# Evaluate Your Meetings' Effectiveness

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"Meetings, meetings, and more meetings! It seems that our only job anymore is to sit through meetings!" complained a member of my client's team. His complaint is not unique. Many of us are spending more time in meetings and less time "doing real work." Yet, the role of supervisors, middle managers, and executives in organizations that are flattening their structures and creating greater inclusion is increasingly that of a "coordinator" rather than a "producer" of goods or services. Without this *continuous* coordination, a flatter, horizontally integrated organization simply cannot function. Hence, coordination meetings *are* a major part of the job for many of us.

I usually try to determine the specific objection whenever someone complains about attending too many meetings. The answer is almost universal, "I hate meetings that waste my time!" Meeting leaders (those who convene the meeting) rarely intend to waste the time of their associates. Yet, the perception is all too common that most meetings are ineffective and a waste. Clearly, the perceived value of the return in attending meetings isn't worth the investment of time for many participants.

I suggest a simple, easy to administer evaluation tool to assist you as a meeting leader in improving the quality of your meetings whatever their size from small unit meetings, to more formal and larger customer meetings, all the way to board meetings. This tool will help you meetings be more productive to all who attend minimizing participant dissatisfaction with you as meeting leader.

## Why Measure Meeting Effectiveness?

Many years ago when I entered the work force as a young account executive in the corporate insurance industry, I worked on a small team for eighteen months handling our firm's largest account. During that time, I reported to a senior vice president who held periodic meetings with his immediate staff. Five of us would huddle in his conference room weekly and listen to him tick off the items he wished to cover on his agenda (which we never saw prior to the meeting, much less contributed to building). His habit was to discuss an issue that concerned him, identify the problem, and tell us his solution. Our job seemed to be to nod in agreement (whether or not we understood the issue). He regularly failed to designate *WHO* would be given responsibility for doing the tasks required of the solution. As a result, everyone walked away hoping our boss (or *anyone* else) would take responsibility to do the actual tasks. Therefore, tasks either remained undone or the lowest person in the unit hierarchy would be given the job at the last minute in a desperate move to avoid a group lecture from our boss at the next meeting.
Since there were no clear task assignments, responsibility and accountability were vague at best.

Of course, this was unfair to the lowest ranking among us. Tempers would inevitably flare. Low morale was always a problem.

The problems in our unit meetings were numerous and diverse to be sure including group resistance to the conduct of the meetings, our manager's inability to assign responsibilities and accountabilities, lack of results measurement, group collusion in our meeting's ineffectiveness, etc. However, if my boss had used a simple evaluation to measure the effectiveness of his meetings, meeting quality might have improved dramatically. Our unit's productivity would have also improved, thus building a sense of unit competence and, eventually, trust in each other as we achieved results.

Yet, my continued experience reveals that meeting leaders throughout business and government regularly replicate the mistakes of my old boss in their daily meetings.

## What to Measure

For groups to be effective over the long term, a complex series of human interactions must take place. Richard Hackman (<u>*Work Teams in Organization: An Orienting Framework*</u>; Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA) identifies three criteria for measuring group effectiveness:

- *… the degree to which the group's productive output meets the standards of quantity, quality, and timeliness of the people who receive, review, and/or use the output.*
- *… the degree to which the process of carrying out the work enhances the capability of members to work together interdependently in the future.*
- *… the degree to which the group experience contributes to the growth and personal well-being of team members.*

Group meetings frequently set the work environment in which groups succeed or fail. Group meetings provide the fertile ground where the group's norms are established and the group leader's style is on display. Group members assess the leader's style and plan their strategy in developing a relationship. However, for regularly scheduled meetings, there is a simpler method of gathering immediate feedback from the group. This immediate feedback begins the process of involving members in the conduct of their meetings, especially when they see some effort to implement their suggestions for future meetings. They know their feedback is seen as valid and their viewpoint valued. Incidentally, the group begins to set explicit meeting norms or rules-of-engagement. As the group defines its standards of acceptable meeting behavior, the group's overall effectiveness improves as meeting quality improves.

So, what information do you as the meeting leader wish to gather? How long should the evaluation format be to be effective? Should the feedback be gathered immediately at meeting's end, or should participants reflect on the meeting and send along their feedback at a later time?

## When to Evaluate

Generally, the sooner people fill out evaluations, the better. Memory of the meeting and their feelings about the meeting are fresh. Specifics can be recalled making the feedback more effective. Build time into the conclusion portion of the meeting agenda to fill out evaluations.

Invariably, when meetings run late, the evaluation is dropped from the agenda. This is a mistake. No matter what happens, take the time to offer the group the opportunity to comment on their experience in your meeting. If you ask people to comment the next day, you will diminish input by at least 50% as people move onto other areas of activity and can't get around to recalling your meeting.

## Evaluation Design

Meeting evaluations should meet several simple criteria:

- <u>*Keep evaluations short*</u>. Three or four questions invite thoughtful responses at the end of a meeting. Thirty questions invite less detailed feedback since they take so much time to complete.
- <u>*Encourage thoughtful responses*</u>. I find that open-ended questions such as, "What specifically, was most valuable to you in this meeting?" or, "What should the facilitator do more (or less) of?" invite honest, thoughtful opinions. Evaluations that use questions with a 1 – 6 scale provide limited feedback. Data resulting from scale questions *suggests* feelings of the group but fail to provide detailed information on which to base a change of the group's behavior. Even if the questions using a scale

are supplemented with open-ended, follow-on questions, the issue of the evaluation's length begins to diminish the quality of participant feedback.

- *Provide feedback on content* ***and*** *process*. Meetings are held to communicate the content of relative issues. However, they are most effective when they have a process that creates participant involvement.
  Questions such as, "How can we improve our meetings?" or, "What can we do differently at future meetings to improve their effectiveness for you?" get to these issues. Responses to these questions provide feedback on content *and* process issues.
- *Gather feedback about the group's effectiveness*. Questions such as, "How can we improve our teamwork?" or, "What can we do in our meetings to improve our communication?" or, "What can we do to build greater cohesion in our meetings?" provide valuable feedback about the group's process.
- *Allow all participants to surface their greatest area of concern*. Broadly worded questions allow each participant to provide feedback on whatever concerns they have about the group. For instance, "If you could wave a magic wand over our group and change it, what would be different?" or,
  "What two things do we need to pay more attention to?" allow participants to surface all matters of concern.
- *Vary the feedback your evaluation seeks from the group*. Ask different questions of different groups. Also, ask different questions from meeting-to-meeting of an intact group. One week you might ask questions about complex content issues, the next week you might inquire into the leadership issues the group uses in its meetings.
- *Feedback about the leader's behavior in meetings*. Meeting leaders tend to use meeting techniques they learned when they held lower positions of rank within the organization. As they gain prestige and relative power, those techniques that served them well earlier may have a negative impact on the group without the leader being aware of it. Leaders need to give permission to the group to offer feedback to the leader. Questions such as,
  "What should I do differently in future meetings to help us?" or, "What behaviors of mine get in the way of our meeting objectives?" are very powerful questions since they gather feedback critical to the leader's success. Further, they set the expectation with the group that feedback is a norm for all group members.

Gathering feedback takes courage on the part of meeting leaders and participants alike. Non-attributed, anonymous responses protect participants from retribution and work well in large groups but are impossible in smaller groups.
*Therefore, the group leader needs to tell the group—and mean every word—that there are no wrong answers*. This feedback is merely each individual's reaction to the meeting.

A common fear of meeting leaders is that the group may take the opportunity to criticize their best effort in running the meeting. In all but extreme cases, however, groups appreciate your soliciting their views on improving your meetings. Even in the rare event that the group's collective anger is so great that they use this evaluation to vent, isn't it better to know just how angry they are so you can take some effective action?

## What to do with the Feedback

Regardless of what they tell you in their evaluations, *feed the responses back to the group*. Let them know you read their comments and share with them your thoughts. There will be some superb suggestions that can be readily applied in your next meeting. There will also be some suggestions that are impossible. Tell them *why* a suggestion is impossible and offer alternatives, if possible. Your intent is to communicate the value you place on each of their perspectives. If the group is large, feeding the evaluation results back via email or memo can be an effective means of communicating the leader's *intent* to implement good ideas from the group.

### Case in Point

I conduct a workshop that trains assertive communication skills. I designed the training to work with those people who tend to remain silent in meetings or who withhold their important viewpoint in critical situations. It also is designed to work with those whose aggressive behavior has put them into career limiting positions due to their aggressive rather than assertive communication.

At the outset of the two-day workshop, I point out to the group that to illustrate use of these skills, I will offer my experiences in the business world and also within my social and family circles. I encourage them to share situations in which they find themselves so that they can apply the techniques being offered to those situations important to them. As you might expect, very few volunteer to share their situations.

At the end of the first day's training, I have the group fill out a four-question evaluation (designed specifically for the training session) that asks:

- What was <u>most</u> valuable for you today?
- What was of <u>little</u> or <u>no</u> value?
- What should Bob (in my role as trainer) do <u>*more*</u> of tomorrow?
- What should Bob do <u>*less*</u> of tomorrow?

The results are always scary for me to read but also interesting in their diversity. Different participants want and expect different things. At the very least, participants in *all* meetings each want and expect something slightly different. Invariably, one or more of the participants wants the trainer to use fewer examples from <u>*his*</u> experience and use more examples from <u>*their*</u> experience.

In sharing this feedback with the group on the morning of the second day of training, I explore with them just *where* I might learn of these experiences that are relevant *to them*. If they choose not to share their experiences, there is no way I can use them as illustrations. As a result, members of the group begin to clearly understand that the quality of their learning in this workshop is largely dependent upon their <u>*asserting*</u> (i.e., the point of the workshop) their relevant situations within the workshop. As a result, day two is always much more interactive and fruitful for the participants.

Without this feedback, the second day's training methods would be the same as the first day's thus frustrating some participants by failing to connect assertive techniques with their daily reality. Once participants share their day-to-day meeting experiences, and the assertive techniques are applied, they learn how to be assertive on the job. They also begin to see that projecting their voice into the workshop is critical to increasing their level of personal learning *and* feeling greater inclusion within the group. Once they *experience* this dynamic, they are able to see how this same projection of their voice into meetings will result in similar dynamics in meetings back on the job. Many leave the workshop feeling a sense of their personal power to impact their own working environment for the first time.

If the senior vice president from my insurance days had sought our group's feedback, our meeting quality would have dramatically improved over a short period of time. Unit members would have known that our opinions counted and we would also have received explanations for those ideas that would not have worked. Most importantly, the boss' meetings would have become *the group's* (<u>*including*</u> our boss) meetings. By including us in meeting design and execution, our entire working relationship with him would have changed. Our unit's subculture would have radically shifted. We would have taken greater responsibility for providing a better process and sharing thoughts in the meeting arena. Who knows what we could have eventually accomplished?