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Mind Your Meetings: Improve Your Organization's Effectiveness One Meeting at a Time

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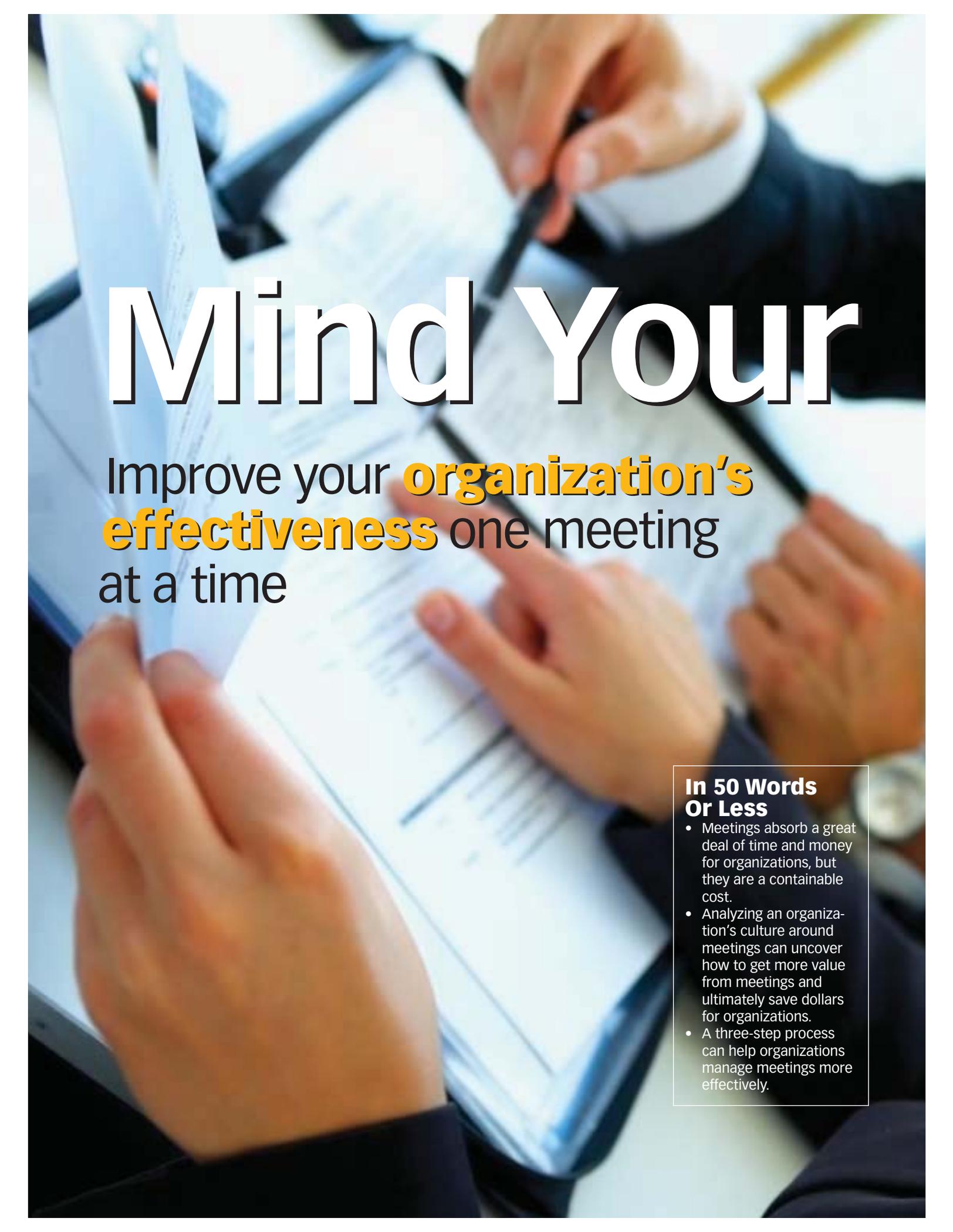
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Mind Your

Improve your **organization's effectiveness** one meeting at a time

In 50 Words Or Less

- Meetings absorb a great deal of time and money for organizations, but they are a containable cost.
- Analyzing an organization's culture around meetings can uncover how to get more value from meetings and ultimately save dollars for organizations.
- A three-step process can help organizations manage meetings more effectively.

Meetings

by Joseph A. Allen,
Steven G. Rogelberg
and John C. Scott

MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES SPEND

an inordinate amount of time in the estimated 11 million meetings held in the United States every day. In a survey of 1,900 business leaders, 72% indicated they spend more time in meetings today than they did five years ago, and 49% said they expect that time in meetings to increase.¹

Another study revealed that small businesses (fewer than 10 people) spend about 10% of their time preparing, attending, leading and concluding meetings. Larger organizations (500 or more employees) spend about 75% of their work time on these activities.²

As the number of meetings increases, the quality and value of meetings can have a direct impact on an organization's bottom line in the form of wasted time and effort, not to mention poor morale. Ineffective meetings are a cost that an organization arguably has the greatest opportunity to control.

It's simple to calculate the average cost of an inef-

fective meeting: Multiply the time of a meeting by the hourly wage of each meeting attendee, and then add the totals. Such estimates are conservative because they do not consider the full range of costs that might be involved. For example:

- Travel expenses.
- Lost opportunity costs (time that could be used for other endeavors).
- Levels of employee stress resulting from ineffective meetings.
- The need for subsequent meetings to clarify or fix the problems created by a poorly run meeting.

Table 1 provides a more complete listing of these additional costs.

Given these direct and indirect costs, the impact of ineffective meetings—compounded across time and across an organization—can be monumental. These meeting inefficiencies and costs represent targets of opportunity for professionals interested in improving quality in organizations.

Three-step process

There's a three-step process you can use to drive better business results through effective meeting management:

- 1. Assessment:** Evaluate current meeting practices (individually and organizationally), recognize any problems and inefficiencies, and develop ways to improve.
- 2. Intervention:** Implement improvement initiatives based on the assessment and enhance the skills and meeting practices of individual leaders, departments and the entire organization.
- 3. Refresher training and follow up:** Solicit feedback on the effectiveness of the intervention. Remind the individuals and organization of the desired practices.

More details on each step follow.

Assessing today's meeting mentality

An organization's meeting culture, practices and behaviors must be assessed to provide a clear picture of the ways meetings are viewed, used and managed by the organization, team or individual leaders. You can gather this information in a variety of ways.

To assure a well-rounded understanding, the optimal strategy is to use all three of the following approaches:

MEETING MONITORING

When considering how meetings are viewed, used and managed by members of your organization, focus on the following topics:

- Meeting use, misuse and overuse. Can topics of meetings be handled through e-mails?
- Meeting efficiency and effectiveness. Do real outcomes and action items result from the gathering?
- Productive and counterproductive leader and participant behaviors. How do people work or not work together?
- Meeting preparation and follow-through. Was any assigned pre-work completed? Were action items accomplished from a previous meeting?
- Meeting punctuality. Did everyone arrive on time?
- Meeting norms. What behavior is expected in the meeting?
- Facilities used for meetings. Does the environment set the right tone?
- Meeting culture in and across units and departments. Do different teams have different outlooks on meetings?
- Agenda usage. Does the meeting's leader prepare and follow an agenda?
- Minutes usage. Does anyone take notes?
- Whether individuals feel training is needed on meeting topics.
- Whether individuals receive feedback about performance in meetings.
- When meetings occur. Too early or too late in the day?
- How meeting scheduling occurs.
- The base rate of unscheduled meetings.
- Number of attendees typically at a meeting. Can attendees be limited?
- Decision making approaches used (for example, majority vote).
- Meeting modalities used and their effectiveness (for example, face-to-face or videoconferencing).
- Participant-to-participant attitudes and behaviors.
- Leader-to-participant attitudes and behaviors.
- Participant-to-leader attitudes and behaviors.

—J.A., S.R. and J.S.

Meeting **behaviors** are often well learned, institutionalized habits **that can be difficult to break.**

1. **Individual interviews and focus groups:** Create a detailed protocol of questions to ask meeting leaders and attendees. Allow participants to identify the strengths and growth areas associated with current meeting practices. To encourage candor, participants and leaders should not be interviewed at the same time.
2. **Direct observation:** Sit in on a sampling of meetings. Ideally, the meetings observed should span units and departments and occur at different times. This provides direct insight into meeting practices and culture that often cannot be articulated in interviews or surveys.
3. **Surveys:** Organizationwide surveys (or a specific division or team) allow for a broad picture of individuals' behaviors in meetings, as well as the use, misuse and overuse of meetings. Surveys allow for statistical comparisons across groups, as well as detailed comparisons within group analyses.

See the sidebar "Meeting Monitoring" for a rundown of topics to consider when assessing your organization's meetings.

Step in and make change

Take the information gathered during the assessment and develop an intervention strategy best suited for the specific needs of your organization, not just a boilerplate solution. The data collected will most likely suggest interventions are needed that target individuals, groups or teams, and the organization as a whole.

For example, the most common intervention is educating those who call and lead meetings by discussing with them:

- When to call meetings.
- The overall use or misuse of meetings.
- Derailers of successful meetings.

- Dealing with difficult and challenging situations that arise in a meeting (for example, participant conflict or a dominating individual).
- Monitoring meeting effectiveness.
- Deciding who should attend a meeting.
- Establishing positive working norms and rules of conduct.
- Instituting effective meeting practices.

Table 2 (p. 52) provides some very basic meeting practices to improve meeting quality.

While learning what makes a meeting effective, you might want to consider classroom training and high contact training tools available that use real-time meeting simulations.

High-contact training not only provides meeting leaders with detailed feedback on their performance

Calculating direct, indirect costs of ineffective meetings / TABLE 1

Travel time

- Compute hourly wage and calculate estimated cost for time spent in transit per employee in the meeting.

Travel costs

- Compute cost of flying in executives or reimbursing mileage costs.

Opportunity costs

- Compute costs of time lost on other tasks participants could be performing.

Employee stress

- Consider the decreased well-being at work (on a daily basis) compounded across time (job dissatisfaction).

Participant time

- Assume an executive makes \$270,000 per year.
- Assume \$150,000 in benefits and overhead for the employee.
- Calculate an hourly rate of pay, in this case approximately \$276 an hour.

Additional meetings

- Estimates indicate that 25% to 50% of meetings are poor meetings.
- More meetings (25% to 50%) are called to make up for poorly run meetings.

Leaders at meetings / TABLE 2

Set ground rules: Provide employees and managers with some ground rules about when a meeting is necessary and when alternative methods are just as effective. For example, call a meeting when conflicts in the group inhibit progress on a project. Also, meet when there is a compelling agenda that needs everyone's support and input.

Provide an opt out clause: Organizations should make it OK for employees to opt out of meetings that have little to do with their work tasks or expertise. Imagine the cost savings of meeting with only the people who need to know, as opposed to the whole group or team.

Plan in advance to enhance efficiency: Prepare the agenda ahead of time and share it with everyone who is to attend the meeting. The agenda should start with the most critical and strategic items. Allow employees to suggest additional items to be put on the agenda.

Define the roles: Make sure everyone in the meeting knows his or her role as leader or participant and what is expected of him or her. Some regular meetings involve constant and consistent participation from all parties. Other meetings might be more information sharing, where participation and interaction should be limited to save time. If it is a regular meeting, set the rules and roles, and stick to them.

Try new techniques and locations: Leaders of meetings should always look for ways to increase participation and the flow of innovative ideas. Try dividing the meeting into small groups to allow for brainstorming. Also, hold meetings in different locations to stimulate creativity.

feedback and, ultimately, reinforcement (rewards). When leaders understand what is expected to run effective meetings—and they are held accountable for their performance—positive change will occur, and wasted resources associated with poor meetings will be dramatically reduced. The required changes to the performance appraisal or 360-degree feedback systems would be minor (include a dimension on meeting skills) but the impact significant.

Follow up and refresh

Meeting behaviors and practices are often well-learned, institutionalized habits that can be difficult to break. Successful organizational change requires ongoing reminders and attention to ingrain the new practices and behaviors.

The assessment and intervention steps do not need to be repeated, but the following processes and methods should be rolled out every six months:

- Abbreviated refresher training modules (if any have been used).
- Supportive memos from senior leadership about the importance of the proposed changes.

in meetings, it can also provide a chance to practice new meeting behaviors. This approach might be suited for new and transitioning leaders and can lead to the creation of individual development plans containing SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) goals that can be tracked and followed up as part of step three.

Another effective intervention for improving leaders' performance in meetings is to incorporate these expectations into one of the organization's formal evaluation systems, such as its performance appraisal or 360-degree feedback processes.

As with any behavior where sustainable change is desired, it is first necessary to clearly lay out the expectations and then follow up with measurement,

- Surveys of meeting leaders and participants (or through observation or interviews, time permitting) to determine if changes have been maintained or if new issues have arisen.
- Rewards and recognition for successful individual and collective meeting performance.

Get buy-in from the top

The three-step process outlined can be labor intensive. We recommend a team or committee carry out the work. This is useful from a distributed workload perspective. But, more importantly, diversifying the team with employees from different departments and levels promotes more buy-in among key stakeholder groups.

In addition, top management must demonstrate strong support for the meeting initiative through informal and formal communications to employees and management.

MEETING OF MINDS

Does your organization handle meetings in a unique way? What's worked to keep your meetings effective? Share your experience with others and post your comments at www.qualityprogress.com, or e-mail them to editor@asq.org.

Overall, it will not be a difficult sell to get employees and leaders motivated to improve meeting behaviors and practices.

Despite the incredible ubiquity of meetings, this assessment and improvement process is rarely used in today's workplace. Its potential to mitigate wasted time and money, lost opportunities and employee frustration associated with incessant bad meetings is an extraordinary target of opportunity for professionals interested in quality improvement.

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