



Well-spent meeting time

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Two of GGI's most-read articles are about writing board papers and running meetings – principal consultant Peter Allanson revisits a popular theme.

A less-than-flattering definition of a meeting is that it is a device that takes minutes but lasts hours. If there is even a hint of truth in this assertion, then it's important to make sure that time spent in meetings is time well spent.

GGI consultants spend many hours every year observing meetings and it's fair to say that one of the questions left in their minds is "so what?". What has the meeting item achieved, has it done what the author and sponsor wanted or needed to be done and will the outcome make any difference?

Meeting mechanics

Observing meetings is an important facet of assessing the effectiveness of an organisation's governance and its board. We see the directors in action, we can see the impact of the chair and we can also see whether the board is using its time productively. The productivity assessment is multi-faceted and in large measure is related to the way the executive deals with its board.

First and foremost, it is worth reminding ourselves that the board is the absolute top of the organisation. Its responsibilities are unique. Former ICI chairman and BBC business trouble shooter Sir John Harvey Jones said: "The future of the enterprise depends on

the board as a whole and therefore the direction in which it is led is the unique responsibility of the board."

That collective responsibility does not ignore the importance of distinguishing between the role of the board and that of the executive. It is the bargain struck between them that establishes just how well they work together.

This basic tenet applies equally to any meeting in an organisation. All fit within a hierarchy and so have a connectivity that justifies – or not – the reason for meeting.

Purpose, outcomes and papers

Meetings must have a purpose – a reason for participants to devote their time. This applies to any sort of organisation, from a PLC to an NHS trust to a board or trustees or a meeting of managers. What is the scope, what outcomes or outputs are wanted and who is needed to help deliver them?

Delivering outcomes is where the bargain between executives and the board comes into its own. That means providing the meeting with material that enables it to take decisions, give advice or comment, which in turn licences the executive to do its job of running the enterprise on a day-to-day basis.

Papers should be only as long as they need to be and clear in what they are asking of those in the meeting – the response wanted, the need to be fulfilled etc. They should present the key information that will help the board or meeting to take the action requested. Papers that don't

include all the necessary information in a form that is easy to read and understand can result in poor decision-making.

Good quality papers:

- start with a statement of what is being asked of the directors, together with a description of who else has considered the paper and a short executive summary so the directors can grasp the key issues before studying them in greater detail – this should include recommended actions
- offer the right level of detail, determined by the information the director needs to make an informed decision – and no more than that
- include an analysis of the risks of the proposal
- give details of any internal signoffs, approvals, discussions, external advice, views of key stakeholders which have informed the drafting of the paper, as these help to make clear the authority with which it comes to the meeting.

Providing this quality of material should result in papers that are accessible, that stimulate healthy discussion and result in good conclusions.

Answering the so what question

There is no doubt that the chair of a meeting can be the single most important element in its effectiveness. The chair must be in control of:

- the agenda
- the discipline of ensuring members have time to consider papers before the meeting
- being fully briefed – good chairs do not bluff their way through meetings
- making sure presentations are additive and not repetitive
- including all shades of opinion in the discussion – including finding ways of persuading the silent or quiet to speak up
- leading the discussion to a conclusion.

In our experience, chairs do not often enough or effectively enough summarise discussions to confirm next steps and actions at the end of an item. The ability to do this is really important and a good summary will make all participants feel that their contribution has been valued and considered – and that makes it more likely they will support the conclusion even if it was not their preferred outcome.

This is a skill worth developing and it makes a huge difference to the answer to the question “so what?” – as well as helping to ensure that time devoted to the meeting was time well spent.

Finally, it would be wrong to conclude this post without paying homage to gurus whose excellent work informed this and our previous articles on the subject: Barbara Minto and Walter A Shewart.

The best boards embrace opportunities for third-party scrutiny because they know it will offer precious insights about how they do things – including running meetings. Find out more about how GGI can help support your organisation with a governance review: <https://www.good-governance.org.uk/what-we-do/services/reviews>

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