



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

BAD MEETING MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Meetings are a very important part of the management process in any company. The main objective of meetings is to get the people involved in a project or problem to meet, discuss and come up with solutions. It is as simple as that. However from informal surveys carried out with the participants in my training sessions, I gather that meetings are one of the most mismanaged of management functions in Malaysia. The complaints are usually focused on three items i.e.

- a. There are too many meetings.
- b. They take up too much time.
- c. They are not effective, i.e. a ball park figure of 50% is usually given.

The question therefore asked is, "Why are there so many meetings and why aren't they effective?" Thankfully, this is not only a Malaysian phenomenon, as it also exists in America. In a survey done by MCI, one of the leading telecommunications company in America, these were the following findings about meetings in Corporate America.

- a. Approximately 11 million meetings occur in the U.S. each day.
- b. Most professionals attend a total of 61.8 meetings per month and research indicates that over 50 percent of this meeting time is wasted. This comes to approximately four work days in a month.
- c. Most professionals who meet on a regular basis admit to daydreaming (91%).
- d. A large percentage (73%) say they bring other work to meetings and 39% say they have dozed during meetings.

I am most certain, that these statistics, although taken from America also mirrors the way meetings are held and viewed in Malaysia.

Reasons for Unproductive Meetings

I will define unproductive meetings as meetings that only partially achieve its objectives. As 50% of meetings fall under this category (from my informal survey), I will now try to state some of the reasons why this happens.

a. Routine Meetings

Routine meetings are one of the biggest culprits of non-productive meetings. How many of us walk off to the meeting room on a Monday morning because we have to attend this ritualized 'manager's meeting'. Sometimes we do not even know what is going to be discussed and sometimes we do not even care. Worse still, there is nothing serious to discuss, but since everyone is around, trivial matters are discussed to justify the forum, to the annoyance of many of the meeting participants. Once a meeting becomes a ritual, then there is always the danger that people will find 'something' to discuss.

b. Weak Chairman

Meetings which have an excellent agenda are sometimes led astray because of a weak chairman. How many times have I seen the following scenario taking place i.e. a decision is made at the first meeting after a long drawn out discussion. At the next meeting someone raises the issue again and the same discussion takes place one more time to the frustration of the meeting participants. Sometimes you just feel like telling someone to tape the original discussion and then just play it back at the next meeting!

Meetings also take a long time, because the chairman is not able to control the meeting well and allows some individuals who have 'verbal diarrhea' to dominate proceedings. From my experience, these individuals contribute a lot, but only in quantity but certainly not in terms of quality.

Another trait of a bad chairman is the fact that they are loathe to making decisions on their own but want to try to reach consensus. And as we are all aware, trying to decide on a simple matter like the date for a family day can be a torturous affair if consensus is required.

Habit

Another reason for unproductive meetings in Malaysian organizations is as a result of bad habits. For example, when something goes wrong at the Marketing dept, the usual temptation and habit is to call for a meeting of all department heads to 'get their views'. The Human Resource manager then goes for the meeting, stays quiet for three hours i.e. the duration of the meeting and then leaves without having made any contribution as he lacks comprehensive knowledge of the issue being discussed. He was there only because it was the requirement for all Heads of Departments to be there. And usually a meeting like this takes place with twelve participants but only three individuals do most of the talking as they are the experts. Wouldn't it have been better to just call these three people for the meeting?

Deviation from the Agenda

Due to lack of control, individuals try to bring up lots of other issues that have nothing to do with the original agenda. The discussions then deviate such that more emphasis is given to the side issues rather than the main item on the agenda. I have many a time been at meetings where the main objective for example, is aimed at discussing the format of a new performance appraisal system, but however degenerates and ends up discussing the need for extra car parks for employees! More time is spent on this issue as lots of personal interests come into play than the latter subject. A weak chairman does not help either.

Measures to Ensure Effective Meetings

Meetings, as we know are a very important part of an organization's management system. We are also aware however that there are too many meetings held and those that are held are to a large extent unproductive. There is also the cost factor to be taken into account during unproductive meetings. Firstly are the salary costs of every meeting participant. Meetings also keep people away from the tasks they were hired to perform i.e. tasks that make money for the company and keep the business more efficient and effective. Then there are the miscellaneous costs of bringing people to the meeting who are outstation or even overseas.

In addition to this financial cost, there is also the human cost such as poor morale, frustrated management, etc. This happens especially, when there is a culture of bad meetings in an organization. How then can we make meetings more productive? What are the measures that we can take to ensure meetings are able to achieve their objectives?

Is a meeting necessary?

One of the first things we must do before calling a meeting is to ask whether 'there is a need for a meeting in the first place.' Are you calling a meeting because it is an organizational ritual, or are you doing it because it really is necessary? Give a thought to the costs involved. Before making the decision make certain that the value you would receive would be greater than the investment in time and the interruption to work flow of the people involved in the meeting.

Ground Rules

Always have ground rules during meetings. These could be permanent features at meeting rooms. Cover such things as speaking rules; focusing on issues and not personalities; staying on the agenda etc. When people are aware of what is expected of them, they are much more likely to adhere to these rules and thereby contribute to a more productive meeting.

In Intel, for example, in all meeting rooms there is a poster with a series of simple questions such as “Do you know the purpose of this meeting”? “Do you have an agenda”? “Do you follow the rules for good minutes”?

These posters are a visual reminder of just how serious Intel is about productive meetings. In addition all employees of Intel are required to attend the company's in-house course on effective meetings. In fact, the CEO Andy Grove himself taught at these courses as he wanted good meeting management to be part of the culture of Intel.

The Agenda

I think one of the most important items before a meeting is to put some thought into the agenda. This step can make or break a meeting.

1. Outline agenda ahead of time. Outline ahead of time what is the objective of the meeting and points that will be covered. Write it out, and distribute it to participants ahead of time. This will help participants to be more prepared for the meeting. No one can say they did not know.
2. Agendas should be strictly adhered to. This might sound very basic, but is definitely a problem in the Malaysian context. People tend to use the meeting forum to bring up issues that they have a personal interest in and the Chairman must use the agenda as an excuse to prevent this from happening.
3. Limit the Agenda to Three Points or Less: Ask yourself, "What are the three most important things we need to cover in the meeting?" Limit the agenda to just these three points. Trying to solve all of the company's problems in one meeting is a definite route to disaster.

Set a Time Limit

Time limits are important as it creates pressure on the chairman and the members of the meeting to have quality discussions. One reason meetings drag on is that people don't appreciate how expensive they are. The time limits set must be realistic and in congruence with the objectives of the meeting.

Many management gurus' invoke the rule that meetings should last no longer than 90 minutes.

Get the right people

How many times have I seen people coming for meetings who are not sure why they are there in the first place? It is better to have a meeting with three people who can contribute rather than 20 people who are there for the sake of being there.

Conclusion

Bad meetings are probably one of the most pervasive yet underestimated problem in Malaysian organizations. The saying "If I don't have to go to meetings, I'd like my job a lot more" is definitely something that many Malaysian managers hold dear to their heart. On the other hand, good meetings can be a very powerful way to communicate and solve organizational problems. Managers must realize that it is a necessary management tool and what they have to do is to be able to use that tool as effectively as possible so as to create a positive impact on organizational effectiveness and efficiency.