of the best things we did with the team from the service company is that they collectively designed a set of new meeting rules. These are the rules of the game that everyone was expected to follow. Because they were created by the team, they had a better chance of being followed and reflected the unique culture of that department and organisation.

For example, some of the rules they agreed to were: start every meeting on time (no ifs or buts); no meetings between 12.00pm and 1.30pm; and no mobile phones or any other electronic devices in the meeting.

These rules also created peer pressure that made it easier for the person who called the meeting to enforce them.

Speed think your way through a few agenda items

In a normal meeting, every agenda item is allocated roughly even time. But with a speed meeting you should divide the agenda into everyday items and more strategic ones. You can then speed-think the everyday items, which will enable you to obtain a result quicker and the meeting will create momentum and energy. It will also free up more time for the more difficult items.

Another effective practice is that after you have made a decision, have two minutes of gut-feel time where anyone at the meeting can voice their intuition. People are now given permission to express what their emotional minds are telling them, eg "I know the numbers don't add up, but my intuition is telling me that there is still a good opportunity here." We know that our intuition works ahead of our rational mind and informs all our decisions. A formal 'gut feel' time respects and validates this process.

Make every meeting also a learning experience

Every meeting should both have a purpose and an outcome and ideally be a learning experience. It is a chance for the younger, less experienced to learn from the leaders of an organisation and for the leaders themselves to role-model what they expect from others. Meetings reflect the culture of a business. If the culture is open and diverse you would expect the meeting to be conducted in a similar way. If, on the other hand, the leadership team adopts an autocratic style this will become very evident in every meeting.

At the service business where we are trying to help some of their team break out of a few sloppy meeting habits we have suggested that the last few minutes of every meeting be allocated to a quick discussion on what worked in the meeting, what did not work, what we learnt and could do better next time. Thinking about meetings as learning opportunities ensures that whatever you decide, no meeting is ever a waste of time.

Running faster and better meetings is an important management and leadership skill that needs to be developed. Every organisation should develop their own way of conducting meetings that reflects its culture, values and priorities and this should be taught to all aspiring leaders of the future. It will make the business more efficient and productive and the time spent in meetings more enjoyable.

Dr Ken Hudson is founder and 'chief starter' of the Speed Thinking Zone, www.thespeedthinkingzone.com.

BOOST FOR CLEAN TECH

Justin Blows looks at the boom in clean and sustainable technology.

IP

Notable economists such as Nicholas Stern say that even though economic conditions are the worst since the Great Depression, tackling environmental issues like climate change cannot wait. Not addressing climate change now will cause a long-term economic crisis deeper than the current one. A better approach, they say, is to address the economic downturn and climate change with overlapping measures.

The biggest opportunity is, in the economists' opinion, a mass exploitation of clean and sustainable technologies. This has the potential to create wealth on the same scale as the introduction of the railways, electricity, cars, and information technology, for example. Some of these technologies are going to be old, like roof insulation and energy efficiency, but others, like solar and green vehicles, will be new.

Governments have framed their stimulus packages to accord with this message. For example, the Australian government has announced financial packages worth billions of dollars for clean coal, solar energy, the installation of roof insulation, and green cars. In the US, it has been reported that President Obama has set aside US\$80 billion in his economic stimulus package for green energy, promised US\$150 billion for research over 10 years, and is to propose tighter regulation of vehicle emissions. When governments provide this sort of encouragement, things happen. For example, the total revenue of the solar photovoltaic market was US\$37 billion in 2008, an increase of 110% over 2007, largely in response to European feed-in tariffs. Other clean and sustainable technology markets may reasonably be expected to experience growth on this staggering scale.

Is your intellectual property in order?

Whether developing a new clean and sustainable technology, merging with or acquiring cleantech companies, or seeking or providing equity capital,