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# The critical importance of meetings to leader and organizational success: Evidence-based insights and implications for key stakeholders

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Consider the following estimates about the current state of workplace meetings in the United States. There are as many as 55 million meetings every single work day. Employees spend on average six hours per week sitting in meetings. Their managers spend even more time in meetings, with averages around 23 hours per week, and with some spending up to 80% of their work time in meetings. Overall, a large amount of organizational resources (i.e., employee time and salaries) go into meetings. Estimates suggest that most organizations devote between 7 and 15 percent of their personnel budgets to meetings At the same time, some estimates indicate that as many as half of all work meetings are rated as "poor", leading organizations to waste at least 213 billion of the dollars they spend on meetings per year. These numbers have vast implications in terms of the return on investment for organizations. They also have implications for employees' perceptions of their work and their organization.

Workplace meetings take place for many reasons. Employees meet to talk about problems, develop solutions, generate ideas, reach consensus, and make decisions. But in addition to the outcomes they are intended to achieve, meetings are also sites for many other organizational phenomena, including sensemaking, leadership influence, relationship building, team dynamics, conflict, and the shaping of employee attitudes. The impact of meetings extends well beyond the boundaries of the meeting itself, a point to which we will return.

Because meetings have become such a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary organizations, research in recent years has increasingly investigated the meeting as a subject in and of itself. Yet, despite the abundance of meetings in everyday organizational practice, meetings research is still a young science. Since the seminal work by Helen Schwartzman in 1986, other organizational scholars slowly began to address meetings as a research topic. Indeed, it took almost 20 years after Schwartzman's ground-breaking work for meeting science to emerge as a distinct field of study. Today, scholars from multiple disciplines, including management and organizational behavior, communication, organizational psychology, and sociology, have all made efforts to better understand the many facets of meetings, such as how meetings are planned and conducted in organizations, what happens inside of the meetings, and how meetings may affect overall individual, team, and organizational outcomes.

*Insights from meeting science*

Table 1 provides a brief summary of research-based conclusions about pre-meeting factors (inputs) and during-meeting factors (processes) that are associated with positive meeting outcomes (outputs). On the input side, research has consistently shown that thoughtful meeting preparation and setup, exemplified in a number of specific design features, set the stage for effective meetings. Additionally, both meeting attendee and meeting leader characteristics need to be considered as critical pre-meeting factors – including careful consideration who needs to be in the meeting room in the first place (and who does not), and the skill level of the meeting leader. Addressing these input factors effectively does not guarantee a successful meeting, but failing to address them effectively makes it much harder for the meeting to achieve its desired outcomes.

In terms of the meeting process, a growing research base highlights ways in which what actually happens in the meeting, in terms of leader and attendee behaviors and interactions, can truly “make or break” the meeting. Some of these process factors are rather straightforward, such as taking care of proper meeting documentation and keeping track of time. Others can be quite tricky, especially when it comes to group dynamics within the meeting that can quickly spiral out of control (e.g., complaining cycles and negativity spirals). These group dynamics are often challenging for meeting leaders, and addressing such challenges requires additional efforts on the input side (especially in terms of providing meeting leadership training).

On the output side (see right-hand column in Table 1), moving beyond the important proximal meeting outcomes (i.e., did the group successfully solve the problem, make the decision, or otherwise achieve the intended immediate result), research shows that what happens before (inputs), during (processes), and after (were action plans actually implemented) the meeting affects employee attitudes and experiences in many ways, often going far beyond the actual meeting itself and its proximal meeting outcomes. It turns out that employee satisfaction with meetings is a distinct component of overall job satisfaction, and a potential driver of organizational commitment (distal meeting outcomes). While we often focus on "bad meetings", which can leave employees feeling frustrated, and can also trigger employee exhaustion and potential burnout beyond the meeting context, good meetings can boost employee morale in general, again beyond the meeting context.

Good meetings are places where trust among employees grows, where leader-follower relationships are shaped and maintained, where positive leadership influence is executed, and where team dynamics are effectively managed for positive outcomes. Bad meetings, on the other hand, are prone to trigger a negative group mood, send teams into negative downward spirals, and derail team processes, leading to negative proximal outputs in terms of creativity, meeting satisfaction, and ultimate performance. Importantly, as noted, meetings also affect outcomes at the broader organizational level (i.e., distal meeting outcomes). At the most macro levels, research has shown that the behavioral dynamics observed during regular team meetings are linked to organizational functioning at large, and even to shareholder value creation.

Leveraging meeting- science based evidence, we now turn to practical implication for meeting leaders and organizations more broadly.

*Implications for meeting leaders*

In most cases the individual who plans and conducts the meeting is a manager, and the participants are his/her subordinates. While there can be situations in which the meeting leader may be someone that a boss designates to run the meeting, that is the exception rather than the rule, The implications that are outlined here apply to that most common case, in which the meeting leader is also the formal leader, the manager of the group of meeting participants.

Given the impact of meetings on individual, team, and organizational outcomes, which have the potential to be very positive, the evidence leads us to conclude that leaders should embrace meetings as a strategic opportunity rather than a “necessary evil” of organizational life. Thus, meetings are not just something that one does as a leader; they are an essential leadership activity, a key element of the leader's role and responsibility. Good meeting leadership is not a given, and it is not easy. It includes critical strategic steps such as spending time and effort to prepare each meeting, active and non-egocentric facilitation, and concluding meetings with actionable steps to be taken by team members, steps which are addressed in this overview.

Getting meeting leadership right has a number of important advantages for leaders and those who depend on them, going well beyond the immediate return on investment. For example, as noted earlier, when leaders conduct meetings well, they can engender employee engagement (see Table 1). A recent study showed that there are three especially critical things under the control of the meeting leader (inputs) that can make meetings a more effective tool for achieving the distal outcome of promoting employee engagement overall: 1) making sure that meetings relevant to attendees, 2) providing opportunities for "voice" in the meeting, and 3) being time-courteous when executing the meeting.

In terms of meeting relevance, meeting leaders need require attendance only from those who actually have a genuine stake in the decisions or actions coming from the meeting, and should give those for whom the meeting is not relevant a pass – avoiding "spectators". The latter have more organizationally purposeful things to do with their time. In terms of voice, meeting leaders need to establish ground rules in the meeting that promotes open communication and a sense of “psychological safety” for attendees. In other words, meeting attendees need to feel that they can, if they desire, share their thoughts and opinions without fear of embarrassment or retribution by the meeting leader or others in the meeting. Finally, in terms of meeting time-courtesy, leaders should start meetings on time, end them on time, and run them efficiently while in process. Recent research has shown that meetings that start more than five minutes late are rated as less satisfying, and less effective overall; and, group performance on a shared task in late starting meetings suffers. Additionally, a meeting that ends later than the stated stop time may cause the next meeting or the next task on everyone’s daily agenda to start late. Taken together, these three strategic inputs, when successfully managed by an effective meeting leader, have been shown not only to produce desirable proximal outcomes, but also to promote the distal outcome of employee engagement outside the meeting.

Leaders of meetings should be very interested in assessing and improving the effectiveness of their meetings. Here, recent meetings research has made an interesting and perhaps surprising observation. There is good evidence that a meeting leader's perception of "how a meeting went" can, and often does, diverge considerably from how meeting participants view the same meeting.   More specifically, our ongoing research shows that employees' perceptions of meeting effectiveness generally tend to be lower than leaders' perceptions. This could be due to the fact that leaders typically take up more "conversational floor space" than the average meeting participant, which is inherent in their leadership role. We know that those individuals who talk more tend to be viewed as more influential (the so-called "babble effect"). The reverse could also be true, such that individuals who already hold a formal leadership position in an organization feel that they have to talk substantially more than others during meetings. A side effect of talking more during a meeting is the positive, self-serving bias about the meeting (i.e., "If I talked a lot during the meeting, it must have been a pretty good meeting"). While such a positive bias is understandable and human, it does create difficulties when leaders rely only on their own judgment for evaluating the effectiveness of a meeting. Research shows that they have a blind spot when it comes to their own evaluation, compared to that of the participants. Hence, accurately gauging meeting effectiveness and diagnosing a need for improving meetings should be based more on employees' feedback, and certainly not solely on the leader's assessment.

Evaluative feedback from meeting attendees is ideally gathered in an anonymous paper-and-pencil (or electronic) survey immediately after the meeting, to ensure candid employee responses. Besides just asking what is going well and not so well in the meetings, questions about attendees' perceptions of broader issues of inputs, processes, and outputs can be addressed. Thus, to what extent do attendees feel satisfied with the meeting preparation, to what extent do they feel they could participate and voice their opinions during the meeting, to what extent are they satisfied with the meeting process and outcome overall, and to what extent do they experience clarity regarding the implementation of plans and action points agreed upon in the meeting (i.e., follow-up)?

Based on such evaluation measures, leaders should periodically take time to discuss their ongoing meeting practices with their employees. Such a discussion could be part of a monthly reflection session, where the leader reflects together with their team on how they are doing overall, whether any issues need to be addressed, and how their meeting communication practices are perceived by the team members. Through this process the leader would also gain self-insight on their strengths and growth areas. From such feedback and the resultant insights, meeting leadership skills can be improved, especially if such skills are addressed explicitly as part of leadership development training.

An effective meeting leadership development program could, for example, address some or all of the following fairly common and especially difficult within-meeting facilitation challenges:

(1) complaining cycles or negative loops in which teams get stuck

(2) difficulties in encouraging employee contributions during meetings

(3) finding a balance between accomplishing the intended meeting agenda on the one hand and flexibly accommodating questions, concerns, and side notes on the other hand

(4) involving more introverted, or silent participants

(5) creating motivation for implementing ideas, in terms of taking on additional responsibilities and tasks

(6) achieving consensus in the face of widely divergent opinions

(7) handling situations in which employees show up late to a meeting or miss the meeting altogether.

Meeting science has strategies for addressing these sorts of within-meeting challenges that can and should be incorporated into an effective leadership development program. Additionally, such situations could be used as a basis for role play in leadership training, during which (future) leaders can try out, revise, and discuss communication strategies for dealing with such meeting challenges. Ideally, such training situations should be followed by real experiences in actual meetings, which can then be discussed again in a follow-up session.

*Implications for organizations more broadly*

What we have learned from meeting science research has organizational implications for both the physical design of meeting spaces as well as the policies and guidelines surrounding meetings per se. Studies consistently show that an appropriate physical meeting environment contributes significantly to meeting effectiveness and participant satisfaction. As noted, the right meeting "setup" includes, ensuring that the space has adequate seating, lighting, and other amenities (e.g., providing refreshments for longer meetings), and allowing for proper scheduling of the meeting. Ideally, meeting scheduling should also allow some time for pre-meeting conversation. Although mostly intuitive, the importance of pre-meeting talk in supporting good meeting outcomes has been underscored by recent findings in meeting science. Pre-meeting talk may include discussion of meeting-related, work-related, or purely socially oriented talk. It serves as a natural interpersonal transition from individual work to group interaction, and as such helps set the tone for the actual meeting.

Beyond structure and design, organizations may consider establishing formal policies that apply to all of their meetings. Recently some organizations have established times or even days when meetings are not allowed to be scheduled. Taking a step further, meeting science suggests that implementing a decision tree concerning when to call a meeting can be a good way to mitigate unnecessary meetings when the goal could easily be accomplished via other communication mechanisms (e.g., an email update). A decision tree is a series of yes/no questions that lead a meeting leader to decide whether a meeting is needed. For example, one question to include might be, “Does a decision need to be made that requires input from the entire team?”. Because each organization is different, the nature of the decision tree may vary across organizations, but the goal is to minimize waste (of time and other resources) and promote purposeful meetings.

Moreover, given what we have learned about the impact of meetings on broader issues beyond the context of the meeting itself, such as employees' overall attitude about their job, it could become an organizational best practice for regular feedback about employees’ experiences in meetings as well as their perceptions of meeting effectiveness to be obtained. Additionally, HR departments could build questions about meeting processes and effectiveness into regular employee opinion surveys. Meeting science can provide several established instruments for addressing this need.

Meeting leadership should ideally become a core curriculum point for leadership training and development programs. Consistent with known principles for effective training design, high fidelity simulations and role plays should be incorporated into the training process. Thus, meeting scenarios that are practiced by (future) leaders should be as realistic as possible, and should closely relate to their actual practice as meeting leaders later on. Furthermore, meeting procedures and practices should be incorporated in employee onboarding and in training initiatives for high potential employees, such that the value and importance of conducting effective meetings, and the techniques that enable leaders to run effective meetings, are communicated early on.

**Conclusion**

Inherent in all of the ideas for improving meeting leadership which we have highlighted here is the need for organizational leaders to bring resources to the problem of ineffective meetings. Taking the time to develop and implement training programs and feedback systems concerning meetings is not a cost-free endeavor. However, as the statistics at the beginning of this article suggest, ignoring the widespread problem of ineffective meetings is extremely costly. Beyond the direct costs, additional costs include opportunity costs, employee stress, fatigue, job dissatisfaction, and “meeting recovery syndrome”—time spent cooling off due to frustration and collective complaining after an unsatisfying meeting has ended. Meetings may be one of the most overlooked quality and efficiency improvement domains for organizational development.

Organizations can learn much from meeting science regarding the impact of meetings on the bottom line. Given the great amount of time and money that organizations spend on meetings and the powerful impact that meetings have on employees, decreasing ineffective and unneeded meetings should be a critical goal at all levels of the organization. Improving meeting effectiveness through the techniques discussed above is a major opportunity for improving the return on investment (ROI) more broadly.

**Selected bibliography**

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**Table 1: Evidence-based success factors before, during, and after organizational meetings**

| Pre-meeting factors (inputs) | Within-meeting factors (processes) | Post-meeting factors (outputs) |
|---|---|---|
| Meeting preparation and setup:<br>• Appropriate rooms and lighting; providing refreshments for face-to-face meetings<br>• Keeping the meeting as small as possible (while still inviting all relevant attendees)<br>• Planning to start and end on time<br>• Preparing a written agenda<br>• Setting clear, transparent goals for the meeting<br>• Allowing time for pre-meeting talk and socializing<br><br>Attendee characteristics:<br>• Only inviting necessary participants who are there for a clear purpose and have relevant expertise for the meeting<br>• Matching attendees and meeting content (e.g., sharing information that is relevant to attendees)<br><br>Leader characteristics:<br>• Training and developing meeting leadership | Meeting facilitation:<br>• Encouraging all participants to actively participate<br>• Making sure that all opinions are heard<br>• Focusing on solutions<br>• Consensus building<br>• Participative decision making<br>• Keeping track of time<br><br>Group dynamics:<br>• Building on each other's ideas and expressing positivity<br>• Avoiding negative spirals (e.g., complaining cycles)<br>• Building a positive group mood<br>• Information sharing<br>• Team learning<br><br>Meeting documentation:<br>• Keeping track of the agenda<br>• Taking meeting minutes<br>• Concrete action planning toward implementing ideas and completing tasks after the meeting | Proximal meeting outcomes:<br>• Consensus and decisions<br>• Team creativity<br>• Meeting satisfaction<br>• Meeting effectiveness<br><br>Distal meeting outcomes:<br>• Employee engagement<br>• Employee wellbeing<br>• Employee empowerment<br>• Team performance and productivity<br>• Organizational development and change |