

'Sorry, I have to go to a meeting'

Rhymer Rigby

Does anyone ever walk into a meeting fired up with enthusiasm? Or do they groan in anticipation of the politicking, the bureaucracy and the office bore taking up what little oxygen remains in the room? And, in any case, all the decisions have probably already been taken, haven't they?

Jim Buckmaster, the unconventional chief executive of Craigslist, the internet classified advertising company, is no fan of meetings. "I've always found them to be at best unproductive and boring, and at worst toxic and destructive," he says. "The people who want to show off do, the brown-nosers brown nose, everyone else wastes their time. I also think the larger the meeting, the worse it is."

At Craigslist, Mr Buckmaster prefers meetings to take place electronically. "You often see people in the same room communicating via chat and instant messaging," he says.

Meetings are emotive, perhaps because executives have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved. People tend to think meetings are for making decisions when they are not, in fact, very good for that, says Nigel Nicholson, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School. "Groups often meet to make decisions but they're doing so for political reasons," Prof Nicholson says. "So when people are called to a meeting [ostensibly to make a decision] and show up to discover the decision has already been made, they feel used."

The formal nature of most meetings also means they are seen as mandatory. If three people meet in a corridor and discuss a project for five minutes, they have had a meeting, and probably an effective one. But most meetings are seen as immovable blocks in diaries. Moreover, they are often scheduled to take place at regular intervals and to last for a set time – neither of which may be necessary.

"My problem [with meetings] is that people have far too many of them," says Allan Leighton, chairman of the Royal Mail. "Also, why are they always for one, two, three, four, five hours – why not have them for as long as it takes?"

Mr Leighton believes that meetings are seen as far more important than they actually are – people fit their productive work around their meetings rather than the other way round.

Worse still, notes Bill Daniels, chief executive of Californian-based adviser American Consulting & Training, a meeting takes up far more time than the time between the welcome and the wrapping-up comments. "[Some] meetings are very expensive," he says. "Not only do you have all the people in the room, but for every hour you spend in the meeting, there's five to 10 hours getting ready. Every now and then a lot of companies will have two-day meetings – these are monstrously wasteful."

Nonetheless, Prof Nicholson insists: "We need meetings. Teamwork is essential in all organisations. You can't have teams without meetings to co-ordinate efforts and find solutions to problems."

Mr Leighton concedes there are some plus points. "They're not bad for sharing information – although some people want to share too much. And there's a team-building element to them, too."

Mr Daniels has three suggestions. First, while you may want to cut back on meetings, don't get rid of them altogether. Second, do not spend too much time in meetings talking about the past – or they will become "exercises in punishment and blame". And third, make sure you have a decision-making process that works. Transparency is the key, Mr Daniels says.

Typically, he will bring together in one room a middle manager and the next two lower levels of management. "You'll get 40-100 people in the room – we sometimes use ballrooms," Mr

Daniels says. "Start with the issues in the lower level management teams – the things the team members have committed to and now know they are lacking the necessary resources to deliver. In each team, either change the expectations, change the allocation of resources within the team, or escalate the issue to the next highest level management team, depending on how much you need to fix that." Mr Daniels says the level of transparency this creates will vastly improve the group decision-making process.

Prof Nicholson adds that it may also be helpful to axe some meetings: "You need to separate out the purposes of meetings and think about the needs they're there to fulfil ... when you bring people together, you need to ensure you do it for something they can only accomplish together."

Meetings need to justify their existence. One reason why so many people dislike them is that they feel they are a waste of time, which suggests another solution: don't go. One business that has embraced this thinking is BestBuy, the US consumer electronics retailer, which uses a system called "results only work environment" or Rowe (see box). No meeting is mandatory. You show up if you believe it is important for you to be there and you leave if it is not. Such an approach does focus the minds of those who call meetings for no reason or like the sound of their own voices.

Perhaps even Mr Buckmaster might attend such a meeting. In the meantime he concedes one point in their favour. "Meetings are excellent for doodling. I can remember doing some really, really spectacular doodles."

Tips to save you time

Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, co-founders of Rowe (results only work environment) and authors of *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It*

In a results-only work environment every meeting is optional. Sounds radical, but let's face it – if a meeting is of value to the work, people will meet. If people are forced to go to meetings that are a waste of time, they will waste time. Making meetings optional forces every person ... to make commonsense decisions about how they spend their time to do what is important – get work done."

Dianne Thompson, chief executive, Camelot group

"You need to have an agenda and objectives in advance, so that people know why they are there. You should start and finish on time and no meeting should be more than 90 minutes without a 15-minute break. You must be very clear at the start who's chairing the session and who's keeping time. At the end of the meeting, ensure that all actions are summarised and that those who carry them out are aware of what they are and what they have to do."

Allan Leighton, chairman, Royal Mail

"At Asda (where Mr Leighton was chief executive), we held meetings standing up. People spent less time talking because they got rather tired. Also you should have them for only as long as they need to be [held]. Do not pad them out. Some of my meetings are as short as five minutes. I have also used something called the two feet rule – if you find yourself in a meeting that you do not think you should be in, you walk out. As it is a rule, it is not considered impolite and it really makes people focus."

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