

Chapter 1

The Business Case for Better Meetings and Workshops

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Reviewing why people hate meetings
 - ▶ Recognising when people get a lot from their workshops
 - ▶ Understanding meetings and workshops: similarities and differences
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Everything important that you'll ever do at work involves other people. Even if a large chunk of your working day is solitary, at some point, colleagues, contacts, critics or clients come into the equation. They check in with you or you with them because everyone wants to be clear about who's on track, who needs help, or who's made fantastic progress. But doing this one person at a time is inefficient.

So you have a meeting.

In most of our organisations and certainly those where interesting knowledge-work is being done, complexity is the order of the day. What we all do has become more specialised, more process-oriented and more project-driven. This means lots of complex problem-solving and continuous learning as everyone pulls together to meet deadlines, respond to changing environments and maximise both performance and productivity. You simply cannot do this one person at a time.

So you get together for a workshop.

When you leave a meeting or a workshop having done really great work in a group, you'll feel buzzed and motivated. But the problem is that many meetings achieve just the opposite: Participants walk out deflated, de-energised and sometimes desperate. This chapter outlines the reasons for those negative feelings and then points you in the right direction for fixing them.

Reviewing Why People Hate Meetings

If you don't enjoy your meetings, you're part of a very large worldwide club. Many people feel the same as you. But here's the strange thing: Even when you hate your meetings, when you emerge feeling frustrated and furious, you still brace yourself and trudge off to attend the next one. Then you schedule yet more.

Too many of us are on meeting treadmills believing that poor meetings are a necessary evil of business life. We go to them because we feel we have to; we go to them to be seen. But we don't enjoy them because they suck. They're poorly planned, badly run and add zero value.

And we all sit quietly back colluding while colleagues make it much worse when they fail on the preparation front. The result is that because nothing much gets done, more and more participants behave badly, but no one ever puts it right.

So what needs changing?

Being clear about what everyone dislikes

To clarify what people dislike most about their meetings, we decided to run a small research project. We asked a class of 80 executive MBA students doing a part-time degree what their top reasons for disliking meetings were. Then we collated the most repeated themes and put them into a questionnaire.

We ran that questionnaire online and face-to-face in Kenya, Singapore, South Africa, The Netherlands and the UK. In the end, we had 675 answers from 28 different nationalities, all of whom were running teams. Some were supervisors, and others were senior managers. Table 1-1 lists the top seven reasons they gave for disliking their meetings.

Table 1-1 Top Seven Reasons People Hate Their Meetings	
<i>I Dislike Meetings Because . . .</i>	<i>Percentage of Answers</i>
They are poorly structured	21
They go off-topic	18
They are too long	17
There isn't an agenda	16
Others don't prepare	16
The presentations are boring	6
We don't do feedback	6

Poorly structured

This item is a travesty. It takes about five to ten minutes tops to create a decent structure to a meeting; it's not a lot of hard work. All it involves is knowing the items you want to deal with and putting them into some kind of sensible order without leaving the toughest subject to last.

That this appears at the top of the list shows you that meeting leaders aren't bothering to do even a tiny amount of thinking before getting into a room. If they don't, why should anyone else? (See Chapter 2 for how to design a great agenda.)

Go off-topic

What this implies is that meeting management skills are poor and that people running meetings can't steer productive participation. What we see in practice is that the chair or manager of a meeting often gets caught up in the conversation. So they are talking rather than thinking about what's happening and how to keep it all on track. (Read Chapter 4 for the skills it takes to keep a meeting on track.)

Too long

We all work with people we love and sometimes with those we love to hate because my, how they talk. Many meeting leaders and participants don't bother to think before they speak and develop their thoughts out loud. Listening to a windbag isn't fun, and Occam's razor needs to shave everything every time. (Occam was a 14-century monk who said, 'Entities should not be unnecessarily multiplied,' meaning 'keep it short and simple'.)

In other words, running last week's meeting and dragging in any new subject isn't helpful. And if you fail to close down irrelevant conversations, you simply prolong the agony. (Chapters 5 and 6 help you get this right.)

No agenda

Every meeting you walk into should have an agenda that considers the best use of time, energy and attention. If you don't have an agenda, any subject's on the table and that approach is absolutely off the menu.

Of course, sometimes it's hard to be that planned, but you can still take the first five minutes of a meeting to make and agree on an agenda and good outcomes. (Chapter 7 helps you manage a lot of the things that can derail a meeting, so you can stick to your agenda.)

Others don't prepare

We're sure that you spend a lot of time getting ready (we're optimistic here) while others don't. They haven't read their documents, have failed to investigate the information they said they would and have not completed their part of the bargain.

If that's a regular occurrence, what norms have been set up? What have you all agreed to? This suggests that there's some meeting governance that needs readjusting and the simplest way to tackle this is with ground rules. Chapter 7 deals with troubleshooting, while Chapter 8 helps you reflect on the meetings you run, what works and what could be better.

Presentations are boring

Yup, we're with you there. Participants who prepare slide-decks in font size 10 and then read every single thing to you in a monotone are the end. At best, you check email or drift off; at worst, you plan idle revenge. Any way you look at it, you're not participating.

The solution? Video them and make them watch it and working through. (Chapter 9 helps you manage that.)

No feedback

Once you’ve sat through a dull and dreary meeting, lots of you gather up your belongings and leave without addressing the elephant in the room. But without feedback, you are condemned to repeating the cycle over and over. Just knowing that you’re doing nothing to tackle the situation is morale-crushing and doesn’t make you feel good about returning to the next meeting with the same participants. (You can get insights about reviewing face-to-face and remote meetings in Chapters 6 and 12 respectively.)

Recognising how many meetings are unproductive

It’s clear that meetings the world over waste time and reduce productivity. Because we strongly suspected that, when we designed our survey we asked people what percentage of their meetings were productive, neither productive nor unproductive or just unproductive.

Table 1-2 shows you what we found.

Table 1-2 Percentage of Time in Productive and Unproductive Meetings	
<i>Perception</i>	<i>Percentage of Time</i>
Productive meetings	39
Neither productive nor unproductive	31
Unproductive meetings	30

At least most people are going to meetings that are more productive than unproductive, which is good news.

But these numbers get more interesting when you start asking everyone what percentage of their week everyone spends in meetings.

When we averaged out the amount of time these 675 respondents spent in meetings, it came to 34 per cent of their working weeks. By the way, that ranged from a tiny 10 per cent up to a stonking 90 per cent.

Let’s make an assumption about the data. Assume that most people average a 40-hour working week (and there’s bags of evidence including lots we’ve got that this is the case). That means your average professional is spending about 13.5 hours in meetings every week. Of those meetings, 30 per cent of them are unproductive. That means four hours a week, or 10 per cent of their regular working life, is wasted. Over a year, that adds up to a horrendous five weeks, if you assume a 48-week working year.

Now factor in meetings, which are a bit ‘meh’ because they are neither productive nor unproductive. They give you *another* five weeks: so all in all, we’ve got ten weeks a year, or 2.5 months of work. Per professional.

Think what an incredible difference that would make in your organisation if you could just make the majority of your meetings efficient and effective. The cost of all this lost productivity is ferocious.

Working out the incredible costs of poor meetings

The cost obviously varies depending on what you earn and where you’re based. But Table 1-3 lists the cost of wasted time based on a national average salary in the UK and United States.

Table 1-3		Cost of Wasted Time		
Country	Salary*	5 weeks	10 weeks	
UK average employee	£26,500	£2,548	£5,096	
UK frontline manager	£35,300	£3,394	£6,788	
USA average employee	\$40,500	\$3,894	\$7,788	
USA frontline manager	\$49,300	\$4,740	\$9,480	

** Based on data from the ONS, National Management Survey, Chartered Management Institute, US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013*

If this is the cost for one person, imagine what the totals are for a group of six senior people sitting together, even if they only waste ten minutes.

If you want to start tracking your meetings precisely – and we recommend you do that – there are plenty of meeting apps to help you. All you need to do is enter your salary and start your meeting.

But it's not just the cash that matters. There are consequences in plenty of other areas, too.

Understanding the ripple effect

When meetings are suboptimal, then it's not just the financial cost of time lost in that meeting. There are other effects that ripple out from there, causing yet more damage:

- ✔ **Relationship costs:** When people get together in a room and their expectations aren't met, they feel incredulous, cheated, frustrated, angry or lethargic – in any combination. And when someone experiences these negative emotions about someone else, trust decreases. In a working relationship that suffers from low trust, there's less effort and input. After all, if I can't make something happen for you, why should you go over and beyond for me?
- ✔ **Reputational costs:** You know what it's like. You come out of a poor meeting, and someone who knows the meeting leader asks you how it was, and you roll your eyes or sigh. That person then commiserates with you before finding the next person to gossip with. Bad meetings with ineffectual leaders are the grist of others' gossip mills. After all, you own my reputation, even if I manufactured it.

Knowing what everyone wants from their meetings

We asked everyone who completed the questionnaire what they wanted from their meetings. Figure 1-1 shows a word cloud of what they said. The larger the word, the more people said it.

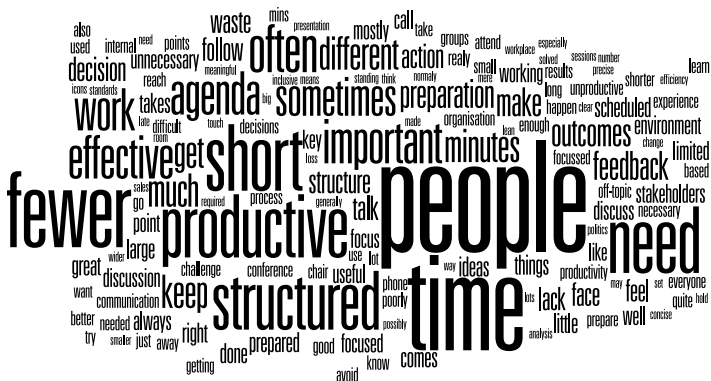


Figure 1-1: What people want from their meetings.

Pretty obvious, isn't it? But the great news is that all of this isn't rocket science. You're not born good or bad at running meetings; it's something you learn by recognising what works, testing what you like, tweaking what you do and trying again. Everything you need to succeed is outlined in this book.

But what about workshops?

Recognising When People Get a Lot from Their Workshops

Workshops are less problematic than meetings because most people recognise the investment they involve and therefore work harder to get them right. Plus, an executive sponsor means scrutiny, and no one wants to explain to someone senior how they just wasted \$50,000. It's not a comfortable conversation to have.

Having mined our in-house data from the 1,300 workshops that we ran in 2013, it's clear that they involve two fundamental dimensions:

- ✓ Doing a great design
- ✓ Delivering brilliantly

Developing a great design

Getting the development right includes four massive must-haves:

- ✓ **Building appropriate content:** Participants want to know that what they are doing is relevant and will help them achieve the outcomes that meet their individual and group expectations. They want to get results.
- ✓ **Creating a tightly structured, logical process:** Items need to make sense to everyone, and they need to flow from and build on each other.
- ✓ **Planning realistic timings:** No one likes feeling rushed in what they do or that they haven't had long enough to do something properly. Nor do they like it when the pace feels slow.
- ✓ **Ensuring active participation:** You want two- or three-way conversation between the workshop leader, group and group members.

You can get all of this and more in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Delivering brilliantly

Participants want a workshop that's led by someone who

- ✓ **Is an expert in the process or content:** That way, participants feel they are in good hands and secure in what they are doing.
- ✓ **Stays calm under pressure:** This workshop leader can deal with any hiccups and can adapt when necessary.
- ✓ **Recognises what's happening in the room:** This workshop leader is attuned to energy and engagement.
- ✓ **Enjoys the process:** If the workshop leader enjoys it, so will everyone else.

Chapters 6, 7, 9 and 11 can help you with these, while Chapter 12 gives you great hints and tips for working with remote groups.

Understanding Meetings and Workshops

On face value, who cares whether you're having a meeting or attending a workshop? It's just a group of people talking in a room. But actually it does matter.

If you should have had a meeting but you planned for a workshop, you'll have done a lot of redundant work. And if you are having a meeting that should have been a workshop, you'll get a lot of complaints from participants because you won't use their time well. So it's worth looking at the similarities and differences between them both.

Recognising the similarities

Workshops and meetings have these attributes in common:

- ✓ **An agreed purpose**, so you all know why you are there.
- ✓ **Outcomes**, so you know what you want to achieve.
- ✓ **Input**, so you have shared information that builds alignment and understanding.
- ✓ **A process**, so you know how you are getting from A to B.
- ✓ **A leader** who is there to help make all of these things happen.
- ✓ **Enough preparation**, so everyone can make a valid contribution.
- ✓ **Ground rules**, so everyone knows the rules of engagement.
- ✓ **Interactive activities** that take advantage of everyone's skills, knowledge and expertise.

But meetings and workshops have some differences, too.

Checklist questions for running a workshop

You should run a workshop if you can answer yes to three or more questions from this list:

- ✓ Do we have sponsors or stakeholders with an interest in the problem we are trying to solve or issue we want to fix?
- ✓ Is this the kick-off of an important strategic initiative?
- ✓ Do we need budget sign-off to get together?
- ✓ Would this be best run by an expert?
- ✓ Will our session last more than half a day?
- ✓ Will the discussions get heated or result in conflict?
- ✓ Will the cost of doing nothing be worse and more expensive pain in the future?

Understanding the differences

There are important differences between meetings and workshops, and you need to recognise them so you plan and prepare the right event.

You have a meeting when you

- ✓ Want to do business as usual
- ✓ Need to get everyone around a table to solve a one-off situation
- ✓ Ensure that glitches are solved by everyone involved
- ✓ Need to discuss and decide things as a group
- ✓ Want to re-clarify or ensure agreement and alignment around existing issues or ongoing projects

You have a workshop when you

- ✓ Have a sponsor with a vested interest in the outcome of this particular session
- ✓ Have to initiate a new project or process

- ✓ Have complex problems or issues to solve that you want everyone to buy-into and work on in some detail
- ✓ Want to learn something new or update your skills
- ✓ Recognise that you need an expert in process or content to lead the session

In short, meetings involve the daily doo-doo; workshops don't.



Meetings are more run-of-the-mill, and workshops require much more effort. It's impossible to wing a workshop without courting absolute catastrophe; it's entirely possible to breeze unprepared into a meeting – which is a huge part of the problem.

One more thing

There's one special get-together we haven't yet mentioned – we're referring to focus groups. We've added a special chapter for you on focus groups because they are becoming more and more common and require some special attention.

You run a focus group when you want to

- ✓ Find out what certain groups of people think
- ✓ Get feedback on new ideas or products
- ✓ Gather in-depth qualitative information quickly
- ✓ Benefit repeatedly from group-work

Well-structured and well-run focus groups are always more than the sum of their parts, and Chapter 10 helps you achieve that from the get-go.