

Too Many Meetings

Almost every insurance company we work with complains about having meetings that waste everyone's time and the company's money. Over the years we've seen various solutions that were supposed to fix this problem. They include ideas that range from . . .

- mandating maximum times for meetings – for example, “No meeting shall exceed 30 minutes”,
- to removing chairs in conference rooms -- the theory is that people will become uncomfortable and therefore shorten the meeting time,
- to providing every employee with something that looked like a credit card but contained their annual salary in the encoding strip. At the start of each meeting, everyone swiped their card into a machine in the conference room. It showed, in big numbers, the dollar cost of the meeting as it progressed. In theory, everyone would recognize the costs being incurred and would shorten the meeting.

As you might expect, none of these ideas work. The reason is that wasted time in meetings is almost always a symptom or result of other, more fundamental, problems. To make meetings more effective and worth their cost, you need to make changes that will cause people to want to attend meetings only when they are worthwhile. How do you do this? In consultant jargon, you need to do a “root cause” analysis, a discovery and analytical process that gets to the real reasons and causes of problems.

Following is a summary of a root cause analysis we did for the CEO of an insurance company who had a problem with meetings. It demonstrates the power of this analytical approach. It not only helped with his meeting problem, we discovered and repaired some fundamental flaws in our client's culture and environment.

The first thing we did was to ask the people who attended these meetings why they felt the meetings were important. This may sound overly simple but we have found that asking people to describe what is going on and what is working and not working is always a good place to start. Employees may not always know the best solution to fix their problems but they always know what the problem is.

Here is what we found. Basically, people attended meetings because they felt they needed to or they were afraid not to. Here are some specific comments that will give you a flavor of what we heard . . .

- “I have to be aware of what's going on in the company. Attending meetings is the main way I learn about new developments.”
- “I use meetings to let others know what we are doing in our department. It's a way of making sure everyone appreciates us and also a way of making sure we are involved in new things.”
- “As new ideas are presented and evaluated I need to be at the meeting so I can protect my department's interests and be involved early before bad ideas get any traction.”
- “Attending meetings is an excellent way of being seen and recognized. I have a lot of ideas. Meetings provide the format for impressing both senior executives and peers.”
- “My peers attend the same meetings I attend. If I'm not there, they'll wonder why.”
- “Attending meetings is what I do. I have my department functioning independently. They don't need me to watch them all the time so I attend meetings.”
- “Attending meetings is a nice way to spend time. You can coast and get your thoughts together for later when you do something important.”

There were more comments, but this gives us enough to work with. Let's summarize what we found.

1. Meetings were fulfilling an important career and social need for the attendees. They provided an important opportunity for a person to be noticed and appreciated. How a person performed at them could help his or her career. The consensus was that managers and key technical people needed to attend the meetings. They couldn't afford not to.
2. Attending meetings was an important way to stay in touch with what was happening and what was being planned. Managers needed to attend meetings to protect their interests and to influence decisions. Other communication vehicles were not as effective or as reliable.
3. Some people saw attending meetings as a perk or recognition of their status. They knew the meetings created little value but that was not the point. They were a social reward for past work. This was especially interesting because many of these same people tended not to spend a lot of time managing their departments or monitoring results. They were coasting.

As you can see, no amount of pressure or clever gimmicks would have an impact on reducing the amount of time spent in meetings in this company. They fulfilled important needs. The solution, of course, was to fulfill these needs in other ways that would be more beneficial to both the participants and the company. Here is what we did.

First, we recognized that meetings were not all bad. We just wanted to eliminate the bad meetings. So, the solution was to create an environment where people only wanted to attend meetings that were worthwhile.

Next, we looked at their organization structure. We were interested in identifying situations where units and departments were organized in ways where managers had little to do. Sure enough, we found areas where the spans of control were very narrow, where "assistant" positions had been created to do work normally done by a manager and where units had outlived their original usefulness. Fixing these situations went a long way to correcting situations where managers had gone into unofficial retirement. It also lowered costs and increased overall effectiveness of these areas.

Then we looked at unit and departmental accountabilities. Managers should focus on accomplishing the critical goals for their areas of responsibility, not make political and other "points" in meetings. But this wasn't happening because there were no clear, quantified goals. The company had nine core success measures (using a balanced scorecard approach) for the company itself but they never continued this effort down to the department and unit level. The result was that managers did not have clear, specific accountabilities. Creating new core success measures at the department and unit level gave managers and key technical and professional employees a new focus and a new and better way of getting the recognition they needed and deserved.

This created a major shift in what middle managers focused on and how they spent their time. It also created a new desire to obtain management tools that would help them succeed. These were things like creating expense allowable formulas so expenses could track work volumes instead of obsolete budget decisions and introducing interactive computer staffing models. They are even considering introducing a Gainsharing incentive compensation plan to help create an ownership culture.

As I mentioned, this is a powerful tool. It had a fundamental impact on this client.

If you would like to discuss any of these concepts, please call me or send an Email. Also please visit our web sight at McDonaldConsultingGroup.com. You'll find further explanations of these ideas in our Concepts and Ideas section.