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Linking Pre-meeting Communication to Meeting Effectiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the importance of communication that occurs just before workplace meetings (i.e., pre-meeting talk). We explore how four specific types of pre-meeting talk (small talk, work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk) impact participants' experiences of meeting effectiveness. Moreover, we investigate the role of participants' personality in the link between pre-meeting talk and perceived meeting effectiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were obtained using an online survey of working adults (N = 252). Because pre-meeting talk has not been studied previously, a new survey measure of meeting talk was developed.

Findings – Pre-meeting small talk was a significant predictor of meeting effectiveness, even while considering good meeting procedures. Extraversion was identified as a moderator in this context, such that the relationship between pre-meeting talk and perceived meeting effectiveness was stronger for less extraverted participants.

Research limitations/implications – Our findings provide the first empirical support for the ripple effect, in terms of meetings producing pre-meeting talk, and suggest that pre-meeting talk meaningfully impact employees' meeting experiences and perceptions of meeting effectiveness. To address limitations inherent in the cross-section correlational design of the study, future research should experimentally test whether pre-meeting talk actually causes changes in meeting processes and outcomes.

Practical implications – Managers should encourage their employees to arrive in time to participate in pre-meeting talk. Side conversations before a scheduled meeting starts can have beneficial effects for meeting outcomes and should be fostered.

Originality/value – There is very limited research on the role of pre-meeting talk. We identify

that small talk is a predictor of meeting effectiveness even after considering previously studied

good meeting procedures.

Keywords – Meetings, meeting effectiveness, pre-meeting talk, communication, extraversion

Paper type – Research paper

Linking Pre-meeting Communication to Meeting Effectiveness

Picture your last meeting. What happened right before? Maybe you and your coworkers considered a new project or suggested certain topics to be brought up during the upcoming meeting. Maybe there was a thrilling conversation about what happened on a popular TV drama the day before. How did this affect your feelings about the overall meeting?

Previous research shows that what happens in meetings substantially impacts employee attitudes and behaviors outside the meeting context (e.g., Rogelberg *et al.*, 2006; Rogelberg *et al.,* 2010). Previous meetings research focuses on what happens during the meeting (e.g., Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2011) and on the outcomes of good and bad meetings (e.g., Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Leach *et al.*, 2009). However, little light has been shed on what happens just before meetings and how that influences meeting effectiveness. In essence, this study focuses on the pre-meeting time or the five to ten minutes leading up to the official start of the meeting (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005).

"Pre-meeting talk" concerns the communication that occurs prior to the start of a scheduled meeting. Mirivel and Tracy (2005) suggest that various forms of pre-meeting talk (small talk, work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk) impact the content, processes, and outcomes of workplace meetings. They also describe the pre-meeting phase such that participants typically use this phase for necessary social bonding and constructing a group identity. Presumably, information shared, emotions generated, and social connections developed in informal pre-meeting discussions can spill over into the meeting and impact participants' perceived meeting effectiveness. However, to date no empirical efforts have been made to understand the importance of meeting-related activities that occur just before the actual meeting

begins. We take first steps in this direction by examining the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness.

We propose that pre-meeting talk relates to meeting effectiveness through a variety of functions, such as setting the tone for the actual meeting, settling in, or gathering information about others' intentions for the meeting or opinions concerning specific meeting topics (Bailey, 1983; Schwartzman, 1989). Moreover, we propose that participants' personality may impact the degree to which individual participants rate their meetings as more effective when they have engaged in pre-meeting talk.

This study offers the following contributions. First, we review the meager research on pre-meeting talk, define four specific types of pre-meeting talk, and elaborate how pre-meeting talk may set the tone for the meeting and relate to participants' perceptions of meeting effectiveness, after accounting for good meeting procedures. Second, we investigate the extent to which a key personality characteristic that is important in promoting interpersonal interaction (i.e., extraversion), impacts the proposed relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. We test these ideas in a diverse panel of working adults and provide a discussion of the implications for meetings research and practice.

Meeting Effectiveness

Meeting effectiveness describes the extent to which meetings help achieve the goals of the meeting attendees (i.e., employees) and the organization (Rogelberg *et al.,* 2006). Although this definition reflects an affective evaluation of the meeting in general, much of previous research has looked at structural (e.g., design factors) or process characteristics (e.g., communication practices) *within* the meeting as predictors of overall meeting effectiveness. For example, Nixon and Littlepage (1992) found that good meeting procedures (i.e., promoting open communication, task-

oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness) were related to meeting effectiveness. Previous research further shows that meeting effectiveness improves if an agenda is used, if the meeting begins and ends on time, if a designated meeting facilitator is chosen, and if the meeting takes place in a quality facility (Leach *et al.*, 2009; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Within the meeting process, functional behaviors such as generating solutions and taking responsibility are positively linked to participants' perceptions of meeting effectiveness, whereas dysfunctional behaviors such as losing the train of thought or complaining are negatively linked to perceived meeting effectiveness (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2011). A key implication of these previous studies is that meeting effectiveness is determined by meeting characteristics that are set up or occur *prior* to the meeting and *during* the meeting itself. Thus, not only what happens in the meeting, but also what happens *before* the official start of the meeting may impact meeting effectiveness.

Pre-Meeting Talk and Meeting Effectiveness

Before a meeting starts, it is common to observe people assembling into a room and engaging in informal conversation (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). According to Mirivel and Tracy (2005), "premeeting talk refers to the conversational (and behavioral) moments that occur before a meeting starts" (p. 2). They propose four types of pre-meeting talk: (1) small talk, (2) meeting preparatory talk, (3) work talk, and (4) shop talk. *Small talk* concerns conversations without explicit work or task focus (e.g., discussions of the weather). In the organizational context, small talk can help build relationships that allow employees to feel comfortable and work well with one another. Moreover, small talk satisfies meeting participants' need for positive face time with others in the organization in a casual, non-work related form of talk (Holmes, 2000). In contrast, *meeting preparatory talk* refers to communication preparing for the upcoming meeting,

such as discussing the agenda in preparation for the meeting or acknowledging topics that participants want to bring up in the meeting. Meeting preparatory talk concerns the situation at hand, rather than work or non-work related topics from outside the meeting context (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005).

Work talk concerns conversations used to actually engage in work. The talk is actually accomplishing tasks associated with the employee's work such as coordinating projects, information sharing essential for task accomplishment, or actually carrying out a task requiring talk between participants. For example, employees exhibit work talk by talking through a work problem, suggesting a potential new project, or discussing problems individuals have that others in the pre-meeting situation could assist in solving. *Shop talk* also refers to pre-meeting talk concerning work related topics. However, in contrast to work talk, shop talk "is discussion about people, events, and issues that link to the workplace. It is not talk that is explicitly doing institutional work (work talk)…rather it is talk about work" (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005, p. 16). For example, discussions of top performers, office politics, or other rival organizations would be considered shop talk.

Meeting activities such as task distribution, information sharing, or decision making are subject to social dynamics not only during, but also before the meeting itself (Cooren, 2007; Mirivel and Tracy, 2005). This suggests that employees' experiences immediately before the meeting will influence their subjective judgments of meeting satisfaction and effectiveness (cf. Schwarz and Clore, 1983, 2003). We assume two underlying processes that drive this influence. On the one hand, pre-meeting experiences can carry over into the actual meeting and change the meeting experience, as well as subsequent evaluations or judgments of meeting effectiveness. On

the other hand, meeting participants' personality may have an impact on the strength of this

effect.

Pre-Meeting Talk and Meeting Effectiveness

The interaction immediately before the meeting may have spillover effects on the meeting

itself. Schwartzman (1989) described a "ripple effect" by which a scheduled meeting produces a

nonscheduled meeting-like interaction before the scheduled meeting. As soon as a meeting is

scheduled, meeting attendees will share information concerning the upcoming meeting and status

differences are on display. Discussions about what the meeting is about, who is attending, and

what decisions will be made all provide opportunities to determine who is in charge, who will be

presenting, what kind of information will be shared and why. During this process, ideas and

opinions are shared in casual conversations that may lead to coalitions concerning decision points

in the upcoming meeting. Moreover, the initial moments of interaction between attendees during

the pre-meeting phase may "set the tone" for the meeting, in terms of interaction patterns or

norms for communicating with one another. Research on swift-starting teams shows that the

interaction patterns that emerge early on between team members are indicative of their later

performance (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2012). Although meetings do not necessarily involve a team setting,

these previous findings relate to the presumed effect of initial pre-meeting interactions and later

meeting effectiveness.

We argue that each type of pre-meeting talk can promote meeting effectiveness. Small talk

can provide an environment of relationship building and allows for positive face-time (Mirivel

and Tracy, 2005). This positive face-time may be particularly important for some individuals

(e.g., participants who score lower on extraversion) and this positive experience may carry over or

ripple into the actual meeting. Work talk provides an opportunity for meeting participants to

actually engage in their work that requires others attending the meeting. For some, this may be the only part of the meeting that provides for their work goal accomplishment (such as reaching agreement and achieving collaboration; Barnes, 2007; Nielsen, 2013). Thus, work talk may again provide for a positive affective event that ripples into the meeting. Third, meeting preparatory talk focuses on the communicative behaviors essential to good meeting function (e.g., passing out agendas, discussing the agenda before the formal meeting; Cohen *et al.,* 2011). As such, meeting preparatory talk likely relates to meeting effectiveness because of its connection to the structure and function of the upcoming meeting. Fourth and finally, shop talk may provide a casual forum to discuss work-related topics that affect meeting participants outside their direct work role (e.g., workplace politics, promotion decisions, competitors in the industry, etc.). This form of pre-meeting talk may provide one of the few locations where some meeting participants hear news about other areas of the organization which may provide for a positive affective event that ripples into their evaluation of the meeting itself. Thus, we hypothesize:

> *H 1:* Pre-meeting talk (i.e., small talk, work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk)
>
> positively relates to perceived meeting effectiveness.

Additionally, we expect that pre-meeting talk will affect perceived meeting effectiveness even when considering good meeting procedures. Good meeting procedures could include many things from the lighting and seating arrangements (e.g. Leach et al., 2009) to the open communication environment established by the meeting leader (Nixon & Littlepage, 1992). Rather than focusing on the design characteristics of the meeting space, we opted to focus on procedural characteristics that are predominantly under the control of the meeting leader or manager. Specifically, Nixon and Littlepage (1992) identified good meeting procedures including open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness that were linked to

overall meeting effectiveness. Open communication is the extent to which meeting attendees feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions within the meeting. Task-oriented focus is the extent to which the meeting flows consistently with the agenda and aims previously identified by the meeting leader and attendees. Systematic approach refers to the extent to which a vigilant process is used in discussing alternatives and options when considering courses of action relative to a decision point within the meeting. Timeliness refers to whether the meeting started and ended on time. However, all of these are within-meeting rather than pre-meeting focused. Assuming that pre-meeting talk ripples into the meeting as previously described, we anticipate that pre-meeting talk will have a lasting effect on meeting attendees that should continue to relate to meeting effectiveness after accounting for the processes in a well-run meeting. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: Pre-meeting talk (i.e., small talk, work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk) is positively related to meeting effectiveness even after controlling for good within meeting procedures (i.e., open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness).

However, the extent to which pre-meeting talk can enhance participants' meeting experiences and perceptions of meeting effectiveness may not be the same across different participants. Specifically, extraversion as an individual difference variable may play an important role in this context.

Extraversion as a Moderator

Although many individual characteristics could impact the relationship between pre-meeting talk and perceived meeting effectiveness, extraversion seems particularly important in this context. Individuals who score high on extraversion are typically outgoing, uninhibited, and likely to be involved with group activities (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1964). Less extraverted

individuals on the other hand prefer to avoid social situations, such as meetings, and may feel anxiety when required to explain new projects, confirm work goals, and exchange information (McCroskey, 1977).

Previous research suggests that extraverted individuals prefer to interact with others in a social environment (Lucas and Diener, 2001), whereas less extraverted individuals prefer to avoid interacting with others in general (McCroskey, 1977; Rolls, 1998). Extraversion can be understood in terms of a preference for and active engagement in social interaction (Ashton *et al.*, 2002). Due to this preference, it is likely that these different preferences would also affect the meeting setting. Discussions within meetings demand participation in order for information to be shared, thus extravert qualities may be beneficial in terms of increased participation and sharing of ideas in general. Previous research shows that some individuals are more apprehensive to participate in social environments (McCroskey, 1977; Pitt *et al.,* 2000). Less extraverted individuals will likely be more apprehensive in social situations than extraverted individuals, possibly because extraverts draw energy from the outside (Opt and Loffredo, 2000). This energy could be provided through face-to-face communication in groups. Since individuals scoring low on extraversion tend to internalize their thought process by not openly expressing and sharing their ideas, they may experience higher levels of apprehension.

Engaging in pre-meeting talk may be a way for less extraverted meeting attendants to feel less fear and anxiety in the upcoming meeting or less apprehensive to communicate in general. Although pre-meeting talk is a form of communication in a social environment, it is less formal and less structured than the scheduled meeting (Schwartzman, 1989). This setting may facilitate the communication of thoughts and ideas particularly for participants with low extraversion, compared to the social setting during the formal scheduled meeting. Arguably, the confidence

gained from expressing ideas beforehand would generate positive feelings) and allow less

extraverted participants to express more thoughts and ideas during the formal meeting (Goldsmith

and Baxter, 1996). For more extraverted participants who do not inherently experience

communication apprehension (Opt and Loffredo, 2000) pre-meeting talk less may be important in

terms of facilitating their positive feelings about the meeting. Following this line of reasoning,

pre-meeting talk will likely be more beneficial for less extraverted participants. In other words,

the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness will be stronger for less

extraverted individuals.

> *H3*: Extraversion moderates the relationship between pre-meeting talk (i.e., small talk,
>
> work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk) and meeting effectiveness, such that
>
> the relationship will be stronger for meeting attendees with low extraversion.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited using Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online panel of internet-

based workers employed by a variety of organizations throughout the United States. MTurk is

maintained by Amazon.com and panelists are recruited from the vast membership of

Amazon.com users who have an interest in receiving monetary compensation for work

opportunities through the MTurk system. For our study, a small financial incentive was provided

for participating in the online survey (i.e. $0.50). Also, we only considered participants who

regularly attended meetings as part of their job (i.e., attend one meeting per week minimum). The

final sample consisted of 252 employed adults. 57.1% were female. The average age of the

participants was 36.9 (range: 19 to 80 years). The average organizational tenure was 5.4 years

(range: a few months to 35 years). The average number of meetings attended per week was 3,

ranging from 2 to 26 meetings per week. 1.2% of the participants had attended some high school, 7.5% graduated high school, 24.2% attended some college, 41.3% held a college degree, 6.7% attended some graduate school, and 19% held a graduate degree. 48.8% of the participants were working at the employee level, 20.2% were employed as supervisors, 20.6% were at a managerial level, 5.6% were director-level, and 4.0% were at the senior or top management level. 17.9% of the participants belonged to publicly traded organizations, 43.8% private for profit, 15.5% private not for profit, 19.1% public sector, and 3.6% other. The most common jobs included managers, supervisors, specialists, and programmers.

Measures

Pre-meeting Talk. Because this was the first empirical study of pre-meeting talk, we created a new measure of pre-meeting talk. In the only other known study of pre-meeting talk, Mirivel and Tracy (2005) analyze a set of meetings and developed the concept of pre-meeting talk including definitions and examples. Based on their conceptualization of pre-meeting talk, the authors independently developed 75 items to assess the four types of pre-meeting talk. Through discussion of the items and reviewing the conceptualization together, the initial 75 items was reduced (i.e. redundancies removed) to 44 items to measure the following four types of pre-meeting talk: small talk (12 items), work talk (12 items), meeting preparatory talk (10 items), and shop talk (10 items).

A small pilot study ($n = 62$) was used to test the functionality of the measure, instructions, and scaling, and to provide preliminary evidence of the internal consistency of the scales. Participants were working adults recruited by students who served as research assistants and received extra-credit for distributing the survey to their working friends and acquaintances. The participants were 57% female and had worked for their current organization for an average of

2.32 years. The instructions read, "Think of your last work meeting. Before the meeting began, to what extent did you do the following…", followed by the items for each scale (see Appendix A). Items were rated on a five-point answering format, ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("to a great extent"). Internal consistency of the four subscales in the pilot sample was good, as all Cronbach's alpha values were greater than .70 (i.e., small talk α = .85, work talk α = .91, meeting preparatory talk α = .90, and shop talk α = .88).

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using the pilot study data. Since no previous research tested the factor structure of pre-meeting talk, an exploratory factor analysis approach is appropriate in order to discover the factor structure even though certain expectations existed concerning the four types of pre-meeting talk. Factors with an eigenvalue of greater than 1.0 were extracted and rotated using oblimin rotation (i.e., allowing factors to correlate). Initial analysis resulted in a five factor solution with several cross-loading items comprising the fifth factor. These items were removed as they did not clearly load onto one factor. The items were re-analyzed resulting in a four factor solution that clearly mapped to the four types of pre-meeting talk. The final survey included 8 items for small talk, 10 items for work talk, 5 items for meeting preparatory talk, and 6 items for shop talk. Appendix A shows the final set of items for each type of pre-meeting talk and their factor loadings onto their respective factors.

Meeting Effectiveness. Meeting effectiveness was assessed using a 6-item scale (Rogelberg *et al.,* 2006). Participants were asked to think of their last work meeting and rate the effectiveness of the meeting relative to the statements provided. Sample items included "achieving your own work goals" or "providing you with an opportunity to acquire useful information". Items were rated on a five point scale ranging from 1 ("extremely ineffective") to 5 ("extremely effective").

Extraversion. Extraversion was measured using two items (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann, 2003). Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement specifying a pair of personality traits. Items were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 being "disagree strongly" to 7 being "agree strongly". The items used to assess extraversion were "extraverted, enthusiastic" and "reserved, quiet".

Meeting Procedures. Meeting procedures were assessed using a 17-item scale (Nixon and Littlepage, 1992). Participants were asked to think of their last work meeting and indicate the extent to which included open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness occurred. Items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 being "not at all" to 5 being "to a great extent". Sample items included "all members participated" (open communication), "the goals of the meeting were clear and well defined" (task-oriented focus), "decisions made during the meeting were put in writing" (systematic approach), and "the meeting began on time" (timeliness).

Control variables. Three specific demographic variables were controlled for in all subsequent analyses: tenure, age, and job level. These particular variables were selected for two reasons. First, previous research looking at meetings and job attitudes used these same variables as control variables (e.g., Rogelberg *et al*., 2010; Leach *et al.,* 2009). These previous studies provide empirical and theoretical reasons for controlling for these potential confounding variables. Second, based on recommendations by Becker (2005), only control variables that show a relationship to the predictor, outcome, or both should be considered for potential inclusion in the model. Based on preliminary analysis, each of these variables showed significant correlations with the predictors/outcome and were thus included in subsequent analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and internal consistency values (i.e. Cronbach's Alpha) are provided for the principal variables in Table 1.

Construct Validity of the Pre-Meeting Talk Measures

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to examine the distinctiveness of the measures of the four types of pre-meeting talk. The model fit for each of the three nested models was compared ranging from a single-factor model to a four-factor model (e.g., Rahim and Magner, 1995; Lance and Vandenberg, 2002; see Table 2). The four-factor model showed the best overall fit. Although each more differentiated model showed a significantly better chi-square statistic (James, Mulaik, and Brett, 1982), in comparison with the other models, the three-factor model showed better root-mean-square errors of approximation (RMSEA; Browne and Cudeck, 1993) and had both comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and Tucker-Lewis Index values above their recommended cutoffs of .90 (TLI; Tucker and Lewis, 1973). All items in the four-factor model loaded reliably on their predicted factors; the lowest loading was .45.

Discriminant Validity of the Constructs

In addition, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to examine the distinctiveness of all ten focal variables. The model fit for each of the nine nested models was compared ranging from a single-factor model to a ten-factor model (see Table 3 for model descriptions). The ten-factor model showed the best overall fit. Each more differentiated model showed a significantly better chi-square statistic (James *et al*., 1982). In comparison with the other models, the ten-factor model showed appropriate levels for the RMSEA, CFI, and TLI. All items in the ten-factor model loaded reliably on their predicted factors; the lowest loading was .43.

Tests of Main Effects Hypotheses

We used regression analysis to test our first hypothesis concerning the link between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. In the first step, the control variables (organizational tenure, age, and job level) were entered and did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in meeting effectiveness ($R^2 = .01$, $p > .05$). In the second step, the four types of pre-meeting talk were entered as predictors of meeting effectiveness and accounted for a significant amount of the variance in meeting effectiveness ($R^2 = .08$, $p < .05$). However, of the types of pre-meeting talk, only small talk was a significant predictor of meeting effectiveness ($\beta = .25$, $p < .05$). These findings provide some support for Hypothesis 1.

Our second hypothesis stated that pre-meeting talk would relate to meeting effectiveness even after accounting for good meeting practices. In the first step, the control variables were entered. In the second step, the good meeting procedures (open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness) variables were entered and accounted 42% of the variance in meeting effectiveness ($p < .05$; see Table 4). In the third step, the four types of pre-meeting talk were entered as predictors of meeting effectiveness (see Table 4). Pre-meeting talk accounted for a significant amount of the variance in meeting effectiveness ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p < .05$) and once again only small talk significantly related to meeting effectiveness ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$), but this time accounting for good meeting practices. Hypothesis 2 was thus supported for the specific context of pre-meeting small talk.

Tests of Moderating Hypothesis

Our third hypothesis stated that the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness would be moderated by extraversion, such that the relationship would be stronger for less extraverted participants. Given the findings concerning Hypotheses 1 and 2, only the moderation effect of extraversion on the relationship between pre-meeting small talk and meeting

effectiveness was tested. Small talk and extraversion were centered prior to regression analysis in order to reduce potential problems related to nonessential multicollinerarity (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). We then calculated an interaction term between small talk and individual extraversion. For the regression analysis, first the demographic and meeting procedures were entered, followed by small talk and extraversion in the next step, and the interaction term was entered in the final step (see Table 5). In the final step, the interaction term was significant and accounted for a significant portion of the variance in meeting effectiveness (($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$).

Figure 1 shows the graph of the moderating effects of extraversion on the relationship between small talk and meeting effectiveness. The graph compares high versus low levels of small talk with high versus low levels of meeting effectiveness. As hypothesized, the overall relationship between small talk and meeting effectiveness was stronger for participants who scored low rather than high on extraversion. These findings lend support to Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. Pre-meeting talk concerns conversations during the five to ten minutes that precede the official start of the meeting (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Specifically, we investigated the effects of pre-meeting small talk, work talk, meeting preparatory talk, and shop talk on meeting effectiveness. First, we found that only small talk was significantly positively related to meeting effectiveness. Mirivel and Tracy (2005) suggest that small talk is a unique form of communication that provides group members with an opportunity to engage in storytelling and friendly discussions in order to establish and maintain relationships. Moreover, small talk can reduce uncertainty in social interaction situations (Goldsmith and Baxter, 1996), which may allow individuals to feel more comfortable and to work well together (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005). When uncertainty in situations

is reduced, intimacy increases (Goldsmith and Baxter, 1996), thus providing a better environment for social cohesion amongst group members (Lott and Lott, 1965; Turner *et al.*, 1987). Based on the nature of small talk, meeting attendees may be able to feel as if they were a part of a communal conversation environment when engaging in these types of conversations, allowing them to speak more openly and bring fourth important concepts and discussion to the upcoming meeting. Small talk seems to provide the pre-meeting talk situation with positive feelings that may ripple across the meeting, leave a lasting effect on meeting attendee's overall feeling of the meeting (Schwartzman, 1989).

Surprisingly, the other three forms of pre-meeting talk did not significantly relate to meeting effectiveness. Several potential explanations exist for these results. First, our results indicate that pre-meeting talk may not have occurred much in this sample. On average, individuals reported that they engaged in pre-meeting talk to a "small extent". Although the variability was adequate to test the hypotheses, this low base-rate may have suppressed some of the proposed effects of pre-meeting talk. Second, the time-span of interest for when pre-meeting talk occurs may have inadvertently emphasized small talk. The survey asked participants to think of their last meeting and rate the items concerning pre-meeting talk relative to whether they did these behaviors "before the meeting". It was deliberately worded this way so as to allow the participant to think broadly about the items. However, it is likely they thought about the few minutes right before the meeting where small talk is quite likely (e.g., salutations, discussion of the weather, etc.). The other types of pre-meeting talk, especially meeting preparatory talk, may occur long before the meeting begins as the meeting leader prepares the agenda, shares the agenda with attendees, and discusses things that need to be included or excluded from the agenda (Cohen

et al., 2011). Both of these issues are methodological in nature and could be addressed by future researchers through using different methods (see future directions section).

Second, we expected pre-meeting talk to be positively related to meeting effectiveness after controlling for previously studied good meeting procedures for effective meetings (Nixon and Littlepage, 1992). Indeed, we found that small talk was positively related to meeting effectiveness above and beyond open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness of the meeting. This finding supports our argument for studying pre-meeting as well as within-meeting factors for understanding meeting effectiveness.

Finally, we were interested in the role of meeting participants' personality in the context of pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. Specifically, we expected a moderating effect of participants' extraversion on the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. Our findings indeed showed that the benefit of pre-meeting talk for perceived meeting effectiveness was stronger for participants lower in extraversion. This finding lends support to the notion that the communal conversation environment provided by small talk (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005) promotes comfort and intimacy especially to those meeting participants who prefer not to interact in more formal social situations (i.e., less extraverted participants; Coupland *et al.*, 1992).

Implications for Research and Practice

In terms of research implications, we empirically tested Schwartzman's (1989) notion of the ripple effect, in terms of unscheduled mini-meetings that are initiated when official meetings are scheduled. Schwartzman (1989) proposed that these unscheduled mini-meetings, or pre-meeting phases, would be "probably very important for structuring interaction and relaying information--perhaps more important than the scheduled meeting itself" (p. 77). Lending support to her assumption, our results suggest that pre-meeting talk can create a lasting effect on

individual perceptions of meeting effectiveness. Moreover, our findings build upon previous research concerning meeting effectiveness by highlighting the importance of what happens *before* (i.e. opening phase) the meeting begins (Zijlstra *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of practical implications, our findings suggest that meeting leader aiming to promote meeting effectiveness should be aware of the critical moments immediately before their meetings. Moreover, managers might encourage small talk, not only pre-meeting but also at the beginning of a meeting. Small talk can help build relationships among coworkers and may promote a level of comfort that allows people who normally do not speak up in meetings the opportunity to feel less nervous during the meeting itself.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, our cross-sectional research design precludes causal inferences. However, we did find some meaningful differential relationships between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. In the future, for a more direct test of the effects of pre-meeting talk on meeting effectiveness, meetings researchers could use an experimental design. Building on research concerning the importance of informal interactions in organizations (e.g., Kraut *et al.*, 1990), future research can help clarify whether facilitating informal pre-meeting encounters causally relates to evaluations of meeting effectiveness. Moreover, future research should employ behavioral measures in addition to survey measures to address any common method bias that may have been present in our findings. However, we followed recommendations to reduce common-method bias by alternating the answering format on the predictor and criterion variable (see Podsakoff, *et al.*, 2003). In addition, we aimed to mitigate common-method bias by testing for a moderation effect of extraversion, allowing less of a concern for an inaccurate relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness (cf. Conway and Lance, 2010).

Second, we focused on extraversion given its relevance for individuals' behavior in social contexts (Lucas and Diener, 2001). However, future research should examine other personality characteristics in the context of pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. However, previous research shows that those who are high on agreeableness are less likely to enjoy conflict and may choose to avoid such situations (Jensen-Campbell and Graziano, 2001). Thus, in meetings with conflict present, individuals who are generally agreeable may be more or less affected by the various types of pre-meeting talk.

Third, we did not examine pre-existing social relationships between meeting attendees that may have affected both pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness. This presents another avenue for future research, for example by using social network analysis for exploring pre-existing relationships among meeting attendants. Future research should also investigate intercultural differences in pre-meeting experiences, as our sample was from an U.S.-American background only. For example, concerning in-meeting social relationships, research indicates differences in within-meeting communication processes across cultures (Lehmann-Willenbrock *et al.*, in press).

Finally, although we focused on positive pre-meeting talk (cf. Mirivel and Tracy, 2005), not all pre-meeting activities may be positive. Meeting process research shows that dysfunctional behaviors such as complaining or criticizing each other are frequent and harmful for meeting processes and outcomes (e.g., Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2011). Future research can take a more nuanced look at both positive and negative pre-meeting behaviors, and explore how they affect meeting processes and outcomes.

Conclusion

This study shows that pre-meeting talk in the form of small talk is significantly linked to meeting effectiveness, above and beyond good meeting procedures. Extraversion moderates this

relationship, such that the relationship is stronger for participants who score low on extraversion.

These findings suggest that managers aiming to improve meeting effectiveness should encourage

their employees to arrive in time to engage in pre-meeting talk.

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