

Meetings: There Is More Going on Than Meets the Eye

By Richard H. Axelrod

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When it comes to effective organizational change, meetings are the crucial component. Over the course of any change process there is a myriad of meetings, ranging in size from 2 to 20 to 2000. It is during these meetings that decisions are made, plans and strategies are developed, and (most importantly) people decide whether they want to engage in acting to meet the organization's objectives.

When individuals meet there is the possibility of people joining in; however, there is also the possibility of people sitting on their hands. There is the opportunity for active participation and energy - or active resistance and sabotage. Outcomes of meetings are influenced by the social and physical architecture of the meeting. The social architecture deals with the quality of these interactions, while the physical architecture influences mood, spirit and our ability to interact. It is the quality of the meeting - of the experience - that determines whether or not people will leave the meeting with optimism and a genuine desire to make something happen.

The three biggest complaints people have about meetings are that:

1. They are boring;
2. There are too many of them; and
3. They produce disappointing results (e.g. all talk, little or no actions).

As you have probably experienced, when meetings are not working, people:

- ◆ Come to meetings late;
- ◆ Avoid meetings entirely;
- ◆ Leave the meeting physically or mentally exhausted;
- ◆ Do other work during the meeting; and/or
- ◆ Make arrangements to get called out of the meeting.

The answer to reducing "painful" meetings is not to shorten the meeting, meet less frequently, or cease to meet altogether; rather, the answer is to put "wheels" on meetings - the way we went and put wheels on luggage. Putting wheels on luggage revolutionized an old product; suddenly we are able to carry more and heavier luggage - faster with greater ease. Engagement does the same thing for meetings, helping us to conduct the organization's work faster and with less effort. When it comes to organizational change, you can either "lug" the change process around or you can put wheels on the change process and make it go both smoother and faster.

By thinking about meetings in a different way, we are able to put in-line skate wheels on change processes. We should not only pay attention to the normal issues like clarity of purpose, effective decision-making processes, and clear agendas. In order to make engagement front-and-center we should also:

- ◆ Create opportunities for people to understand both the opportunities and the dangers our companies face by allowing employees to discuss the issues with our organizational leaders and each other in stimulating forums.
- ◆ Foster broad participation to quickly identify problems and solutions by asking the questions: Who needs to be here? Who has information, authority, and responsibility? Who might be impacted by our decisions? Who thinks differently or might be opposed to what we are discussing?

- ◆ Spark innovative and creative thinking by encouraging different points of view, encouraging curiosity, and engaging the whole person through sight, sound and movement.
- ◆ Encourage collaboration, making sure that people are connected to each other and to the issues by asking the question: What do we want to change as a result of our work together - for the organization, our group, ourselves?
- ◆ Create Communities for Action by co-creating the future together. In doing so we respect the diversity of thought and opinion present as we make sure that everyone's voice counts.
- ◆ Practicing Democratic principles by making sure that meetings are conducted with a sense of equity and fairness, that there is transparent information and decision-making, and that people have the freedom and autonomy to take actions on the agreements reached.

Additionally, the physical environments in which meetings take place influence the culture and social architecture of these interactions. Long, rectangular tables emphasize hierarchy and maintain distance while round tables support interaction and dialogue. Adequate wall space supports making things visible while lighting and acoustics influence human interaction.

Engaging meetings produce results: change happens, commitments are made, and actions are taken. The organization's capacity for change is increased as people learn a process for working together that is not only repeatable but is adaptable to new and changing conditions.

In these meetings, people come early and stay late because we are engaged in what is going on. Creativity is increased because each of us, as a whole person, is fully engaged. Collaboration across organizational boundaries increases as a result of the personal connections we are making and good will that we are developing. A whole-system orientation moves ahead of self-interest as we come to understand the whole system, consequently making decisions that are in the interest of the common good.

Putting the in-line skate wheels of engagement on your organization's meetings allows you do more faster, easier, and with more fun.

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