

Three Keys To Meeting Success

By Baldwin H. Tom CMC



It doesn't take an article in a prominent business school magazine to tell us we attend a lot of meetings. Interestingly, the article went on to say that *we like meetings!* Even though we find most meetings marginally productive, take longer than necessary, and some a waste of time, we still attend them. Apparently we need meetings for social interactions, for an outlet and validation of our ideas, and because we expect (or hope) something important, or at least useful, will be presented. I go for all those reasons.

Beyond the need, what makes for a satisfying meeting? What do you like about those meetings in which you walk away feeling energized, feeling it was worth the time investment? Was it because the meeting was well organized? Was it that the material was of specific interest to you? Was it that the meeting atmosphere and exchanges were positive and engaging? No doubt all of the above.

Key ideas. From our work with many groups, both friendly and contentious, we have learned that there are three keys to meeting success – *process satisfaction*, *content satisfaction*, and *psychic satisfaction*. The order of these keys is deliberate and important.

Process Satisfaction. When participants believe a meeting will be well run and a process to manage the meeting will be used, there is a positive expectation for the meeting. What creates process satisfaction?

- * Ground rules for participation are known
- * Roles and responsibilities of the leader/facilitator and participants are clear
- * Agreement on a set of desired behaviors is made
- * Every person can speak without interruption
- * Disruptive and dominant persons are under control
- * The meeting stays on task and on time

- * Most importantly the meeting starts and ends on time

Content Satisfaction. Without process satisfaction, it is a tough task to gain content satisfaction. No matter the value of the content, if the meeting is not under control, a focus on content is difficult, or not at all. Content satisfaction begins with a useful agenda. The agenda is a roadmap that sets the stage for success in dealing with the contents of a meeting. Without a roadmap, then all paths (including dead ends) will arise when the meeting starts, leading to a chaotic, not satisfying, experience. Here are ideas to optimize content satisfaction:

- * Send out an agenda at least 3-5 days ahead of the meeting. The more pre-reading and work that is required for the meeting the earlier the agenda is sent out.
- * Do a topics check at the beginning of the meeting to be certain there is agreement with the topics. Ask for any other topics that should be included.
- * Since the agenda will be set up with a time schedule, it is important to have agreement which topics should have priority (need more time) and be at the top of the list of topics. This is an important point also when a participant may be leaving early and their input is needed. Rearrange topics as needed.
- * When, in the course of the meeting, a new subject arises that is not part of the original list, deal with it by setting it aside in a “to be considered” bin. The key is to acknowledge that the new topic is recognized, but will not be considered until the end (if time permits) or at the next meeting.

Psychic Satisfaction. The first two satisfactions address our left-brain need for order. Psychic satisfaction is clearly a right brain component. This satisfaction may be the *WD-40*[®] lubricant to meeting success. With this we walk away feeling good about the meeting. If it is missing, we do not feel good about the meeting, even if there is Content satisfaction. So what are the contributors to psychic satisfaction? We feel good about a meeting when:

- * Participants are valued -- meaning everyone is given a chance to speak.
- * Participants are respected -- where no one is cut off in mid-sentence that often happens in meetings. We allow everyone to complete their thoughts before commenting or criticizing. We don't try to finish someone's sentence when there is a pause in their presentation.
- * Participants try to be *yay-sayers*, not *nay-sayers*. It is so easy to criticize rather than make useful suggestions.
- * Ideas and positions may be attacked, but not people personally.
- * Disruptive individuals are not tolerated.
- * The atmosphere is positive, even when the topic is difficult.

Working with groups is much like a *full contact* sport. It is *full contact* because it engages both sides of the brain to achieve full satisfaction from a meeting. In fact, it engages body, mind, spirit, and relationships, the same components needed in creating a balanced, fulfilling life!

At your next meeting, decide whether you consider it fully successful or not and then see if the three *satisfactions* were met. We expect you will find that the best meetings have all three covered. The less successful meetings lack coverage of one or more of the *satisfactions*. By the way, if you utilize a facilitator instead of having the leader manage the meeting, that can enhance meeting success.

Have a happy meeting day!

About the author:

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