Lots of talking. Little sense - Using time in meetings efficiently

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Too long, no structure, no result: many meetings are just as bad as their reputation and ensure the maximum level of disagreement between management and employees. However, meetings are a real opportunity for more cohesion and productivity in the business.

Where else can ideas be developed, opinions be collected and information be exchanged so quickly as when in direct contact with others? Yet the following also applies here: quality over quantity. It’s time to question our own meeting culture and its effects on the efficiency of meetings! In the ideal case, meetings serve to increase the creativity and productivity of a team and lay the foundations for cooperative and result-oriented teamwork. The meeting culture of a company extends well beyond the conference room. It is therefore worthwhile to take a closer look at all qualitative and quantitative meeting features and develop the right meeting culture for your own company. Thoughts regarding frequency, duration and choosing the location and participants also come into the process, just like the definition of the “rules of play” for the meetings themselves. Unfortunately, the reality often looks somewhat different: meetings which are arranged too often, have no structure and lead to no result or hours of pointless waffling – frustration and apathy are to be expected. Inefficient conferences waste individual working time, group work time and, in the worst cases, even both.

On top of all this: regular meetings break up the working day, the highly-value ‘flow’ state or ‘deep-work’ phases where you can work for longer and immerse yourself in your tasks without interruptions, are becoming rarer and rarer. And what do employees do to be able to work undisturbed and complete neglected tasks? They give up their evenings or weekends more and more often. A fact that not only makes employees unhappy, but also increases the probability of a high employee turnover rate and the number of burn-out cases.

Minimalism à la Google, Apple and Co.

When Google co-founder Larry Page took back leadership of the company in Spring 2011, he established a company-wide guideline. Since then the rule was: no meeting without a goal or decision-maker, never more than ten participants and each person must make a contribution – or stay away from the meeting. Even Apple founder Steve Jobs followed the minimalism principle and withdrew invitations to meetings for people he found to be unnecessary, in a friendly manner, of course. Many new start-ups are following these technology giants’ principles today – with much success.

Ingredients for more efficiency and attention

First off: the need for meetings and their organisation are just as individual as the company itself. This is why there is no general “recipe for success” for efficient meetings. Best-practice examples from different branches show, however, that there are a few rules that can make meetings more efficient and their participants more attentive.

No meetings for the sake of it
Is there a topic that has to be discussed? What is the purpose of the shared appointment? If the answer to these questions is still open, you can certainly do without the meeting.

No meeting without an agenda
Without fixed agenda topics, there is a danger of endless discussions without any real results. Aside from the topic, you must define the goals which should be achieved in the meeting, above all. And: the agenda determines the participants.

New spaces
No two conference rooms are the same. The room design has an enormous influence on the creativity and attentiveness of the participants. In line with this, creative meetings require different spaces than board meetings. The classic meeting room is experiencing increasing competition from new, unconventional collaboration areas where brainstorming and quick, informal thought

exchanges can take place in a pleasant atmosphere.

Stand-up meetings
New forms such as stand-up or walking meetings can lead to more agility and creativity in the team. Discussion groups require on average 34% less time to reach decisions when participants are standing up (source: study by the University of Missouri).

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Fixed time allowance
Parkinson’s 1st law states that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”. This is why you should plan fixed time windows for meetings.

Structure, structure, structure
Most importantly, aside from concrete goals and the corresponding agenda, constructive meetings depend on a moderator who shapes the meeting – who ensures the participants adhere to the agreed meeting rules, summarises opinions, stops wafflers in their tracks and can also get an opinion out of even the most quiet of participants.

“The greatest leverage for a good meeting culture is visualisation”, says Florian Grolman, managing director and senior partner of the Berlin organisation consultancy company initio (source: Harvard-Business-Manager, October 2017). This includes flip charts and pinboards just as much as electronic media for presentation and visualisation. And not least the minutes of the meeting where the essential results are determined in the form of decisions and to-do points.

No efficiency without culture
To establish a new meeting culture, you must undergo a structured process where teams, departments or the whole company analyse and evaluate their meetings, and forge new paths based on the results. The effect of meetings, good and bad, is extensive. Thus, it pays off to examine your own meeting culture and its elements more closely and to have the courage to make some adjustments. Good meetings can be a precursor to a better working life: leading to higher productivity, closer collaboration, more open and honest communication and finally, more job satisfaction.