



FRONTIER ASSOCIATES, INC.  
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## **Case Study #5**

### **The Case of the Monumental Meetings**

#### **The Situation**

The 16 senior executives of ABC Electronics Corp.<sup>1</sup> met twice a week. On Tuesday afternoon they met for a few hours for an informational discussion on topics of interest. On Friday they met to make decisions.

The Friday meetings, which almost always took the entire day, gave rise to universal frustration. Arguments over issues would go on for hours, often without resolution. Issues thought to have been decided in prior meetings would arise and be debated at length, as if the prior decision had never been made. The CEO was discouraged because he couldn't get the vice-presidents to make a decision. They would argue until he got weary and ended the discussion by imposing his decision. Everyone felt that the meetings were unproductive.

#### **The Goals**

The CEO engaged Frontier Associates, Inc. (FAI) to accomplish two primary goals. First and foremost was to get the senior managers to efficiently make decisions and own them instead of always relying on the CEO. The second was to make the Friday meetings more efficient and effective by radically reducing their duration and improving the quality of their results.

#### **Our Analysis**

To understand better what was going on in the meetings we conducted a confidential 1-on-1 interview with each of the senior executives. Their universal discontent with the meetings was confirmed. In addition we discovered that there was disagreement as to the purpose of the meeting. Some of the vice-presidents expressed the belief that the purpose of the meeting was to debate the issues so that the president could make an informed decision. One even said that when there appeared to be agreement he often took the devil's advocate position, even though it was not consistent with his personal viewpoint, to make sure that all viewpoints were represented.

Based on these interviews we concluded that the group lacked some key components for holding effective meetings:

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.



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- Explicit agreement as to the meeting's purpose
- Clear guidelines as to how the meeting would arrive at decisions
- Effective processes for managing the meeting

In addition, we found that the senior executives perceived that they were primarily accountable only for their individual departments, and that overall accountability for the company rested solely with the CEO.

As a result of this analysis, we established the following approach for accomplishing the engagement goals:

- Alter the senior executives' perceptions so that they regarded themselves as being jointly accountable for the entire company.
- Provide the senior executives with the concepts and skills for conducting effective meetings.

## The FAI Solution

We reported a summary of our findings to the senior executive group. Many were surprised to learn that there was lack of consensus on the purpose of the Friday meeting. The CEO was astonished to discover that other executives viewed the meeting as a debating exercise to help him reach a good decision. Along with the existing frustration, these revelations established sufficient motivation for the group to act to improve the meeting.

We then conducted a training for the executives in efficient meeting management<sup>2</sup>. Some of the topics included the purpose of meetings, creating a purpose for a specific meeting, the roles of the various meeting participants, creating agendas, suggested guidelines for meeting management, and managing various meeting processes to efficiently arrive at meaningful decisions.

At the first Friday meeting after the training, two agenda items were the main topics. The first was a declaration that the senior executives as a group were accountable for everything that occurred at the company. The CEO declared that while he remained accountable to the board, he would overrule a decision of the senior executive group only in extreme circumstances. The topic sparked a lively discussion that resulted in unanimous passage of the declaration.

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<sup>2</sup> See the *Effective Meetings Workshop* and the *Effective Meetings* series of The Inquiry articles for some of the principles covered in the training.



The second main topic established the purpose of the Friday meeting and set meeting guidelines consistent with the declaration. The executives decided that the purpose of the meeting was to “to uncover and resolve any impediments to fulfilling the company’s strategic plan.” Here are some of the meeting guidelines they adopted:

- The meeting would be scheduled for two hours and would start and end exactly on time, regardless of who was present.
- The CEO would vote only in the event of a tie or, in extreme circumstances, to exercise a veto.
- An absent senior executive could send his or her deputy, who could exercise the senior executive’s voting power. All members agreed to be bound by the decisions of the group whether or not they were present.
- All supporting material for an agenda item had to be distributed to all participants by end of day on the Monday prior to the meeting or the agenda item was removed from the draft agenda.
- The meeting would be conducted under the assumption that all participants had read the supporting material. No time would be taken during the meeting to repeat material previously distributed.
- The group would aim for consensus decision in all cases. Where consensus could not be reached, the participants would either use majority vote or the CEO would decide.
- The Friday meeting would be used only for making decisions. All background discussions would take place at other times.
- The COO would play the role of meeting manager. In that capacity, he would be accountable for ensuring that the agenda was fulfilled, and he would stay out of content discussion.

For six months after the training an FAI consultant sat in on many of the Friday meetings to observe and provide coaching to the COO as meeting manager. Typically the consultant would simply observe the meetings and later e-mail observations and coaching to the COO.

## **The Results**

The Friday meetings, which had typically lasted all day with an indefinite ending time, now could be relied on to last precisely two hours. All participants said that the meetings were now highly productive and worth their time. The CEO said that the vice-presidents were making decisions and holding themselves fully accountable for the activities of the company. Five years later, despite an almost complete turnover in personnel, the meetings are still run with the same principles and produce the same high level of results.



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## Summary

With proper training and coaching, meetings can be made highly productive and satisfying.