



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Keeping Minutes and Wasting Hours

I once read a definition of a meeting that went something like this: A meeting is an event in which you spend many hours of wasted time so you can produce minutes later on!

It is not uncommon to hear individuals complain about the fact that there are too many meetings and some of the stuff is absolutely irrelevant at these meetings. Yet we all recognize that we have reasons for getting together with people. There are valid and legitimate reasons for us working together in a teamwork-like atmosphere. So, it is not a question of whether we have to have meetings. The question remains how to make these meetings more effective and relevant to our day-to-day activities.

It might help to take some time exploring what meetings are supposed to be for. There are many ways to classify the conducting of a meeting. My personal preference is to classify them as being essentially one way or two-way interchanges. Sometimes we hold a meeting to merely pass out information so that everyone is kept informed. Another reason to hold a meeting is so that there can be an exchange of information between individuals who are attempting to work on similar problems.

Another way of classifying meetings is whether they are regularly scheduled or they are intermittent. The more regularly scheduled a meeting is, the more there has to be something meaningful to be conducted. The standard by which this is measured is called an agenda. Simply put, if you have a regularly scheduled meeting and you have nothing to talk about, then why have the meeting? The second is the concept of an unscheduled meeting. Generally speaking, the only successful unscheduled meetings are ones in which there is only a single item to be addressed.

Let us review the parameters of what constitutes a good meeting. The first parameter is that there is a good reason to get together. The most successful meetings are when they are focused on a specific. If you can answer this simple question - why are we getting together today? You are halfway home to having a successful meeting.

The second question to be asked is what do we intend to do after this meeting is over? If the answer is you are going to make a decision, you are going to take a specific course of action, then the meeting stands a high degree of possibility of being successful. If the meeting does nothing more than defer a decision, why have it. A good question to be asked is who needs to be at this meeting. All too often meetings are held to bring together large numbers of people, most of whom have nothing to contribute. One of the most courteous things you can do for your staff is to make sure if they come to a meeting, they are included. One of the most discourteous things you can do to your staff is invite them to a meeting in which they have absolutely no concern, then make them sit there while they listen to an



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exchange going on between one or two other people. The idea that meetings should be conducted between people with relevant relationships is one in which many individuals totally overlook.

Another good question regarding meetings is who will be responsible to take action. The worst sin of holding a meeting is failing to make a decision. The second worst decision is failing to identify the person who will implement that decision. Any time you finish a meeting by saying, "we decided..." but fail to say that you must take action; there is the possibility of a slight hitch in bringing closure.

Then there are the actual logistics of meetings. There has been a lot of ink spilled over the topic of how a meeting room should be arranged, whether it should be horseshoe shaped, the tables put in a circle, etc. Frankly, I think that is overemphasized and entirely too mechanical. It doesn't make any difference how the meeting is laid out as long as it is functional. Anytime you are holding a meeting to deal with specifics, all that information needs to be right there at the time you bring it up - charts, graphs, illustrations, bulletins, maps, etc., are of absolutely no use to the decision process if they are stuck in a drawer or out of reach.

Similarly, it is not always necessary that we be overly concerned about the creature comforts as long as the meeting is of reasonable duration. Long drug out meetings often require all sorts of accoutrements to make them comfortable. However, if you focus the intent of the meeting on a very specific item then the room furnishings, etc., take a back seat to the decision making process.

One of the most functional meetings, are stand up meetings. This is where you call a group of people together in a small area and say, "We have a problem - I need your input - what do we need to do here so we can fix this." Then you move on.

Granted, it is not always as cut and dried. There are certain meetings we need to have on a regularly scheduled basis for no other reason than calendaring and coordinating the activities of the members of our organization. My personal preference is to have what I call a calendar meeting every Monday. The purpose is to let everyone know what I am up to for the week to determine what they are going to be working on during the same time frame, and to see if we can avoid any conflicts, duplications, overlaps or omissions.

Probably one of the most abused forms of meetings is called "staff meetings". Everyone is brought together for purposes of having the boss tell everyone how the cow ate the cabbage. Staff meetings are almost always shaped like a pyramid. There are large masses of people sitting in the audience with a very small number of people who are actually making contributions and/or discussing things. The greatest danger of staff meetings is that they become so monolithic and boring that the individuals at the bottom simply get nothing out of them.



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The greatest strength of a good staff meeting is that you can turn the pyramid upside down. This is when individuals are brought to the meeting and asked to contribute their thoughts, ideas, and concerns about the activities in the organization.

There are people who come from the school of thought that the fewer meetings you hold, the better off you are. There are also people who believe that you have to meet on practically everything because they've read too many books on participative management. The answer is probably found somewhere right in between. You need to hold meetings to have communication. You don't need to hold meetings for ceremonial purposes. The more that a chief officer or supervisor uses meetings as a point of contact with an emphasis on action, the more likely meetings will become meaningful and people will actually look forward to participating in them.

One of the other things we must be very careful of in meetings is to make sure that a meeting is not used as a form of punishment. Frequently meetings are held in order to air dirty laundry or hold people up for ridicule. This is not only counterproductive and a waste of time during the meeting, but it also has an adverse impact when people return to the work force. Any time a person is brought in front of another group at a meeting and receives some form of verbal discipline for failing to achieve something, the other individuals will return to their workplace asking themselves, "Will it be me next time?"

One last admonition about meetings. A person who calls a meeting must accept responsibility for that meeting. If you are in a superior position and request your subordinates to attend a meeting, it is up to you to make sure they take something away from it. If they have requested your time and asked you to attend one of their meetings, it is their responsibility to make sure you get something out of it. If everyone who sits around the table or stands up to engage in a dialogue under the guise of a meeting remembers that there is a mutual responsibility to give and take or there is no reason to hold the meeting, then things can't help but improve.

There is a concept in decision-making that says every decision has the possibility of being totally democratic all the way to being totally autocratic. One must also remember that when you conduct meetings where you are asking for input, this is a consensus gathering process. Individuals who participate in meetings must also realize that when they are requested to give input it does not mean they are being asked to vote on something. Oftentimes, the responsibility to take action is held in the hands of the individual who is conducting the meeting. That's not being autocratic - that is being responsible. I am reasonably sure that most organizations will still have frivolous meetings. I have no doubt in my mind that there are going to be many people who will be sitting in meetings drawing doodles on paper wishing they were somewhere else. However, if those who are responsible for conducting meetings pay a little more attention to these ground rules, the opportunity for that will probably diminish and will begin to see an increase in the effective use of our own time.