The critical importance of meetings to leader and organizational success: Evidence-based insights and implications for key stakeholders

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Consider the following estimates about the current state of workplace meetings in the United States. There are as many as 55 million meetings every single work day. Employees spend on average six hours per week sitting in meetings. Their managers spend even more time in meetings, with averages around 23 h per week, and with some spending up to 80% of their work time in meetings. Overall, a large amount of organizational resources (i.e., employee time and salaries) go into meetings. Estimates suggest that most organizations devote between 7 and 15% of their personnel budgets to meetings. At the same time, some estimates indicate that as many as half of all work meetings are rated as "poor", leading organizations to waste at least 213 billion of the dollars they spend on meetings per year. These numbers have vast implications in terms of the return on investment for organizations. They also have implications for employees' perceptions of their work and their organization.

Workplace meetings take place for many reasons. Employees meet to talk about problems, develop solutions, generate ideas, reach consensus, and make decisions. But in addition to the outcomes they are intended to achieve, meetings are also sites for many other organizational phenomena, including sensemaking, leadership influence, relationship building, team dynamics, conflict, and the shaping of employee attitudes. The impact of meetings extends well beyond the boundaries of the meeting itself, a point to which we will return.

Because meetings have become such a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary organizations, research in recent years has increasingly investigated the meeting as a subject in and of itself. Yet, despite the abundance of meetings in everyday organizational practice, meetings research is still a young science. Since the seminal work by Helen Schwartzman in 1986, other organizational scholars slowly began to address meetings as a research topic. Indeed, it took almost 20 years after Schwartzman's ground-breaking work for meeting science to emerge as a distinct field of study. Today, scholars from multiple disciplines, including management and organizational behavior, communication, organizational psychology, and sociology, have all made efforts to better understand the many facets of meetings, such as how meetings are planned and conducted in organizations, what happens inside of the meetings, and how meetings may affect overall individual, team, and organizational outcomes.

INSIGHTS FROM MEETING SCIENCE

Table 1 provides a brief summary of research-based conclusions about pre-meeting factors (inputs) and during-meeting factors (processes) that are associated with positive meeting outcomes (outputs). On the input side, research has consistently shown that thoughtful meeting preparation and setup, exemplified in a number of specific design features, set the stage for effective meetings. Additionally, both meeting attendee and meeting leader characteristics need to be considered as critical pre-meeting factors—including careful consideration who needs to be in the meeting room in the first place (and who does not), and the skill level of the

Table 1   Evidence-based Success Factors Before, During, and After Organizational Meetings

Pre-meeting factors (inputs)	Within-meeting factors (processes)	Post-meeting factors (outputs)
Meeting preparation and setup:	Meeting facilitation:	Proximal meeting outcomes:
• Appropriate rooms and lighting; providing refreshments for face-to-face meetings • Keeping the meeting as small as possible (while still inviting all relevant attendees) • Planning to start and end on time • Preparing a written agenda • Setting clear, transparent goals for the meeting • Allowing time for pre-meeting talk and socializing	• Encouraging all participants to actively participate • Making sure that all opinions are heard • Focusing on solutions • Consensus building • Participative decision making • Keeping track of time	• Consensus and decisions • Team creativity • Meeting satisfaction • Meeting effectiveness
Attendee characteristics:	Group dynamics:	Distal meeting outcomes:
• Only inviting necessary participants who are there for a clear purpose and have relevant expertise for the meeting • Matching attendees and meeting content (e.g., sharing information that is relevant to attendees)	• Building on each other's ideas and expressing positivity • Avoiding negative spirals (e.g., complaining cycles) • Building a positive group mood • Information sharing • Team learning	• Employee engagement • Employee wellbeing • Employee empowerment • Team performance and productivity • Organizational development and change
Leader characteristics:	Meeting documentation:	
• Training and developing meeting leadership	• Keeping track of the agenda • Taking meeting minutes • Concrete action planning toward implementing ideas and completing tasks after the meeting	

meeting leader. Addressing these input factors effectively does not guarantee a successful meeting, but failing to address them effectively makes it much harder for the meeting to achieve its desired outcomes.

In terms of the meeting process, a growing research base highlights ways in which what actually happens in the meeting, in terms of leader and attendee behaviors and interactions, can truly "make or break" the meeting. Some of these process factors are rather straightforward, such as taking care of proper meeting documentation and keeping track of time. Others can be quite tricky, especially when it comes to group dynamics within the meeting that can quickly spiral out of control (e.g., complaining cycles and negativity spirals). These group dynamics are often challenging for meeting leaders, and addressing such challenges requires additional efforts on the input side (especially in terms of providing meeting leadership training).

On the output side (see right-hand column in Table 1), moving beyond the important proximal meeting outcomes (i.e., did the group successfully solve the problem, make the decision, or otherwise achieve the intended immediate result), research shows that what happens before (inputs), during (processes), and after (were action plans actually implemented) the meeting affects employee attitudes and experiences in many ways, often going far beyond the actual meeting itself and its proximal meeting outcomes. It turns out that employee satisfaction with meetings is a distinct component of overall job satisfaction, and a potential driver of organizational commitment (distal meeting outcomes). While we often focus on "bad meetings", which can leave employees feeling frustrated, and can also trigger employee exhaustion and potential burnout beyond the meeting context, good meetings can boost employee morale in general, again beyond the meeting context.

Good meetings are places where trust among employees grows, where leader—follower relationships are shaped and maintained, where positive leadership influence is executed, and where team dynamics are effectively managed for positive outcomes. Bad meetings, on the other hand, are prone to trigger a negative group mood, send teams into negative downward spirals, and derail team processes, leading to negative proximal outputs in terms of creativity, meeting satisfaction, and ultimate performance. Importantly, as noted, meetings also affect outcomes at the broader organizational level (i.e., distal meeting outcomes). At the most macro levels, research has shown that the behavioral dynamics observed during regular team meetings are linked to organizational functioning at large, and even to shareholder value creation.

Leveraging meeting-science based evidence, we now turn to practical implication for meeting leaders and organizations more broadly.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEETING LEADERS

In most cases the individual who plans and conducts the meeting is a manager, and the participants are his/her subordinates. While there can be situations in which the meeting leader may be someone that a boss designates to run the meeting, that is the exception rather than the rule. The