



## MINDSHIFT ON MEETINGS—PART 1

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### ARTICLE 1 OF 2

This two-part series offers ideas for revitalizing meetings as a key tool for organizational learning and change. This article explores three “mindshifts”—or changes in perspective—about meetings that can help make them more meaningful and productive.

**T**oo many meetings!” “Most meetings are a waste of time.” These are the most common complaints we hear from our clients. Meetings are a required ritual in organizations around the world. Yet, they often seem like black holes, doggedly devouring our days.

Must meetings remain unavoidable sinkholes in the business landscape? Or can they become tools for boosting productivity, learning, and collaboration? We are finding that as clients learn to make meetings highly collaborative, they actually meet *more* often and make far better use of time individually and collectively than ever before. Here are three ways to improve the quality of every kind of work gathering.

### 1. View Meetings As Work

One of the most telling commentaries about meetings goes something like this: “I’ll be there, but I’ve got a lot of work today.” Or “Can we do this another time? I’m really under the gun.” The unspoken assumption is that meetings keep us from doing our jobs. Do we hold this belief because so many meetings are unproductive or unfulfilling? Probably. But we may also believe that meetings aren’t part of our “real work.”

Some years ago, we brought a group of youngsters from a gifted and talented program to business seminars on creative problem solving. These 10- to 12-year-olds would spend a day with corporate executives applying creative thinking to current business challenges.

In one such session at TXU, the group chose to address the question, “How can we reduce the number of meetings so we can get our work done?” After listening quietly for an hour, an observant 10-year-old commented, “It seems to me that your job is your meetings. Maybe you need to think in a new way. Maybe the real question is, ‘How can you make your meetings better?’ rather than trying to duck out of them. Isn’t this where you learn stuff, get help, and figure out what’s missing?”

A fresh initiative was born from this startling observation. The problem now became: What is limiting the value of our meetings? How can we improve the ways we communicate, surface challenges, make decisions, invite and engage input from all levels, create strategy, and provide growth opportunities for people? By connecting the issue of meetings to the long- and short-term goals of growing a business, the focus and results changed dramatically.

Those closest to a problem began to call spontaneous meetings to gather input and generate solutions. Meetings became more proactive, with time devoted to solving problems far ahead of potential crises. And people learned to listen nondefensively at a deeper level in order to make changes that benefited the whole rather than lobbying for solutions that benefited only their business unit.

The first mindshift we may need to make, then, is to envision meetings as an integral part of our jobs. People complain that the time spent in meetings is time that they could be “doing” the work instead of just “talking” about it. But many times, well-intentioned “doers” rush off to “get things done,” only to find out

that they were missing critical information from others and now have to re-execute many of their tasks. Where is the time waste now?

While “doing” the work is obviously a necessity, it is only through “talking about the work” that we can

- avoid redundancy,
- identify scheduling problems,
- share resources effectively, and
- stay current on the big picture.

When everyone understands the context, each can make better decisions and assume responsibility for keeping a project on course. Thus, meetings are the venue to make work more efficient, not less. This mindshift may be the most difficult one for all of us—we must learn to feel productive when solving problems together as well as when executing work.

To make this change, try seeing business gatherings as opportunities to connect with others for profit, learning, and mutual growth instead of as obstacles to these objectives. In addition, stay aware of successes and problems between meetings, so the group can both celebrate and learn from these experiences.

### 2. Make the Link to Vision and Values

A second reason that meetings might seem like interruptions in work is that they do not reflect the organization’s values, vision, and mission. To make sure that meetings are connected to our *raison d’être* and principles, we might ask questions such as: Are our weekly staff meetings (or monthly operations meetings or annual performance reviews) aligned with our business identity and purpose? Do they make it safe for people to take turns leading, brainstorm new paradigms, challenge current practices,

and surface obsolete work practices? Do we ever invite clients in to learn what is most important to them and most frustrating? Do we provide training in active listening, conflict resolution, and creative problem solving and practice these skills frequently in the course of our work together?

In order to better connect with each other, share information, and make decisions, you might radically change the format of your meetings. This might entail breaking into small cross-functional work groups to explore fresh options to ongoing challenges, meeting in the field with clients who have suffered the most provoking problems, or going on-site with vendors to see their work process, brainstorm win/wins, and solve problems further upstream in the workflow.

You also might want to change the way that you refer to meetings to reframe people's expectations. We call one of our weekly meetings a "huddle" and our quarterly meetings "advances" (rather than retreats). One of our clients uses the term "deep dives" for in-depth sessions to get at root causes. At TDIndustries, supervisor-supervisee meetings are called "one with ones."

The possibilities are virtually limitless for organizations, teams, and individuals. For example, do you meet often to plan, review, and celebrate? Do you initiate relationship-building breakfasts and lunches, time-outs to explore unintended consequences, check-ins to stay current, and post-mortems to build collective intelligence following major initiatives? "Fireside chats," "camp-fire gatherings," and "buzz sessions" are terms used to engage the imagination and invite the heart to join the mind as we search for collective meaning.

### 3. Move Toward Interdependence

Asking "Who is responsible for the quality of our meetings?" can help reveal some interesting assumptions. If the answer is "our team leader" and the rest of the participants go because they feel they have to, then no wonder people complain! From this perspective, the leader controls the

meeting, which includes controlling the attendees. The attendees may either resent this treatment or submit to it. Either way, this framework does not tap the collective intelligence and capacity of the group.

The concept of one independent person leading many dependent people will not get the job done today. Thus, a third mindshift is also necessary if we are to revitalize meetings—we must move away from dependence on leaders and toward *interdependence* among coworkers. People who are interdependent are equally comfortable being dependent on others (inviting and welcoming help) and independent (responsible for commitments).

In this setting, employees learn both to lead and to follow seamlessly, when appropriate. They don't depend on others for constant direction, supervision, motivation, discipline, reminders, and approval. Workers from all levels collaborate, balancing the needs of the group with those of each individual. Instead of competing for more of the pie, they make the pie bigger by working together. Diversity is respected and leveraged to strengthen the whole.

If all of us are responsible for the quality of our meetings, how might we alter our behavior before, during, and after each session? "Shifting from Top-Down to Collaborative Meetings" shows some of the differences we have found in our work between the old and new paradigms.

Regardless of the shift to a more collaborative form of leadership, in certain circumstances, someone will need to lead the meeting by collecting input from others and setting an agenda, calling the right people together, managing the decision-making process, and so on. The difference is that when communities of people identify a shared vision and accept mutual responsibility for outcomes, they participate in these events in different ways than before. They speak up if they believe the proposed agenda misses the mark. They ask for clarity prior to a meeting if they are unsure about what value they might contribute. They notice who is *not* represented and assign someone to speak and listen for those not present. They actively bring their personal gifts to all situations. In other words, each person comes with a total commitment to making the gathering bring high value to all stakeholders.

For, isn't all of life some form of a meeting? An encounter with others, with destiny, with opportunity? Perhaps what we are suggesting are new ways to frame these daily opportunities so we actively co-create the futures we desire for ourselves, our planet, and our society. ■

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## SHIFTING FROM TOP-DOWN TO COLLABORATIVE MEETINGS

### Old School

- The boss owns the meeting.
- The meeting goes on regardless of the level of commitment or engagement of participants.
- Communication flows from boss to subordinates.

### New School

- The group jointly holds responsibility for making the meeting productive and successful.
- If the meeting is not of value, the group stops and reevaluates the need to continue or finds ways to fully commit.
- Communication is interactive.
- Someone from any level in the organization takes responsibility for calling a meeting, collecting the agenda, etc.
- Participants learn to notice who is not present and find someone to represent the absent partner.