

'we spend way too much

time in meetings': Liberate resources by running meetings more effectively



by marc levy

Meetings are too long. The right people aren't in the room. More people are invited to attend than necessary. There is no agenda. Roles are unclear and there is no moderator of the discussion. Outcomes are opaque. The minutes or actions arising are distributed too late. Actions don't get followed up.

Right thinking

- Ineffective meetings are a source of pain for many organisations
- By applying '5 P's' to every meeting, organisations can increase the effectiveness of their interactions
- Successful organisations use meetings to get real work done together, not as a distraction from their real work

The title of this article is a refrain we frequently hear from our clients. Meetings are too long. The right people aren't in the room. More people are invited to attend than necessary. There is no agenda. Roles are unclear and there is no moderator of the discussion. Outcomes are opaque. The minutes or actions arising are distributed too late. Actions don't get followed up.

Having facilitated 500 executive teams and board offsites, we are practiced at meetings. And while our consulting work is typically in strategy and planning, quant marketing projects, and organisation and alignment, we've found that clients are increasingly looking to us for help to improve the effectiveness of their meetings.

In a tight budgetary climate, when it can be challenging to have executive teams and boards approve new headcount, freeing up capacity to get more done, or new things done, is vital – as is, of course, initiative prioritisation and resource allocation effectiveness, topics canvassed in previous editions of Right Lane Review.

Meeting effectiveness projects can have a very high efficiency dividend. One of our senior clients estimates that he spends 60-80% of his working day in meetings and that 30% of that time is wasted. Improving meeting effectiveness can liberate between 50 and 100 hours per week of top team time, and many hundreds of hours for the CEO+2, or all officers, group.

We help clients improve their meeting effectiveness by: observing their meetings, recommending new policies and practices, training their people in the new approach, and observing, and further embedding the required changes. We do diary analysis at the start and end of the projects to quantify the potential savings.

One practice that we frequently recommend relates to 'the Ps' of meeting effectiveness. There are various lists of between five and eight Ps (see, for example, Schuman 2005). Different lists work in different contexts. Our own Right Lane five Ps are: purpose, product, perspective, people and process. We expect meetings to have an agreed purpose, a clear process and end product, and so on. In consulting we want our people, particularly our analysts and junior consultants, to have a perspective. Participants in our meetings are expected to have a view on the issues to be raised in the meeting and to 'get in the game', which means be heard and have an impact in meetings.

One of our most successful clients spends a high proportion of their time in meetings, and they have a different attitude to this investment in time than many of our other clients. They get 'real work done together' in meetings; they don't see meetings as a distraction from their real work or what they have to get done. There are several reasons for this, but one of the most important is that their meetings are well run and the usual frustrations that accompany meetings are largely absent.

Let's fix meetings so that they can be the powerful site of action and collaboration that they should be.

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The 5 P's ...

1. PURPOSE	Why are we having this meeting?	To develop an approach to completing this year's business plan.
2. PRODUCT	What do we want to get out of it?	A clear timeline and next steps in the process.
3. PERSPECTIVE	How should we best gather the input of those present and those unable to attend?	Have everyone express their views to a consistent format. Require a consultative process for interested stakeholders.
4. PEOPLE	Who should be in the room and what roles should they play?	Project team members and executive leaders. Facilitated by project manager.
5. PROCESS	What is our agenda? How will we have the conversation?	Welcome and introduction, complete project on a page, confirm key milestones.

Reference

Schuman, S (ed) 2005, *The IAF handbook of group facilitation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

want to know more?

If you would like Right Lane to help you run your meetings more effectively, contact **Marc Levy**:

marc@rightlane.com.au