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Living engagement

Help! I'm in a Meeting and I Can't Get Out!

by Alex Wray

This was the third meeting of the six-member project team. About 45 minutes into the meeting, Greg was getting really frustrated. As the creative contributor to the project, he felt the meeting was going nowhere. The conversation kept going around in circles and people talked about the same issues they had talked about in the two previous meetings.

The technology guys explained with numerous examples how they were never given enough time to accomplish their tasks. The client liaison kept coming back to her point that she cannot go to the client with more delays and she described the many different times she'd had to do so already. Greg wished that the project manager would re-focus the meeting, but he just let everyone drone on. In fact, he kept getting on his old soapbox about how everything needed to fit within the adjusted budget.

Greg had heard all of this so many times before. His mind started to drift off. He checked his Blackberry and sent a few messages. As the meeting was probably going to drag on, he wished he could make a phone call to let his afternoon appointment know he'd probably be late? He was dying to get back to his desk and finish the plans he needed for the appointment. Exchanging eye-rolling glances with his creative colleague, Rachel, who was on her third page of elaborate doodling, he felt he was, once again, hostage in a meeting that was adding nothing new to the project.

What would you do in Greg's situation? Would you engage or disengage? Would you know what else to do? Typically — and unfortunately — most people disengage just like Greg in the example. Most of us are all too familiar with this situation. We have participated in — or perhaps even lead — those proverbial meetings where minutes are kept and hours wasted. And as common as those meetings are, most of us simply don't know what to do, other than to mentally check out and try to politely and quietly pass the time that seems to be standing still. Most people trapped in a droning-on meeting do not know how to positively influence the meeting whether they are the designated facilitator or a participant.

Untapped Opportunity

Learning how to participate in meetings more effectively may seem like a minor and trivial point, but weeding out unproductive meetings is a huge untapped opportunity available to practically every company. Well-functioning meetings bring with them benefits that reach far beyond alleviating boredom. Meetings are a critical forum in which managers can influence the level of engagement in their organization. Moreover, effective meetings don't just increase engagement; they also improve morale, boost creativity and save money.

Meetings are not something that we can ignore. In fact, they are becoming more and more important in the way we do business. Research results show that almost 72% of business leaders report that they spend more time in meetings than they did five years earlier; and the majority anticipated spending even more time in meetings in the near future (Tobia, Becker 1990; American Psychological Association Journal of Applied Psychology 2006, Vol. 91) The predictions of those leaders have come true many times over.

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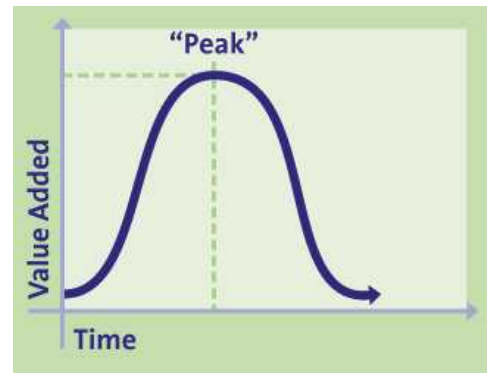
Today's executives are acutely aware that the scarcest resources in their overloaded organizations are time and attention. Because of constant time pressures, people have become chronic multi-taskers that do not seem to have time to give their full attention to any one task. Meetings are where we need to — and have a great opportunity to — minimize the use of time and maximize the use of attention. As more and more of work becomes teamwork, and there are fewer people to do the work, the number of meetings is going to continue to increase. Meetings are here to stay, and for many organizations, the number of meetings is going to keep growing.

According to the Wharton Center of Applied Research (Pennsylvania University), the average senior executive spends an average of 23 hours a week in meetings, and the middle manager 11 hours a week. The managers also report that 44 percent of all meetings are completely unproductive, and 25 percent could have been replaced by a phone call, email or memo. These numbers may not be applicable to every industry or company. However, if we calculate the hours each individual in a company spends in meetings each week, and then add up the cost of such meetings — including the cost of time to prepare and follow-up; the cost of equipment and space; the cost of delays to other tasks — we will most likely end up with a rather significant number. Meetings are too expensive to ignore and their role in our working lives is getting more and more significant.

What can we do?

Luckily, there are many things we can do to prevent meetings from going off track. To free the hostages and to prevent conversations from droning on, we recommend in our group facilitation skills training that groups learn how to pre-empt such behaviours before they occur. One of the tools, or "preventions," we have developed to help groups do this is what we call "the Peak."

Over the years, we have observed a common pattern in conversations. Initially, as the conversation progresses, the value the group gains from it increases. But as the amount of time spent discussing the same subject wears on, the incremental value added by each speaker decreases, until the point is reached where the longer something is discussed, the less value is added. We call this point, where the discussion has reached its optimal value to accomplishing the meeting objective, the "Peak" (see graph). Any conversation on that topic after the Peak tends to harm the objectives of the meeting rather than help them. The Peak is the point where participants start getting frustrated and tune out.



We recommend that the meeting leader should introduce the Peak graph and an explanation of the conversation pattern at the start of a meeting, and ask participants to be willing to acknowledge when the conversation has Peaked rather than sit by and become a spectator, or worse, a hostage in the meeting.

The Peak is a tool that allows for professional, respectful and productive feedback between team members while maximizing the efficiency of the meeting. It empowers all participants to be in charge of and responsible for their own level of engagement in the meeting.

Using the Peak does not mean there is no time for debate or hard questioning in a meeting. On the contrary, vigorous back-and-forth discussion is a sign that the topic is still moving toward the Peak. However, it is important to ensure that topics are not Peaked too early, as this may shut down valuable

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conversation. One way to avoid this is to ask the group as a whole to decide whether it has reached the Peak on the topic or not.

Peaking the President

The Peak is a simple tool that works even in a situation where the person who happens to be going on the longest is the president. In one of the meetings I facilitated with the senior management group of a large oil and gas company, the group found a way to use the Peak without saying a word. I had introduced the Peak, plotted the conversation pattern on a graph and explained how the Peak works. About an hour later in the meeting, the president seemed to be getting on his soap box, explaining his point in vivid detail. He was an engaging speaker. As I scanned the room, I noticed someone at a back table putting their fingertips together, trying to get my attention, but I couldn't figure out why. I continued to listen to the president.

A few moments later, I scanned the room again and noticed the entire back table had their fingertips together, and grins on their faces. At that point I realized they were using the universal hand signal for the Peak. I told the president that 'I sense we might be at the Peak with this.' He turned around and the back table — not wanting to get caught — put their hands down really quickly. The president chuckled and said, 'I guess that's a bit of a hobby horse of mine.' People laughed, heads were nodding, and he got the point.

The managers had not wanted to make the potentially career-limiting move of saying: 'Hey, president, you've Peaked!' but instead they used their fingertips to signal me that they needed help because they had heard the same point so many times before. Rather than remaining helpless hostages in their meeting and disengaging from it, they took charge of their own level of engagement and with the one simple action of signalling the Peak, they increased the effectiveness of the meeting for all participants.

Alex Wray is the co-founder and principal of the Wray Group, an international management development and consulting firm located in Vancouver, Canada. Since 1993, they have supported clients, ranging from innovative niche players to members of the esteemed Fortune 20, to realize more of their potential. They achieve this through engaging people to the company priorities and objectives that matter most, and equipping each person to deliver results to the best of their abilities. Wray Group believes in focusing and optimizing the creative energy and spirit of people to achieve outstanding business results – transforming the “workplace” into a great place to work.

To learn more about our training programs, visit our website at www.wraygroup.com, call us at 604-990-1321, or email clientservices@wraygroup.com.

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