How Do You Know That Was A Great Meeting?

By Richard S. Hawkes

Meetings are essential to getting things done in businesses, *but how do you know a meeting was actually effective*? Indeed, how do you know whether any conversation is actually effective?

The answer is you can make highly effective meetings more likely by applying two principles:

1) Focus on critical communications.
2) Practice consultative decision-making.

These two principles can be used to plan meetings, lead meetings, determine next steps and then document meetings. This article includes a comprehensive and powerful approach to high-performing meetings. It demonstrates how to apply these two principles, presents a template meeting agenda, and describes the different kind of meetings high performing teams have.

The First Principle: Focus On Critical Communications

One attribute that sets human beings apart from rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to shape reality through language. Some dramatic examples include: "would you marry me," "we find the defendant guilty as charged," "you have just inherited a million dollars," and "I want a divorce."

Requests, declarations, offers, commitments and refusals and are all example of critical communications (also known as speech acts). After a critical communication, big or small, the world shifts. And, as a result, new possible futures emerge – or collapse.

Critical communications are how persuasion happens:

For example, imagine a sales call during which the prospect says: "I really enjoyed meeting you. Would you send me more information?"

Now ask yourself, was it a successful sales call?

Experienced sales people will tell you absolutely not! Why? Because a critical communication did not occur and a new possibility was not created.

They will tell you that a successful sales call requires that a prospect specifically tell you out loud they are choosing to move forward. It explicitly requires: a commitment, like a signed contract; a declaration, like "I plan to buy your services;" or an offer "if you are willing to come back next week, I will set up a meeting with our CEO." Great sales people engineer critical communications.

Critical communications are what occurs in effective meetings:

Most people have had experiences with ineffective meetings. A group comes together around urgent and important topics. Members fully engage. Great ideas bubble-up. And then afterwards, nothing happens because no critical communications have occurred. Not a single compelling request, clear commitment or inspiring declaration was made. What a waste of time.

These kinds of empty meetings are insidious. Like empty calories, they might taste great going down but can cause unhealthy team cultures. They cause members to become de-energized. And they cause important topics to eventually become unmentionable. You can be sure empty meetings have been happening when you hear: "Yeah, we know it could be better but it is a waste to time trying to talk about it."

In contrast, highly effective meetings and conversations are full of critical communications. These communications cause topics to be surfaced, responsibilities to be determined, solutions to be created, decisions to be made and actions to be taken.

Critical communications can also foster an atmosphere of trust. You may not always agree with what is being said but at least you know it is coming from an authentic place.

Effective leaders know how to drive critical communications:

If meetings were a sport, then critical communications would be how scouts assess whether a player is ready for the big league. A post game debrief might sound like this, "We hit the right topics. We documented two declarations, three compelling requests and actionable commitments all around. And in general our team atmosphere feels open, authentic, intentional and positive."

Imagine you are in a meeting and one of your teammates makes an obvious self-serving power play. What do you do?

The answer of course is to communicate clearly and intentionally: "I want to make a request to our team that we approach this issue in a different way. I am concerned that the way we are currently addressing this topic could undermine trust on this team. Can we ask ourselves, how to work together to resolve this issue in a way that will strengthen trust and collaboration between us?" Now, that is critical communication in action.

Here are some more examples of critical communications:

Imagine that it becomes clear in a meeting that because a leader was unwilling to delegate an important topic to someone else, meeting preparations were weak. You ask the leader: "What can this group do to make it easier for you to let someone else besides you gather input around important topics and sketch out possible solutions so that we can move faster on topics critical to our shared success?"

Or imagine a meeting is getting derailed by an individual who did not prepare. In response you say: "When any member of our team, including me, comes to meetings unprepared to engage in critical conversations, I get concerned about the potential impact on our team. What can I or our team do to help you come to our next meeting better prepared?"

Indeed, it can be argued that organizations and businesses evolve and grow at the speed at which critical communications occur.

The Second Principle: Practice Consultative Decision-Making

The types of decision-making approaches used in meetings have a big effect. There are three such basic approaches: consultative, consensus and autocratic decision-making.

To demonstrate, below are the flows from three meetings. What one step distinguishes the consultative meeting from the other two?

Consultative Meeting: topics are surfaced and prioritized; the individual who will be accountable for resolving each topic is determined; these individuals gather input from others; they lead efforts to create solutions; decisions are made; responsibilities for actions are determined; and actions are taken.

Consensus Meeting: topics are surfaced and prioritized by vote; solutions are discussed; responsibilities, decisions and actions are discussed.

Autocratic Meeting: a list of key priorities is provided by a top leader or group; key information is provided; assignments and deadlines are given.

The distinguishing step is this: **assigning individuals to be accountable for resolving each topic before gathering input or discussing details.** This is the step that makes consultative decision-making the best overall approach.

Consultative decision-making is the style most often used in high-performing teams because it tends to lead to faster and higher-quality decisions in complex environments than consensus-driven or autocratic approaches.

Why does assigning accountabilities before discussing details make such a big difference? The answer is twofold. One, it ensures at least one person is focused on critical communications around an important topic. Two, it ensures that all critical discoveries in a meeting are captured and fully owned. As a result, there is a mechanism for managing complexity and collaboration.

Let's be honest about how many people engage in meetings. They choose to focus on critical communications only in those conversations that directly impact them, while dabbling in the rest. However, when every critical topic has a clear and accountable owner, then valuable input –input that drives innovation – is less likely to get lost.

Putting These Two Principles Into Action

Based on the two principles of critical communication and consultative decision-making, here is a generic approach that can be adapted for planning, leading and following-up on high performance team meetings:

Step 1: Prepare The Agenda And The Participants

1) Assign Accountability For Meeting Success To A Single Leader: The meeting itself needs an owner. In accordance with consultative decision-making, before getting into any planning details, make sure one individual is designated to drive the overall success of the meeting.

2) Gather Topics: The meeting leader is accountable for soliciting input from others (i.e., by email, a pre-meeting, etc.). The meeting leader prioritizes an initial list of topics to be covered in the meeting.

3) <u>Set The Stage:</u> If the group is not already familiar with the two principles of high performing meetings, share this article with them.

4) <u>Assign Topics and Determine The Participants:</u> The meeting leader should determine before the meeting:
   - Who will be accountable for driving each of these key topics to resolution?
   - Who should participate in the meeting?

If roles and accountabilities are truly clear, answers to these two questions should mostly be obvious. (Later in this article is a list of different kinds of meetings, which can be applied to think through who should participate in a meeting.)

If they are not obvious, then it is possible that your team does not have a complete system-of-roles. This then should become the highest priority focus of the organizational or team lead. In fact, it is possible that this should be the focus of the next meeting. In a complete system-of-roles, every kind of key topic, issue, outcome and relationship has a clear owner with the right level of authority. And key interdependencies between roles are effectively managed.

It cannot be overstated how much time and resource are wasted not having a clear and complete system-of-roles in place!

- <u>Prepare Topics:</u> Each participant prepares to come to the meeting ready to manage critical conversations around the topics they own.

  Individuals should be encouraged to connect directly with each other before the meeting. Speed to resolution will be accelerated if viable solutions can be sketched out prior to the meeting.

Sometimes the best way to create engagement, or to surface critical conversations, is to offer a viable solution that you know will be shot down. Some people are better at describing what they don't want than clarifying what they do. Getting someone to disagree is not always the best way, but it can be effective to get everyone engaged.

Step 2: Lead The Meeting

- Open The Meeting: State the purpose of the meeting. Show a written agenda that looks something like the following:

  10 AM Open Meeting

  10:15 Topic: Increasing competition in our market - John

  11:00 Topic: New product breakthrough - Sally

  12:00 Topic: On-boarding new hires - Sam

  1:00 Close Meeting

  (Notice each topic has an owner and a planned start and finish.)

- Discuss The Topics: Work through the topics. The meeting leader should pay close attention to how effectively the group is working. If the group gets stuck or the conversation seems to wander, the leader should ask:

  - "Are we focusing on critical conversations?
  - "Are we applying consultative decision-making? What might we do differently?"
  - Are we making compelling requests, clear commitments or inspiring declarations? Are we creating new possibilities?"

- Close The Meeting: Make a list of key issues or topics. Ensure each is assigned a single owner. Have that owner articulate clear next steps and commitments out loud to the group. Agree on when the group will meet next.

Step 3: Document Critical Conversations

- Send Out Meeting Notes: The meeting leader (or someone else) prepares meeting notes, including the following four elements:

1. Meeting purpose.
2. List each topic.
    - Topic owner
    - A short summary of progress
    - Declarations, commitments, requests, etc., made, by whom, to whom, by when
3. List each new topic.
    - Topic owner
    - Declarations, commitments, requests, etc., made, by whom, to whom, by when
4. Next meeting time.

Obviously, this generic agenda will take different shapes depending on the purpose and participants of a meeting. The next part of this article will show you how.

Different Kinds Of Meetings

Below is list of different kinds of meetings. In some cases different kinds of meetings can be combined. Conversely, leaders sometimes discover, after reading through this list, that they are trying to do too much in a single meeting with a given group of participants.

Situation Analysis Meetings

Purpose: to gather information and separate larger topics into actionable sub-issues and set/recommend priorities. This kind of meeting is commonly held as part of the preparation required to determine the topics on the agenda for a larger meeting.

Participants: A smaller group with the implicit authority to set overall priorities and assign topics and sub-issues to others.

Frequency: As needed.

Topic Sequence:

1) Gather input on topics prior and during the meeting.
2) List, group and separate topics.
3) Prioritize.
4) Assign and inform owners.

Progress Evaluation

Purpose: To evaluate progress against goals and identify obstacles.

Participants: Any leader or individual who has a direct impact on the goals being evaluated.

Frequency: As needed.

Topic Sequence:

1) Gather data and prepare analysis of progress against specific goals prior to the meeting.
2) Identify significant gaps.
3) Align around focus and priorities.

Project Plan

Purpose: To define and plan projects, so that informed commitments of time and resources can be made.

Participants: A smaller group with the implicit expertise to define and implement a project plan.

Frequency: As needed.

Topic Sequence:

1) State project purpose and target scope (by this time, for this cost, with these resources).
2) Clarify objectives and deliverables.
3) Clarify milestones.
4) Define tasks required to achieve each milestone.
5) Define resources required for each task.
6) Assign accountabilities by task (by this time, for this cost).
7) Create overall schedules and budgets.

Problem Analysis

Purpose: To hypothesize and verify the most likely cause of an unknown deviation.

Participants: A smaller group with the implicit expertise to analyze a given problem and recommend a solution.

Frequency: As needed.

Topic Sequence:

1) State the problem (what should be happening vs. what is not).
2) Specify the problem (what is/is not, where is /is not, when is/is not, trend is/is not).
3) Imagine and test possible causes against the facts.
4) Determine the most likely cause.
5) Recommend a solution.

Decision Recommendation

Purpose: To develop recommendations so that real closure on decisions can be efficiently reached.

Participants: A smaller group with the implicit expertise to recommend a choice.

Frequency: As needed.

Topic Sequence:

1) State the decision (what scope of alternative needs to be evaluated).
2) Define and weight the objectives (what criteria should be used to compare alternatives).
3) Generate and compare alternatives.
4) Identify the choice that best balances benefits against risks.
5) Make recommendation.

Strategic Alignment Meetings

Purpose: to drive closure on top-level decisions and redirect resources towards against strategic business goals.

Participants: enterprise leader, business leaders and key function leaders.

Frequency: Recurring every three to six months.

Topic Sequence:

1) Clarify business requests to the enterprise.
2) Clarify function requests to the enterprise.
3) Address requests in the context of strategic enterprise priorities and budgets (e.g., investments priorities across business; investment priorities across capabilities/functions).

You Should Now Have Everything You Need

This article presents a comprehensive approach to planning, leading and following-up on meetings based on one idea: that if two key principles are followed, then highly-effective meetings become more likely. These two principles are: 1) focus on critical communications; and 2) practice consultative decision-making.

It provides several examples of critical communications, including requests, offers and declarations. It concludes that organizations and business grow and evolve at the speed of critical communications. If meetings were a sport, then the frequency of critical conversations would be how team players score.

It describes how consultative decision-making differs from consensus or autocratic decision-making and why it is better. It shows that the distinguishing step that sets consultative decision-making apart is assigning leaders to drive topics to resolution before discussing the details of those topics. The reason this works is because it ensures someone is responsible for making sure critical conversations are occurring, and that they own the outcome of those conversations.

It provides a generic meeting outline based on the principles of critical communications and consultative decision-making. It then provides example plans for different kinds of meetings.

As a result, meeting leaders should have everything they need to understand the why and how of planning and leading highly-effective meetings.

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