

Meetings that work

During the first several minutes of the meeting, 10 people gather around a table littered with briefcases and papers. Beepers go off and people abruptly walk in and out, smart phones in hand. In the back of the room, two administrators pore over a sheaf of reports and whisper back and forth. A faculty member is grading exams on her lap, glancing up occasionally. Another faculty member is reading something on an iPad. The muted staccato of a laptop keyboard patters through the pauses, and the person with the laptop mumbles, “Just taking notes.” When the perfunctory items at the top of the agenda have been dealt with, the facilitator asks the group to focus on the first item of new business, having to do with budget matters. One member of the group objects, “What’s the use of us taking our time to talk about it? The finance people already know what they’re going to do anyway! Let’s just move on and get this meeting over with!”

This meeting is at a crossroads. A quorum is present, but the group is not, in the true sense of the word, “present.” The agenda seemed important to the meeting planners and the intent of all who came to the meeting was to get matters resolved. Yet at this moment in time, unless something changes, the meeting will deteriorate and end ultimately because the time is up, not because the purpose was met through meaningful discussion.

What is that “something” that could change? And how do we change it?

A software upgrade is going to allow people in a department to tap into MegaData gathered by a consortium of universities, and function in real time with others far away on work in process. In order to use it effectively, all members of the group need to adopt the upgrade and follow new procedures, even though only some members will get the ultimate benefit. Several members of the group come late to the software training session and complain to the facilitator about the program, the annoyances change entails, and the disruption this has caused them. The facilitator sidesteps their complaints and attempts to move forward, but the group is quickly involved in grumbling cross-talk, some members defending the new program, others berating it. Within moments, one member of the group says, “The real problem is you people don’t appreciate the demands of our work. We never get the support we need. If it wasn’t for us, this department wouldn’t have any credibility at all.” And another member says, “Give me a break! We have to work together. Have you totally forgotten our values? What’s the matter with you?”

This session has fallen apart. The learning opportunity is being suffocated by discussions that have nothing to do with the facilitator’s role. Yet, unless the group gets back on track, the training will be wasted and ineffective and the software upgrade will not benefit anyone.

What can the group do to get back on track? And how could the rancor have been avoided?

A graduate committee is meeting with a young man planning his course of study. The young man is highly energized and enthusiastic and opens by saying he has a lot of questions. Then he pours his heart out for the first 10 minutes of the meeting about all of his hopes and dreams. He describes a summer job he has just accepted that he believes will give him a head start in the direction of his interests. He offers a rambling, but impassioned, description of his long-term goals. One member of the graduate committee, as soon as the student pauses, asks, "Why are you taking statistics in the same semester with two other demanding classes? Most people find that too difficult. I think you should take statistics in the summer, when you'll have more time to work on it." The student looks deflated. The faculty member continues to reorganize the young man's course list, explaining as he goes how to set it up for most likely success. "You'll be glad we did this," he tells the student. "What about my wonderful summer job?" the student asks. "What job?" the faculty member responds, genuinely puzzled.

This conversation has lost its way. The faculty member is on the verge of feeling unappreciated and disrespected. The student is on the verge of feeling disheartened and resigned. Yet the committee began with every intention to serve the student's best interest, and the student began with every intention to get good advice from his committee.

What went wrong? And how can the student and committee re-connect and get and stay on the same wavelength?

Each of the examples above points out how baffling it is that hard-working, sincere people so often get together to address important matters, only to spend their time in a discussion that deteriorates into what can be called bad tone -- distraction, mistrust, anxiety, nitpicking, misunderstandings, defensiveness and ill-will.

When meetings go wrong, we tend to blame the facility or the facilitator, blame the other attendees, blame the past, blame the quality of information at hand. Rarely do we look to see what was on our own minds during the meeting, and what an impact our own thinking had on us and on the progress of the meeting. And even more rarely do groups, together, make the tone of their meetings and their connection to each other more important than determined pursuit of the agenda -- and therefore refrain from doing business until the tone is right, or stop the business at any time to take care of the tone and connection as soon as they begin to erode.

When meetings don't work, we tend to ascribe an external reason. The agenda wasn't right. People shouldn't be forced to change. Students should pay more attention to their advisors. We're so used to looking outside of ourselves to explain our own behaviors that

we rarely look at our own thinking as variable, never mind volitional. Nonetheless, the invisible ingredient that sets and sustains meeting tone is unique to each person in the group, moment-to-moment, yet common to all. The invisible ingredient is the nature and quality of each person's thinking – what's on each person's mind and how readily thoughts come and go, leaving each person's mind free and clear to connect to the subject at hand.

In each case described here, the answers to the questions lie not in the agenda, the change process or the student. The deeper explanation is the principle of thought: What comes to our mind in any moment creates our experience of that moment. When any unrelated personal thoughts intrude – whether they be other important work, opinions or judgments or a future plan -- those thoughts momentarily pull us out of the relationship with the group or the other person and pull us into our own world. And the three examples above illustrate the three most common thought processes that draw people away from their connection to and engagement with the moment: (1) listening with something else on one's mind; (2) listening to one's own insecure thoughts and not remaining neutral and curious; (3) not listening and not noticing it.

The people at the meeting in the first example generally had their other work on their minds and were partially and intermittently attentive. Thus they were not truly working together to hold a meaningful meeting, even though they would say they were sacrificing time and other demands to be there.

The group members in the training in the second example were drawn into their own insecurity about change and status as soon as questions were raised. Without realizing it, their minds filled with judgments about themselves and each other and the institution, and they became defensive and righteous.

The faculty member in the third example went to work on the class schedule in his own head as soon as the student mentioned having questions, and just tuned out during the student's subsequent heartfelt talk. He would say he was "listening" to the student, but his listening actually stopped as soon as an idea was raised for which he thought he should have an answer and started working out the answer in his own mind.

Truly and simply taking life in moment-to-moment – another way to describe listening -- comes easily and naturally to us when we're not thinking about our own small worlds. And the ability to "know" whether we're self-preoccupied is equally natural. A shift in the way we feel is the signal of a shift in what and how we're thinking. When we're relaxed and comfortable, we're in the clear. When we're uneasy, uncomfortable, urgent or anxious, our internal barometer is signaling fog or rough weather ahead.

So the first solution to finding a meeting of the minds with others is treasuring peace of mind within ourselves. And being at peace within is a confident and easy state that opens

our minds as well as our hearts to others. The quality of every interaction in life improves proportionally to one's own commitment to internal quietude.

What if the people at the first meeting had the insight that their distraction was an internal event, created by their own unsettling attention to matters having nothing to do with the meeting? What if they looked to calm down and just put their whole focus on the task at hand, realizing that each person's interest in the others' ideas could generate a meaningful and productive resolution?

What if the people at the training session arrived with genuine curiosity, reserving judgment until they had a chance to see how the new system actually worked? What if they put their own calm and good will at a premium, looking to see what they didn't know and to develop collaborative opportunities through new technology?

What if the faculty member trusted that, if he really caught the spirit of the student's aspirations, he would be able to see how to advise the student, not with a predetermined answer based on others' past experience, but with a fresh answer inspired by this student in this moment and responsive to this situation? What if faculty and student put the creation of deep rapport and a respectful, trusting relationship in the foreground?

What if people came to every situation in life and at work with a heart full of love and the intent to experience harmony with others and appreciate our common humanity? What if it were naturally in our own best interests to look for those feelings first, since such feelings are like the sun that warms the earth, even when it isn't visible to us? Faith that the sun is there keeps us from fear when it is temporarily out of sight; the fact that the sun is there whether we have that faith or not sustains our world and makes faith an infinitely available possibility.

A meeting of the minds about what really matters – the human relationships that warm and enliven our daily transactions – allows us to work together effectively, for the common good, and resolve matters as they arise by trusting each other to continue to look and listen for ways to come to agreement. The faith that we can enjoy every moment, no matter what it contains, and the fact that we are all always able to reconnect with the truth that sustains such faith, is a context that engenders hope and courage. It is the shining light that illuminates the transcendence of all possibilities even as difficulties are casting small shadows upon us.

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