



Effective Meetings #4

Separate “Decision Making” from “Information Sharing”

One of the major causes of ineffective meetings is that information-sharing activities are often combined with decision-making activities, exacerbated by treating these two types of activities as if they were the same. We have found that information-sharing and decision-making are very different activities that require different types of participation and process management, and further, that participation in one type of activity often inhibits participation in the other.

We recommend that organizations separate meetings for information-sharing and general discussion from decision-making meetings. Some of the specific reasons for this separation are:

- The two types of activities are managed quite differently. Decision-making is often facilitated by specific steps, such as brainstorming, analysis, and only then, decision. Information-sharing often may be, and possibly should be, highly unstructured.
- Decision-making often requires attendance by specific participants. Optional attendance is usually sufficient for information-sharing or informal discussion.
- Decision-making may have urgency and time criticality. Information-sharing and discussion may be able to take place at a much more leisurely pace.
- Decision-making meetings often require rigorous time management to ensure that a conclusion is reached in the time available or by a given deadline. A discussion to explore a topic may require only an elapsed time frame since no specific consensus or agreement is needed.
- Information-sharing is often a passive activity on the part of the participants, whereas decision-making requires active participation.
- The objective of decision-making is to reach agreement. During information-sharing, it may be desirable to have a wide diversity of views expressed, and agreement is not typically required.
- If shared information is perceived to be irrelevant to the participants, they often “tune out,” dulling their awareness and the quality of their thinking. On the other hand, decision-making requires participants to be focused, and able to listen to others with full concentration.



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Putting this Article into Action

A few ways people have implemented this separation include:

- Assign agenda items for decision-making and information-sharing to separate meetings.
- Identify agenda items as information-sharing or decision-making.
- Have decision-making items precede information-sharing unless the information-sharing is relevant to the decision-making.
- Light and short information-sharing agenda items may be a welcome relief between tough decision-making items.
- Separate the two types of agenda items with a break, particularly if information-sharing precedes decision-making.

Summary

A simple separation of decision-making activities from information-sharing activities has vastly improved the quality of many of our clients' meetings as well as the participants' satisfaction with their meetings.

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