

Meeting leadership in the future

We are becoming experts at wasting each other's time. In many of our meetings, we sit on poles like stooping coffee addicts. What needs to happen for necessary meetings to become the day's high point? And what is good meeting leadership?

By Bo Krüger

The speed and complexity of our society is becoming greater. We go to more and more meetings to keep control of everything. Meetings are the glue that hold all the loose ends together. For many managers and employees, more than 10 meetings a week are not uncommon.

Unfortunately, we are generally dissatisfied with the quality of the meetings. They are too long, too boring and too ineffective. In other words, we are becoming experts at wasting one another's time. A research project conducted by Learning Lab Denmark in 2004-2006 shows that even in successful Danish companies, employees feel 21% of their time in meetings is wasted. And that is not counting the time in meetings that is not wasted but is anyway unsatisfactory.

The industrial meeting form is on the way out

One explanation for poor meetings is that we still hold meetings as if we still lived in an industrial society. Our meetings are standardized and alike. Almost all take place around a table in a white room, with coffee cups in hand. We still treat knowledge like a commodity. We aim to mass produce it as cheaply as possible and distributed to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. But knowledge is not a commodity to be consumed quickly. Knowledge is anchored best and most quickly in the brain's neural network when we have time to chew on it and develop it further. Therefore, knowledge is created and passed on in meetings best if we are involved with our mind, body and feelings.

Innovation in meeting culture has been at a standstill for decades. We broadcast on the same channel every time we go to a meeting. It recalls the days when there was only one television station, run by the state. A living hell for all of us that like to see news or American sitcoms on a Saturday evening. Complex people in a complex society need to be able to communicate in many different ways depending on the meeting's participants and goal. A budget meeting in a bank should be far different than a concept development meeting in a manufacturing plant.

Luckily, the meeting culture is in flux. More and more companies are furnishing alternative meeting rooms with tall café tables, walls that can be written on, and Mozart as background music, in acknowledgement of the fact that the room's physical boundaries help give direction to thoughts.

Future surfing

In short: today's managers face a massive challenge. We will continue to go to more and more meetings, but how do we make them better and more effective? Meetings have the potential to be the high point of the working day. They include all the elements that normally are present to create a life-confirming experience: to meet with good colleagues, to make important decisions, to create something with others, and have a break from other or more trivial tasks. Fortunately for us, a number of trends give us the chance to create world-class meetings.

We often delay and hinder innovation and decision processes, because we stretch them over a very long time and split them into many linear sub-processes. For example, management meets to come up with ideas for a new business strategy, which is thereafter presented to employees, and finally to customers. Customers and employees dislike the new business strategy, so management must meet again to change course. Each sub-process leads to wasted time and a risk that important information is lost along the way.

If we could hold meetings where management, employees, customers and other shareholders were available at the same time, we could avoid a lot of trouble and greatly accelerate the innovation process. If everyone from developers to customers were available at the right time, all could synchronously contribute their knowledge and instantly decide if the solution will work.

Open Space and *Instant Innovation* are two recent meeting concepts that try to short-circuit the value chain. Both concepts aim to gather all interests in the same place in an intense, partly self-organized process. The single meeting requires many resources, since it requires many participants as a rule. On the other hand, it is unnecessary to meet many times, which is illustrated by the motto *Instant Innovation*: innovation in half the time, with double the fun.

Flow-zones

One of management's big challenges is how to create conditions for creative concentration in a busy day filled with email, mobile phones, deadlines and distracting open-plan offices. Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, of Claremont Graduate University, has shown we perform best and most creatively when we can achieve a state of focused attention he calls *flow*. A state many of us know from hobbies such as *working in the garden*, a *great computer game* or a *great book*. When we are in flow, we are absorbed by the assignment and forget everything about time and place. We give it everything we have, and then some, and describe it later as a fantastic, satisfying experience. If we can get into the *flow*, every time we have meetings, we would all ask for more meetings, not fewer. But it is not like that. That is because the ordinary meeting does not meet the conditions for flow: a challenging task, constant feedback and strong focus. The last, especially is hard to achieve when the phone rings and the meeting is held in a fishbowl all can see into.

In the future, we will see *flow-zones* and *offline-spaces* that are hermetically sealed from outside distractions. One department in Novo Nordisk, a pharmaceuticals maker, found it could multiply case-handling speeds by creating a case-handling room without email or telephones. For the same reason, off-site meetings are popular today. But why not pull the plug for even longer? Conduct concentrated meetings in an Alpine chalet or on a boat out in the bay? Exciting and differently furnished meeting rooms with soft music and soft colors that bring the mind down into the *flow-state's* alpha-wavelengths are also effective.

Our working life is almost empty of physical activity. Soon, the only movement we will have on the job is when we turn on the multimedia center and reach for a cookie. Corporate healthcare and fitness plans often have little effect since our busy day does not permit an hour in the gym. Physical activity is hardly increased when it is not integrated as part of the daily routine. A good place to think about the body is when we hold meetings. In addition to helping prevent smile wrinkles from turning into double chins, physical activity at meetings can create more dynamic meetings where we more easily come into flow and can concentrate longer. This writer is working on a project with *Arbejdsmiljø København*, aimed at increasing the amount of physical activity in meetings held in the offices of the Municipality of Copenhagen. Examples are energizers (short fun exercises that create grins and focus) and physical moves during the meeting (from table to whiteboard, standing, lying down and walking).

Belly and heart on the speaker's list

In his book, *Hjernerum - Den følelsesfulde hjerne*, Danish neuroscientist Morten Kringelbach writes about the breakdown of rationality. His point is that our decision processes seldom spring exclusively from an explicit rational analysis. Very often, we do things that, from a rational perspective, are foolish, such as smoking, drinking or watching Jackass. Apparently, our decision process are much more complex than we can describe. What is often missing in the decisions we make in our meetings today is the emotional and intuitive dimension. We do not talk about the "gut feeling" that something is wrong or the chill down the spine that says we are working with a challenge that simply must be investigated.

In a complex world in which we are grilled with new information constantly, we need fast access to the intuitive perceptions and emotional signposts to be able to cut through and access the brain's unconscious layer. To do that, we need new ways to communicate and hold meetings.

Artistic working methods are today used in many companies. The trend is broadly called *arts-in-business*. The idea is to use the art's creative, aesthetic and intuitive approach to communicate and create development and change. For example, a simple painting can communicate great complexity, or acting methods can give enormous room for feelings. For example, in the world of theatre, it is normal to use a great deal of time working on the interpersonal relationships, since the actors and director know the big emotions cannot be present if great confidence is not present. In contrast, an ordinary meeting uses only about five minutes on small talk at the beginning of the meeting to create an open and confident mood.

Minutes "on the go"

If meeting culture innovation is standing still, the same cannot be said for communication technology. Already, different technologies give us the chance to solve some of the biggest limitations of meetings, and the future holds even more.

Technology makes it possible to create meeting minutes that are visible to all during the meeting. That means the minutes can be adjusted immediately and can become an active co-actor in the meeting. Today, minutes are most often published a few days after the meeting, when it is too late to change anything other than details.

Technology that can project the minutes on a wall, or synchronously show them on screens in the table top make it possible for all participants to follow what has been decided how it is documented. The advantage is that uncertainties can be negotiated on the spot, with everyone present, and that makes it easier to jump back to items decided previously in the meeting.

It has been shown that negotiations are more successful if we illustrate what has been decided. Drawn models can function as mental prototypes that, in addition to promoting understanding, make it possible to make a nuanced perception of how things will be before we execute. On the whole it is a great advantage if we can directly at the meeting create models and prototypes that can instantly give us an impression of whether an idea or plan will function in practice. In that way, we can increase the speed of innovation and reduce the number of failed projects. Technology already exists to help us with this – the 3-D printer, for example, can print a physical model of a drawing; the Table PC makes it possible to draw models directly on the computer screen and project them on a wall.

Globalization compels us to think about how we can hold meetings without being in the same physical room. Today, the solution is most often video conferencing and teleconferencing, which can be useful, but generally lead to the meeting being more static and less personal.

An already available option for a completely new meeting form is meeting in cyberspace. In the online computer world Second Life, in which over seven million avatars have been created, people meet constantly to trade, make films, get married and even have sex. The first companies are already buying land and finding possibilities in Second Life. For example, the Danish tax authorities have bought an island called Danmark, and Grundfos, a Danish company, has created a test room from which to sell pumps. The question is whether international companies will have, in a few years, their own virtual worlds, in which managers, employees and customers can meet as digital avatars. The possibilities are limitless. The meeting can be held in a simulation of the customer's authentic environment to preserve customer focus during the entire meeting. When the meeting is over, the participants can hold a little after party, where they can party harder and wilder than they ever could in real life. Later, the meeting can be preserved in digital form, so that minutes can be clipped.

Good meeting leadership

If we take the aforementioned trends seriously, the meeting leader of the future has a number of possibilities to be the

Michelangelo of meetings. The meeting leader of the future should be able to:

- **Short circuit the value chain.** Instead of holding many meetings over a long period, hold intense, high-quality meetings over a short periods, in which you ensure that everyone in the value chain can communicate synchronously. Gather everything together in a big bang, instead of hiking around for ages in the far corners of the galaxy.
- **Be a flow coach.** The meeting leader helps everyone come into a collective, creative state of concentration — among other ways, by ensuring the meeting area is free of distraction. Mobile phones are switched off and network cables are pulled, so everyone can give the meeting full focus. The meeting can be held in a vault, for example, or a raft in the Caribbean.
- **Ensure the meeting is full of movement** in the form of energizers and physical shifts between being seated, walking, standing and lying down. In this way, you maintain general health and increase concentration and the chance to get into flow.
- **Put belly and heart on the speaker's list.** For example, work intensively on the interpersonal relations of the participants so they can relax, let go and give the best they have. The meeting leader can also use artistic methods such as pictures, theater and music to create space for the emotional and the intuitive. The meeting could, for example, paint an agenda or play a decision.
- **Invite technology to every meeting.** Technology cannot replace human communication, but it can expand it by letting you create advanced models and test ideas directly at the meeting. Someday, we will replace the taker of minutes with an advanced speech-recognition program on the computer.
- **Hold meetings in virtual worlds** such as Second Life to cut distance in a globalized world.

That was the end of this little meeting between text and brain. I hope I was able to help create new welds and byways in your neural network. At any rate, it has been great having you as a reader. Thanks – and take care!

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