MANAGING MEETINGS IN ORGANIZATIONS

RESEARCH ON MANAGING GROUPS AND TEAMS

Edited by Marshall Scott Poole, on behalf of the Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research (INGRoup)

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MANAGING MEETINGS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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PREFACE

"Meetings, meetings, meetings … too many, too often, too long": a common refrain and complaint in today's organizations. Yet as much time as people spend in meetings and as many critical decisions and errors are made in meetings, it is surprising how little reflection and thought is devoted to the subject. Perhaps it is because we attend so many meetings we think we know all about them. As Fletcher (1984) has commented:

> It is, when you think about it, astonishing how cocksure most of us are about meetings. We treat them – as we would never treat tennis, golf, or horse-riding, let alone accountancy or computer programming – as though they can be mastered without training or guidance, or even much forethought (p. 13).

In *Managing Meetings in Organizations* Meinecke, Allen, and Lehmann-Willenbrock have assembled a set of chapters that provides this much needed reflection on meetings, their problems, their challenges, and what can be done to make them more effective. This volume includes chapters about a wide range of subjects related to meetings, some of which address well-known issues and others which break new ground.

After introducing conceptual foundations for the study of meetings, the volume considers the impact of meetings on individuals and the team itself. The importance of reflexivity in fostering effective meetings and enabling meetings is explored in depth. Attention then turns to the dynamics of gender and diversity in meetings, a topic much in need of exploration. The development of divisions and faultlines in meetings is a serious issue, and two excellent chapters consider the effects of faultlines and how they can be prevented or dissolved. The final section of the book focuses on leadership and strategy in meetings.

Managing Meetings in Organizations makes an important contribution to our understanding of this elemental social form. Meetings will always be with us in modern society, and explaining and improving them is a great contribution to organizational effectiveness.

This is the first volume of the *Research on Managing Groups and Teams* series that has been issued under the sponsorship of INGRoup, the Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research. I am proud to have this as our inaugural volume.

Marshall Scott Poole
Series Editor

FURTHER READING

Fletcher, W. (1984). *Meetings, meetings: How to manipulate them and make them more fun*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

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FOREWORD

While I don't love attending meetings, I do love studying them. And so do many, many others. Research on the topic of workplace meetings is exploding at an incredible rate. The work spans disciplines and spans the globe. A book like this allows us to stop, breathe, and get a good sense of where we are and where we need to go. I am grateful to the authors for taking on this meaningful effort.

This book does an excellent job highlighting the evolutionary origins of meetings and the different types of meetings that we encounter in contemporary organizations. The book then proceeds to capturing and discussing individual (specifically well-being) and team processes in meetings (including the role of entitativity and team reflexivity in meetings) before delving into the topic of diversity and gender in meetings. The book closes with three book chapters that shed new light on leadership and strategy processes that emerge in and through meetings. I also really appreciate that the different book chapters each lay out an agenda for research that can be incredibly helpful.

Meeting science is clearly evolving and maturing. I am excited to see meeting science finding its footing and establishing a nice balance of primary studies, evidence-based practice pieces designed to improve the current state of meetings at work, and integrative book efforts like this. Thank you to the authors for their excellent work and being such good stewards of meeting science.

Sincerely,

Steven Rogelberg
Chancellor's Professor
Professor, Psychology, Management, and Organizational Science,
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research (INGRoup), and especially to the series editor Marshall Scott Poole, for providing us with the opportunity to edit this volume. A key mission of INGRoup is to unite scholars who study groups and teams across fields and nations, and its annual conference provides an opportunity to network and socialize. It was at one of these conferences that the editors of this volume got to meet for the first time.

Accordingly, we were excited to bring together this international and interdisciplinary group of authors – ranging from early career researchers to established scholars in meeting science. Research on workplace meetings is growing thanks to the wonderful scholars who devote their time and energy to studying this intriguing – though in practice, sometimes despised – workplace phenomenon. We are grateful to the authors who contributed to this volume for their hard work.

We hope that those who share our enthusiasm for meetings will gain something meaningful from reading this book, be it an inspiration for their own research or actionable advice for an improved next meeting.

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Annika L. Meinecke, Joseph A. Allen, and Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock
Volume Editors

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PART I

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MEETING SCIENCE

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CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTIONARY SIGNIFICANCE OF TEAM MEETINGS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock, Joseph A. Allen and Mark van Vugt

ABSTRACT

Teams in organizations have weekly – or even daily – meetings to exchange information, generate ideas, solve problems, and make decisions. Yet, many team meetings are described as ineffective by the participants, due to either their design or dysfunctional communication practices within the meeting. To gain new insights into addressing these issues, this chapter goes back deep in history and discusses the origins and functions of group meetings. Building upon evolutionary theories of human behavior, the authors examine the evolutionary significance of meetings and the ways in which they were adaptive for our human ancestors. Drawing from this evolutionary perspective, we then compare meetings in ancestral times with their modern-day counterparts. Using evidence from (a) ethnographic studies of small-scale societies that model ancestral group life and (b) organizational and team science, we contrast the typical workplace meeting with its ancient counterpart. In this review of ancient and modern meetings, we identify meeting characteristics that have been maintained through time as well as those that are unique/new in the modern time. In doing so, we inspect to what extent meeting practices in ancestral environments are aligned or at odds with meeting practices in contemporary

organizations (the notion of mismatch). From these similarities and differences, we derive novel theoretical insights for the study of workplace meetings as well as suggestions for improving contemporary meeting practice. We also include a series of testable propositions that can inform future research on team meetings in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Solving problems, coordinating actions, building consensus, and negotiating status are some of the daily puzzles that humans face, and in no type of social interaction are these tasks more common today than in team meetings at work. Team meetings are held for numerous reasons: information exchange, idea generation, decision-making, and so forth (for an overview, see Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Rogelberg, 2015). Employees today report having at least three meetings – totaling nearly one full day – each week, and managers spend up to 80% of their work time in meetings (Romano & Nunamaker, 2001; Schell, 2010). In fact, we have become so accustomed to meetings as an organizing principle in our work that most people feel their workday is incomplete without having at least one meeting (Rogelberg, Allen, Scott, Shuffler, & Shanock, 2010).

From a broader organizational perspective, meetings are an essential attribute of organizations and the organizing process that occurs therein (e.g., Haug, 2013; Lehmann-Willenbrock, Rogelberg, Allen, & Kello, 2018). Specifically, meetings are sensemaking episodes where organizational structure and functions are constituted and reconstituted (Scott, Allen, Rogelberg, & Kello, 2015). An understanding of meetings as sensemaking episodes builds on the notion that meetings are typically sites of collaborative, ongoing interpretation in which organizational members interact within and across subunits to construct plausible definitions of what is happening in their respective environments – environments which are often equivocal, open to multiple, plausible interpretations (Scott & Trethewey, 2008). The sensemaking and organizing approach to meetings may also enjoy a complementary relationship with other approaches to understanding meeting practice in organizations. For example, research on meeting formats and design characteristics suggests that these choices shape the outcomes of the meeting both psychologically and from a productivity standpoint (Bluedorn, Turban, & Love, 1999; Davison, 1999). It may be that the organizational and meeting environment itself evolves as the sensemaking process unfolds, so effective facilitation amounts to the strategic adaptation of meeting communication processes to the needs of the group's ongoing organizing and sensemaking efforts (Coburn, 2001).

Even though meetings may be essential to organizing and organizational functioning, meetings often go wrong, and employees frequently complain about

having too many meetings that are ineffective (e.g., Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006). Yet, abandoning them altogether – despite several practitioner books recommending just that (e.g., Ressler & Thompson, 2008) – seems neither feasible nor helpful. As Schwartzman (1989) points out,

> meetings have generally been the background structure for examining and assessing what are assumed to be the "really" important matters of organizational life – for example, power, decisions, ideology, and conflict. (pp. 10–11)

Why are meetings in the workplace so important and prevalent, and yet why do they often go wrong? To explain why some negative meeting practices prevail in today's workplace, despite their importance, this chapter draws from evolutionary psychology theories. We examine the origins of meetings in ancestral human times – from approximately 200,000 years ago to about 10,000 years ago, before the spread of agriculture – and compare them to contemporary meeting practice in order to derive recommendations for meeting more effectively. While evolutionary analyses are commonly applied to explain features of the human body (as well as the bodies of other animals), they can also inform our understanding of the human mind and its behavioral products (Van Vugt & Kameda, 2012). Several scholars have considered the principles of evolutionary theory for explaining human behavior in organizations (e.g., Nicholson & White, 2006; Von Rueden & Van Vugt, 2015). In this chapter, we leverage evolutionary theory to provide a novel perspective on team meetings in organizations.

The appeal of an evolutionary perspective of workplace meetings is twofold. First, by going "back to the roots" of group meetings and discussing meeting practices in ancestral environments, we can examine the evolutionary significance of meetings and the adaptive goals they may have served for our human ancestors. Second, by inspecting potential mismatches between meeting practices in contemporary organizations and meeting practices in ancestral times, we can gain novel theoretical insights for the study of workplace meetings as well as make suggestions for improving contemporary meeting practice.

WORKPLACE MEETINGS DEFINED

When we refer to meetings in the present chapter, we focus on the workplace and on official gatherings rather than unofficial, unplanned social interactions at work such as "water-cooler talk." A commonly shared definition of workplace meetings was developed by Rogelberg et al. (2006), who define a meeting as a purposeful work-related interaction occurring between at least two individuals, which has more structure than a simple chat, but less than a lecture (see also Allen et al., 2015, for a detailed definition). Meetings are different from less formalized communications in that they are scheduled in advance and typically last 30–60 minutes. Meetings can be conducted face-to-face, in distributed settings (e.g., using communication technology such as Skype), or as a combination of

the two (e.g., when some meeting attendees are co-located and other attendees join them virtually).

Additionally, meetings are held for a variety of purposes both in terms of content and in terms of instrumental value. A scientifically derived taxonomy of meeting purposes identified 16 different overt purposes for which meetings are regularly called in contemporary organizations (Allen, Beck, Scott, & Rogelberg, 2014). These purposes include introducing a new service, discussing firm financial matters, discussing productivity concerns, discussing ongoing projects, discussing employee performance, educating and/or training associates, identifying problems/solutions, and so forth (see Allen et al., 2014 for the complete list). For additional consideration of meeting purposes and types, see the Kello and Allen chapter in this volume.

In a review of meeting composition and use statistics, Romano and Nunamaker (2001) discussed the optimal size of meetings (i.e., number of meeting attendees). Through this discussion, they looked at issues of relevance of the meeting to the person as well as the goals set forth for the meeting (e.g., problem solving, decision making, etc.). Based on their report, the majority of meetings contain less than 10 attendees (61%), and for meetings that involve problem solving or decision making, it is recommended that there be five or fewer participants. What is striking about their analysis is that the optimal size for a given meeting appears to be dependent upon a variety of factors including relevance of the meeting to attendees, the purpose of the meeting (e.g., decision making vs information sharing), as well as the facilities available for the meeting (e.g., conference style room; see also Cohen, Rogelberg, Allen, & Luong, 2011).

Contemporary workplace meetings have been studied by researchers from a variety of academic disciplines and perspectives (for an overview, see Allen et al., 2015). These researchers have connected meetings, how they are run (Cohen et al., 2011), and how many meetings people have (Elsayed-Elkhouly, Lazarus, & Forsythe, 1997; Rogelberg et al., 2006) to a variety of outcomes ranging from job satisfaction (Briggs, Reinig, & de Vreede, 2006; Rogelberg et al., 2010) to employee well-being (Rogelberg et al., 2006), employee engagement (Allen & Rogelberg, 2013), intentions to quit (Mroz & Allen, 2015), and team performance (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014; Lehmann-Willenbrock, Chiu, Lei, & Kauffeld, 2017).

Building upon this research and concurrently studying meeting processes, other researchers investigate the specific behaviors within group and team meetings (e.g., Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Lehmann-Willenbrock, Allen, & Meinecke, 2014; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014; Tadmor, Satterstrom, Jang, & Polzer, 2012, etc.). Through investigating actual verbal as well as nonverbal behaviors of individuals within meetings, these researchers have found various patterns of behaviors that promote good and bad team meeting outcomes. For example, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Allen, and Kauffeld (2013) discovered sequential patterns of procedural meeting communication that promote proactive meeting behaviors, including goal accomplishment and decision making.

From an evolutionary point of view, humans are group decision-makers. The advantages of human grouping behavior are manifold: Groups offer social support,

provide safety in numbers, allow for the division of labor, and promote information sharing (e.g., Forsyth, 2009; Van Vugt & Schaller, 2008). Meetings as group settings can generally be considered adaptive because they allow for information pooling, distribution, and exchange (e.g., Allen et al., 2014). The variety of information potentially shared in groups is greater than that contained in any single individual and provides the opportunity for a better outcome – a phenomenon that has been described as the "wisdom of crowds" effect (Demiris, Washington, Oliver, & Wittenberg-Lyles, 2008; Vogwill & Reeves, 2008) – even though methods of information sharing during group meetings may not always be ideal. Furthermore, meetings are a place where interpersonal networks are formed that facilitate knowledge transfer beyond the meeting itself (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

MEETINGS IN ANCESTRAL ENVIRONMENTS

To examine the evolutionary significance of meetings, we return to human evolutionary history when small, egalitarian, kin-based hunter-gatherer bands, sometimes nested in larger tribes, were the norm. This setup broadly describes the way anatomically modern humans lived for nearly 200,000 years, and is the setting in which the human brain, social cognition, and behavior evolved (Dunbar, 1993, 1998; Gärdenfors, 2006). In looking at human meeting behavior in this time period, we aim to address four core questions: (1) Have humans always had meetings? (2) If so, what did past meetings look like and what were the functions? (3) What are the discrepancies between ancestral and modern meetings (i.e., mismatch)? And (4) how can these discrepancies inform meeting science and practice in contemporary organizations?

Humans are an intensely social species and, like most primates, have a long history of group living, which has been the key to survival and success (for an overview, see Van Vugt & Kameda, 2012). An inextricable aspect of living in groups is coming together for meetings, and even though archaeological evidence is typically used to piece together the past, meeting behavior can be difficult to distinguish from regular group life in the archaeological record. Instead, ethnographic accounts of behaviors in modern-day small-scale societies (which provide models of ancestral group life) and studies of the behaviors of our primate relatives can help us approximate how early humans may have behaved (Marlowe, 2010).

Studying the conditions of the ancestral environment can also explain human preferences for social groups of certain sizes, which persist today. Stiller and Dunbar (2007) studied social networks and neocortex size in humans and other primates, and found that cognitive capacity and memory skills correlate with the size of the social networks that can be managed. This "social brain hypothesis" suggests that the human brain has evolved to function in social groups and form personal relationships with a maximum of about 150 people (a figure known as Dunbar's Number), with about 35 people in our general social groups, more familiar groups of about 15, and five people with whom we have the closest relationships and on whom we depend for support (circles of intimacy; Dunbar, 1993, 1998).

The earliest gatherings with enough structure to be called "meetings" would have likely been the small groups of band members that met to hunt or forage together – behavior which can also be seen among male chimpanzees, our closest relatives (Boesch, 1994). Female baboons – another close relative – tend to stay in the same groups for their whole lives, form alliances within these groups, and join together to compete with males and other allied groups for food (Barton, Byrne, & Whiten, 1996). Sometimes meetings took place with relatively large proportions of the group; though the meetings themselves may have been smaller than present-day meetings, they were often composed of most of the adult male members of the tribe (Bamberger, 1974; Sahlins, 1963), and would have always consisted of face-to-face interactions.

Evolutionary Functions of Meetings

Like modern workplace meetings, meetings in ancestral times were held for a variety of purposes and designed to accomplish a variety of aims. We focus on a few here that are particularly salient, and for which examples are accessible in the ethnographic record. The explicit purposes of ancient meetings likely concerned important topics like food sharing, trade, marriage, conflict resolution, politics, and warfare. For example, among the Ilongot people – a hunter-gatherer tribe in the Philippines who still live in much the same way our ancestors did – meetings were called to discuss "marrying and killing" and provided a setting for the exchange of gifts and the reinforcement of social bonds between different clans (Rosaldo, 1973; Schaller et al., 2013).

The act of meeting itself also served as a ritual for producing and reinforcing identity within a group or community (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 216). Meetings are considered a stable source of cultural validation in times of instability and changing contexts, which would have been apt descriptors of daily life for foragers during most of human history. Along these lines, Schwartzman (1989) described group meetings as sense-makers: "the place where individuals in a changing context are able to reconstitute themselves to themselves as a social and cultural group" (p. 44). In meetings, the group may discuss and work through their unstable situation and forge a new identity for themselves and their society. This process is illustrated in an account of a ten-hour meeting held by the Banaban community, who were forced to resettle on Rambi Island, Fiji, when their home was turned into a large mine: the meeting became "a form through which Banaban identity could be invoked and understood" (Silverman, 1977, p. 45).

Meetings were also called for large-scale cooperative gatherings between different tribes, typically related to issues of tribal governance, territory, warfare, and/or peacekeeping. The Western Inuits have been recorded deploying 300–400 men in battle, where most tribes had only 10–15 adult men as warriors, indicating meetings and coordination between groups (Allen & Jones, 2014). Furthermore, meetings provided opportunities to develop economic exchanges (e.g., bartering relationships), resolve conflicts, and make other important community decisions.

Though not always an explicit function of ancestral meetings, these gatherings were also places where social status and hierarchy were negotiated and reinforced,