

Assuming we'd like our team meetings to be more entertaining...³

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Some team meetings are all together pleasant: Time passes quickly, members laugh and have fun together – time flies and the meeting is over sooner than usual. On top of that, the meeting proves effective, saves time and is well worth the time. The upshot is that new and innovative ideas are brought to the table. Progress is made and work moves forward. Other meetings (or perhaps other teams) have a rather hostile undertone: They go on forever; everyone wants to express an opinion (and unfortunately, they often succeed in doing so). The meeting seems pointless in the eyes of the participants. The “real” work is waiting back at their desks. People are annoyed and argue over trifles – everyone is relieved when the meeting is over.

One can feel especially at loss where there's leadership without staff accountability – that is, when you're faced with the challenge of leading a team of “volunteers” and are responsible “for getting” them to deliver short-term results one way or another on top of their “home team” activities. There is no way you can demand engagement – you can only invite them to participate by setting up a framework that inspires co-creative collaboration. Of course, you can take steps to lighten up the meetings and make them more stimulating and productive – but what steps are we talking about? Under what circumstances do they apply? How do we proceed? Who will take charge?

Assuming *you*, or for that matter, a member of the team are responsible for initiating action, provided that you haven't lost faith in improving the situation. If you wish to bring more spirit and enjoyment to the team meetings, there are a number of practical suggestions and ideas you might try. I'd like to offer you a few in this article. Some of them are particularly indicated to kick off a “team development process” and sustain it: How can you collaborate on improving team meetings? Another approach is to target the team meetings directly. Something all approaches have in common is that they are sincere and intentional – while bringing in a lighter and more playful touch.

Don't be misled by the title of this text. Naturally, it's not just about fun and entertainment at team meetings. The top priority is always to improve effectiveness and efficiency. In this respect, they constitute an integral component of quality management. Furthermore, a positive atmosphere in the team is more likely to be enjoyable and inspire productivity. Taking the doldrums out of the subject can only lead to a win-win for all involved.

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As mentioned earlier, experience has shown that these recommendations can have a very positive impact, provided that they are appropriate for both team dynamic and setting. Again, only you can decide what's appropriate and will serve you and only a trial and error approach will shed light on what works and what doesn't. You might hesitate to share some of these ideas into your team meeting; or perhaps you are already experimenting with some of them. Quite possibly, none of these recommendations will prove appropriate for you and your team. Then again, you might already be working with them. Or, you have come up with totally different ideas, and will continue to build on them as a result of your reading. Why not pick up there and start experimenting? Or, ask your colleagues for their opinion.

4. Getting started

It can take some time before an idea becomes a reality. It does involve a bit of courage and risk-taking – especially if processes have become habitual and evolved into rituals. Fear of being rejected is justified: On the one hand, there's complaining and dissatisfaction. On the other, the person who dares to suggest something novel is viewed with suspicion – or, is confronted with comments such as: “We've always done it that way!” “We've never done that before!” “What makes you think you're in charge?” This presents a double bind – and takes courage to negotiate a win-win scenario when faced with a team that is reluctant to bring in change. One lead-in could be: “I have a somewhat unusual idea – you might want to reject it outright – then again, it'll only take a few minutes ... what do you think”...?” Find an ally on the team who supports you. Don't get discouraged by initial resistance. Rather, take it as a hint not to change too many things at once.

5. 13 Recommendations to improve team meetings

Recommendation 1: What works; What doesn't?

Invite your colleagues to reflect as a group on what is good about the team meetings – what are they happy with and what can be done to sustain that feeling. When the team begins complaining about the meetings, be persistent and patiently redirect the focus on the positive aspects. You can be sure that you'll find a number of examples of which you can say: “Hey, let's keep that as is”. The goal here is to shift the team's perspectives regarding their meetings, not to change those aspects that are actually working. Moreover, while you were reflecting, you as a team might have become aware of what actually works – and, in the process, develop more enthusiasm for implementing the changes.

Recommendation 2: Worst case scenarios

You might ask your team to reflect on a totally different scenario: Take a few minutes of meeting time, and ask members to generate 40 to 50 ideas on how the meetings could be turned into a disaster. To do this, consider the following ideas:

How could you, as the team/project leader create a team meeting that no one would attend?

- How could you manage an increase in sick leave absenteeism precisely at the scheduled meeting time?

- Under what circumstances would you refuse to continue to take part in the meetings?
- How could you create team meetings that would lead directly to disaster?

Collect as many ideas as possible. Draw your ideas if you like. You're likely to enjoy this exercise – even if this isn't the top priority. You'll soon begin to realize that you and each and every individual on the team impact the team dynamic and that each one of you has the means to tip the balance toward either a positive or negative outcome.

Recommendation 3: Less can be more

Before you and your team jump in and begin initiating changes or trying out new ideas, consider what could be left out from previous approaches, only temporarily, for the sake of experimenting. Perhaps the meetings could be shorter, or maybe a few standardized points on the agenda could be dispensed with (and simply included in every second meeting instead). You could also streamline the agenda a bit more. In any case, you and your team will know best what's indicated depending on the situation.

Recommendations 4: The miracle question

Together with your team, you could pose the miracle question: *"Suppose tonight, while you slept, a miracle occurred. When you awake tomorrow, what would be some of the things you would notice about your team that had suddenly gotten better?"* (Adapted from Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer). Since you were sleeping, you would be unaware of any miracle having taken place: What might you notice about your behavior upon waking the next morning that would lead you to believe that the miracle had actually happened? Take fifteen to twenty minutes to reflect on possible answers. Go ahead and brainstorm, sharing your wishes in as much detail as you like. Round off the brainstorming with a group complaint about how, unfortunately, miracles just don't happen anymore – or, take a moment and consider if one or the other scenarios could actually be made to happen even if the "miracle" hadn't occurred.

Recommendation 5: Scaling questions

You can ask so-called scaling questions in the team: "On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 stands for dissatisfied and 10 stands for very satisfied, how satisfied are you with our team meetings". Each member answers the question by choosing a number on the scale. You can share your number if you like – answers to the follow-up question are the decisive ones: "Assuming your evaluation would have been one point higher, what would have changed in our meetings? And how could I have contributed." Discuss your answers and take notes. Quite possibly, you'll find an opportunity to try out some of these ideas in the near future.

Recommendation 6: Hesitation as opportunity

Your colleagues' reaction to your suggestions for a change in team work might not call forth spontaneous enthusiasm ("Wow! That's great, let's do it!"). There might, in truth, be quite a bit of resistance, not to say outright rejection. A team's strength lies in its different perspectives, experiences, competencies and skills. Those members who hesitate to join in on suggestions for change are showing a healthy dose of skepticism. They remind us that not all was bad, and not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Start with

experimenting with changes, slowly and for a limited time period. Then decide as a team what advantages and disadvantages the changes can bring in the long run.

Recommendation 7: Talking about success

You could share success stories: Start a team meeting by asking each member to share a situation in the last week where he or she was successful or could look back on a job well done – and, in the process, pass on a few tips to colleague. Exchange stories about what you achieved and details about what lead to your success.

Recommendation 8: Boasting about failures

In some teams outright boasting about achievements can be annoying for many other colleagues. Here you could invite the team to reverse the approach and boast about situations in which they came out less than successful: Who can come up with an amusing dumb mistake? The message is: “you learn from mistakes and grow wiser. That’s why one is not enough!”

Recommendation 9: Taking turns moderating

Why not encourage different team members to take turns moderating the meeting? There’s no reason why the task should fall to the project or team leader alone. On the contrary, sharing this “service” among members leads to an overall win-win scenario. The same goes for the minutes of the meeting. The way I see it, they should not be drawn up by the team leader.

Recommendation 10: Working with the agenda and time limits

You can draw up an agenda prior to the meeting or inform members by email a few days in advance, adding how much time should be dedicated to each item. Once the time is up, the team moves on to the second item. Points that weren’t discussed are postponed until the next meeting. As strange as this approach might seem to teams that are not used to time restraints, my experience has been that team members are surprised at the advantages it can bring within a very short time!

Recommendation 11: Pattern shifts

“Small steps in the direction of change are followed by more significant shifts”: Teams that enjoy experimenting, in particular, have developed a range of creative variations on the modus operandi they have become accustomed to. For example, they will purposefully switch their seating arrangements or choose different rooms for their meetings. Refreshments and snacks can be included one time and not the next. Members could appear at the meeting wearing sunglasses or silly hats, take on a more formal tone or address one another by an entirely different name. Granted, these suggestions might sound silly – their effect, however, can’t be judged until they’ve been put the test.

Suggestion 12: Following up with feedback

Take a few minutes at the end of you team/project meeting to give the person who moderated feedback (I liked ...). This is an opportunity for learning. As a team, share feedback according to the questions below (and be persistent in your questioning): What have we achieved today? How did we manage to make the meeting work? How has each one of you contributed to making the meeting a success?

Suggestion 13: Reward and consolation

If you and your team decide to introduce some changes into your team meetings, consider in advance how you will reward success and console in the case of (partial) failure. Putting heads together and sharing ideas on how to celebrate achievement is already a step on the path to success.

6. Prospects

I wish you successful experimenting with one or the other of these recommendations! Applied over time by a large number of teams, these approaches have repeatedly proved beneficial.

In closing, I would appreciate hearing about your experience with these recommendations – which ones you found encouraging and others that didn't work so well for you. Which one of these ideas you tried with what outcomes. What tips would you give colleagues who wish to try out some of these ideas but haven't quite mustered the courage? What suggestions do you have for improvement? And, what ideas have you and your team come up with? I'd very much appreciate feedback on your experiences so that other teams, too, can benefit.

References

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