



The Five Reasons To Meet

Glenn Newsom, Ph.D.

W

hen working in organized systems, we are naturally inclined to set meetings.

We intuitively understand that certain subjects require attention by the group (or groups) involved, and that by meeting we can move an issue beyond what we can accomplish individually. This can be true, and when meetings are well organized and facilitated effectively, productive things can occur.

However, despite the best intentions, most organizations have too many meetings that go too long and accomplish too little.

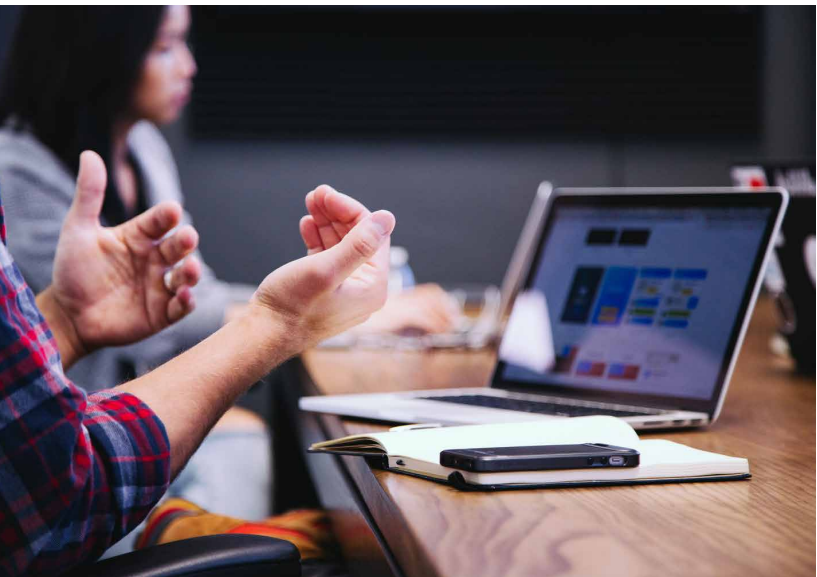
After observing countless meetings and coaching executive teams on how to use meeting times more effectively, I've come to the conclusion that there are really only five reasons to meet, and that a team or group's discipline to consciously manage each of the Five Reasons is the key to meeting successes or not.

1) To Inform

Sometimes we need to inform multiple people about something they need to know. Whereas Exploring is about discovering new thoughts and ideas, Informing is about sharing existing thoughts, ideas and information. Informing is about information dissemination- sharing information that is somehow helpful or enlightening to a group that needs to know. Meetings can be great places to Inform as real-time questions and answers can clarify points and ensure consistency of interpretation; but beware, we often spend way too much time Informing in meetings, and Informing can often be accomplished without having to meet. Rule of Thumb: Inform in meetings when subject complexity is high and clarity of interpretation is critical. Otherwise, inform via other methods.

2) To Explore

Sometimes we need multiple people with varied thoughts, opinions, and insights to thoroughly explore an idea, issue, or problem. When one perspective is not enough, we need to meet to explore the possibilities. The goal of Exploring is to create divergent thinking—to hear differing views and insights about something so as to fully understand the subject matter. When groups are aligned on the task of exploring, and judgment on ideas is withheld, many great insights can be accomplished.



3) To Debate

Sometimes we need multiple people to express opinions about what to do or not to do. Debate should be a pre-condition to deciding. It's the process of evaluating the pros and cons of an issue and the interests and concerns of multiple constituencies. Like Exploring, Debate creates insights and differing ways to think about a subject; but unlike Exploring, which should be judgment free, Debate is informed by judgment and differing and often opposing judgments should be encouraged. Whereas Exploring is about divergent thinking, Debate is about convergent thinking and designed to limit or narrow direction.

4) To Decide

Sometimes we need multiple people to align on a decision or decisions. By deciding together, a group creates a shared responsibility and ownership and moves a subject to an action and accountability phase. Deciding is perhaps the most poignant reason to meet because when we decide, we can often create movement to get things accomplished. Beware, not all decisions need a committee. In many cases, decisions can be made by an individual or individuals without the need to meet.



5) To Connect

Lastly, an important and often forgotten, aspect of team performance is interpersonal connection. The vitality of a team has a lot to do with the strength of the relationships between team members. Every team needs to pay attention to things beyond the transactional work if it is going to create trust, generate commitment, and leverage the discretionary energy needed for peak performance. Especially if some team members are remote, we need to dedicate time to connect relationally in our meetings to build cohesion and trust among members.



Once a group becomes more aware of the reasons to meet, it can more consciously decide if to meet (many times any or all of the 5 objectives can be accomplished without meeting); and if deciding to meet, become more disciplined in targeting and accomplishing the objectives.

In my observations, most meetings are undisciplined and have misaligned goals and expectations. For example, some people come into a meeting wanting to Explore something, while others are wanting to Debate it. Or, some are wanting to Inform while others are wanting to Decide. Some come hoping to Connect and only get technical discussion and information. Misaligned goals and unclear expectations are the first and most common roadblock to team performance. We've all been in meetings where we are being Informed about something that is irrelevant to our role or function. Or, we are trapped in an endless Debate without any conclusions or decisions.

Things begin to change for the positive when groups begin recognizing their own tendency to drift without intention. When groups get intentional about deciding when to meet or

when not to, and focus more intentionally on why they are meeting and how to move from objective to objective, good stuff begins to happen. The habit of groups to self-identify what they want to be using the meeting time for is not natural, but a needed skill for most teams.

Almost always, meetings need leadership. Most of the time, there is an identified leader within a meeting, but any person within a meeting can be the point person to pay attention to the processes that keep a meeting on track. Helping the team or any individual within the team to identify what they need from the meeting is key. Does the subject require Debate? Is there a need to Inform? How can we Connect? Does the group need to Explore ideas? Does the group need to Decide on something? Are all of the Five Reasons in play, or just one or two? Effective leaders keep these questions in mind as they facilitate their meetings and help coach others to do the same. If done well, the group will begin self-regulating. They will see the differences between Exploring, Connecting, Informing, Debating and Deciding. They will recognize when they need to transition from one of the Five Reasons to another and how to be clearer about objectives for meeting in the first place.

Keep the Five Reasons in mind for your next meeting and good things will happen.



Tips for leading a good meeting:

1) First decide whether a meeting is really needed. Can a subject be evolved without having to meet at all? Could something be Explored, Informed, Debated or Decided on beforehand or as a prelude to the actual meeting? Rule of thumb, meet less; meet shorter.

2) Gather the right people to meet. Think consciously about who needs to attend and who doesn't. Don't keep members hostage to the whole meeting if they do not need to be there for the whole process. Remember that more than 8 members of a meeting is usually too many.

3) Create an agenda and preview the agenda with meeting members. Ask for agenda feedback before the meeting and seek adjustments prior to the meeting.

4) Create space, even just a few minutes, to check in and Connect before diving into the agenda. It will help the leader know how people are showing up, and adds a personal, human element to the agenda.

5) Note the Five Reasons for meeting and actively identify what needs to occur to move an issue forward. Ask the group what's needed at the beginning and at intervals throughout the meeting and help the group stay on track without drifting unconsciously.

6) Stop a meeting if it becomes clear that out-of-meeting work needs to occur before a subject can be advanced.

7) Delegate Exploring, Informing, Debating, or Deciding to individuals or sub-groups before meeting (or after the meeting if it's clear that sub-groups need to advance an issue before continuing as a larger group).

8) Rarely meet for more than an hour. If an issue needs more than an hour, then you are trying to fit too many of the Five Reasons into one session; and besides, most people can't sustain true attention beyond an hour segment. If you must meet for longer than an hour, take breaks to ensure maximum productivity.