

'We can't go on meeting like this'

People in organisations spend an inordinate amount of time in meetings. Teamwork requires discussion, but in this article, based on his latest book, *Mote: The Super Meeting*, David Wethey investigates why meetings are often frustrating, boring, unfocused and too long, and describes a method of improving their efficiency and productivity

WHAT IS the greatest challenge for business leaders? Profitability? No. Productivity? No. Sustainability? No. Communications? No. Diversity? No. Red tape? No. I'm talking about *The Meeting* – the dysfunctional and villainous consumer of people and time. It should be the pathway to decision making, the engine of progress, and the multiplier that translates individual talent into collective excellence.

Instead, meetings in most companies achieve little, demotivate participants and waste time and money – £50bn is the estimate of the cost to the UK economy of time squandered in meetings every year. That is more than the defence budget, and more than the central education budget.

How often do you hear anyone say 'I have just come out of a fantastic meeting'? People simply don't talk that way – largely because fantastic meetings are rarer than hens' teeth. Meetings get a really bad press, especially when you consider how much of our lives we spend in them. The title of the vintage Video Arts film *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* (originally made in 1976, with an updated version in 2012) says it all for most people.

It has been quite an experience for me working with so many famous companies

and agencies. I can scarcely believe it, but it covers 50 years and nearly 40 countries. I have learned so much, and met some incredible people. But have the meetings themselves been impressive? Generally speaking, they have not. The despairing call in the caption to the cartoon on the right would be a fair reflection not just of my long stint in the conference room chair, but of the vast majority of business people I have talked to and interviewed.

WHY DON'T MEETINGS WORK?

Too many meetings. Too many people around the table. Too many egos on display. Too little meeting technique – both from those leading meetings and those asked to attend them. There's also confusion about what is supposed to be going on. Are meetings to inform? To update? To lobby? To persuade? To discuss? To debate?

And those are just features of the old-fashioned face-to-face meeting, with everyone in one room. If they seem to work increasingly less efficiently, what price the ubiquitous conference call and telephone meeting? Nightmares for the most part. Dominant and persistent voices rule. Conference calls for the most part are all output, with everyone queuing up to speak. Any listening is passive



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and grudging. I feel that conference calls don't work well even as status updates. As a forum for decision making they are quite simply hopeless. Video conferencing and Skype work better, but usually seem to suffer from many of the defects of 'live' meetings.

Companies have poor meeting cultures, but people cause problems in meetings too. Overleaf is a hand-picked selection from the rogues' gallery of offenders – all to be found around a conference table near you.

But however frustrated we are by the number of meetings we have to go to, we don't spend too much time complaining about them. Most people seem to accept endless meetings as an unpleasant fact of life. A giveaway is the paucity of books, articles and papers on the subject. We usually click on 'accept' when the invitation hits our screen. Nor do we spend any time trying to find a better way of doing things – meetings have become a fact of life.

What is less well understood is the damage they do to the quality of our lives. Ask anyone, 'Are you busy?', and it's odds-on the reply will be 'Yes, very busy', with a furrowing of the brows.

No wonder – if you spend at least a third of your working day in meetings, it's highly probable that the only way you

can get your work done is to start early before the conference rooms fill up, work into the evening, and make up the slack at weekends. It is estimated that senior managers and executives spend 550 hours a year in meetings – nearly four complete working months!

Here are some observations I've made about the dynamics of dysfunctional meetings: questions that seemed obvious and in need of some speculative answers.

We know that time is money, but we very seldom stop to think about the costs of a meeting – much less how much meetings cost over a week, a month, or a year.

I strongly suspect that companies don't want to admit how much their commitment to the meeting culture costs them – let alone acknowledge the wear and tear on their best people. Behavioural scientists can give us numerous examples of selective denial, where people (particularly powerful people) say one thing and do another. In this instance, a leader can impose a draconian cost-cutting regime, and turn a blind eye to how much time and money is being squandered in largely unproductive meetings. Why? Probably because the company knows no other *modus operandi*. Meetings are supposed to be a management tool, but they turn into the

main driver of management activity.

Why do people keep accepting meeting invitations even though they have no faith in the meeting system?

There are several possible explanations, but fear is probably a big factor. There is FOMO (fear of missing out by not attending). But also fear of your boss objecting to your decision to decline his/her meeting.

People work in teams, but they don't take that team mentality into meetings. It tends to be everyone for him/herself.

Meetings have become combative, not collaborative. We could speculate that teamwork is a habit that you unconsciously break once you go into the meeting room. In other words, your meeting behaviour overrides your team behaviour. Let's examine this combative aspect in attempting to answer some related questions.

Why are some people more aggressive in meetings than on paper? And why do they behave worse in meetings than they do in the office or at home – for example, by overtalking and interrupting?

Same reason. We tend to compartmentalise our life into best behaviour (the default setting) and occasions when we are less controlled. In meetings, as when we are driving in heavy