

IMPACT OF MEETING PROCEDURES ON MEETING EFFECTIVENESS

Carol T. Nixon
Glenn E. Littlepage

Middle Tennessee State University

ABSTRACT: This study examined the relationships between meeting procedures and perceived meeting effectiveness. Sixty-seven subjects from a variety of organizations completed a questionnaire containing 20 meeting procedure items. Meeting effectiveness was measured by two items, goal attainment and decision satisfaction. Factor analysis of meeting procedure items revealed four major factors: open communication, task focus, systematic approach, and timeliness. Several meeting procedures were related to effectiveness. Results suggest that the following may be important processes leading to effective meetings: open communication, focus on tasks, thorough exploration of options, analysis of decision consequences, action planning, temporal integrity, agenda integrity, and leader impartiality.

Meetings represent a pervasive and important aspect of organizational life. It has been estimated that executives spend approximately 10 hours per week in meetings (Kriesberg, 1950) and that in the United States alone, perhaps a million meetings are going on at any given hour during the business day (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1987, p. 418). The meeting literature consists primarily of observations, opinions, and suggestions concerning how to run more effective meetings (e.g., Jay, 1976; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1987; Renton, 1980; Tropman, 1980). Although many of the suggestions concerning meeting effectiveness appear plausible and are based on experience or theory, most have not been tested empirically. While there has been much research dealing with effects of group processes on group performance and decision making (e.g., Brandstatter, Davis, & Schuler, 1978; Forsyth, 1990; Shaw, 1981), relatively little research focuses specifically upon meeting processes (Schwartz-

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Glenn Littlepage, Psychology Department, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN 37132.

man, 1986; 1989). Further, only loose linkages seem to exist between the group performance research and the popular meeting literature.

The present study examines the extent to which meeting effectiveness is related to a variety of meeting procedures that are suggested in the literature and is an attempt to strengthen the connection between the empirical literature on group performance and the applied concerns of those who design, conduct or participate in meetings. Specifically, five hypotheses are tested concerning relations between processes occurring in meetings and meeting effectiveness. In addition, the dimensions of meeting procedures are explored.

One issue frequently discussed in the meeting literature is the role of the meeting leader. Several authors suggest that the leader should orchestrate the meeting, but should not endorse a particular proposal or point of view. According to Dunsing (1977), the leader should not control the meeting and should avoid taking total responsibility for it because if the leader has tight control, dialogue will be cut off, negatively affecting the quality of decisions. Janis (1982) suggests that leader endorsement of a solution can decrease the effectiveness of a decision-making group by limiting the range of options that are explored and by inhibiting criticism of the leader's solution. Similarly, Doyle and Straus (1976) state that leader partiality can lead to a "rubber-stamp" meeting (p. 33). Renton (1980) asserts that the leader should "control" the meeting to keep it focused and moving forward, but should restrain from giving his opinion. Tropman (1980) likens the role of the leader to that of an orchestra conductor in that one can not direct and play at the same time. Thus, the present study hypothesized that leader impartiality is positively related to meeting effectiveness (Hypothesis 1).

Another meeting issue concerns agendas. Tropman (1980) strongly emphasizes the use of an agenda and strict adherence to it. He further recommends several rules for agenda development and its structuring including agenda integrity or, in other words, adherence to the agenda. Agendas are considered important for effects on member preparation, efficient use of time, and ultimately, meeting effectiveness (Doyle & Straus, 1976). However, Dunsing (1977) suggests that although the agenda can be helpful, it also can become "wooden" thus causing greater expense of time and energy on secondary issues and thus ignoring issues that can quickly developed within a dynamic organization. While meeting theorists are somewhat divided concerning how rigidly an agenda should be followed, most emphasize the importance of having and following an agenda. Thus, it was hypothesized that having an agenda and following it would be associated with meeting effectiveness (Hypothesis 2).

Authors have agreed on other issues concerning meetings. Complete participation by all group members may be repetitive and time consuming, and some members may choose not to contribute (Dunsing,

1977). However, it is important to create the *opportunity* of full participation for all group members (Stasser & Titus, 1985; Tropman, 1980). For example, Maier and Solem (1952) found that procedures to encourage wide participation helped groups recognize a correct minority viewpoint. In addition to wide participation, a climate which facilitates open communication, including the expression of dissenting opinions, seems important. Nemeth and Staw (1989) report a series of studies which suggest that expression of dissenting opinions can lead to more thorough evaluation and better discussions. Likewise, Tjosvold (1980; 1990) emphasizes the importance of constructive controversy, a climate which encourages frank discussion of differences within a cooperative context. Thus, the study's third hypothesis was that open communication is positively related to meeting effectiveness (Hypothesis 3).

Many theorists assert that a number of alternatives must be developed and consequences thoroughly investigated in order to insure an effective decision (e.g. Hoffman, 1965; Janis, 1989; Nutt, 1984). Janis (1989) suggested a vigilant processing strategy in which the group explicitly discusses objectives, examines a wide range of options, and thoroughly evaluates various proposals. Therefore, an additional hypothesis was that a thorough and systematic approach would be related to meeting effectiveness (Hypothesis 4).

Additionally, authors stress "temporal integrity" (Tropman, 1980) or beginning and ending at the appointed times (e.g. Dunsing, 1977). Therefore, the last hypothesis was that temporal integrity would be related to meeting effectiveness (Hypothesis 5).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 42 men and 25 women who worked in a wide variety of organizations in the southeast United States. They ranged in age from 22 to 63 with a mean age of 41.2. Fourteen subjects worked for a communications company, 13 for an appliance manufacturer, 8 for the psychology department of a public university, 6 for an engineering department of a private university, and 26 for 26 different organizations including banking, retail, and non-profit organizations. Subjects' jobs ranged from clerical to top-level management. Organizational tenure ranged from under one year to 35 years with a median of 8.0

Materials

A 51-item questionnaire was developed with 20 items that described meeting procedures, and the following two items that served as the study criteria: (1) "The group is successful in reaching meeting

Table 1
Meeting Procedures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Goals <i>r</i>	Sat <i>r</i>	Factor Loading
Factor 1 Open Communication					
All members participate	3.66	1.10	.28*	.41**	.85
A variety of options are explored before the group makes its final decision	3.88	0.98	.38**	.50***	.79
Consequences of decisions are fully explored before final decisions are made	3.55	1.02	.43***	.48***	.76
Meetings follow the agenda	3.52	1.17	.31*	.44***	.51
You would feel comfortable working with the members of your group in the future	4.31	0.74	.33**	.34**	.51
Factor 2 Task-Oriented Focus					
You are 100% committed to the group meetings in terms of time and effort requirements	3.75	1.11	.37**	.42***	.74
You adequately prepare for your role in the group before the meeting	3.82	1.01	.19	.44***	.72
You have access to the necessary and pertinent information and/or materials needed to prepare for the meetings	3.90	0.99	.28*	.18	.60
The meetings are a more satisfying experience than a frustrating one	3.57	0.99	.35**	.54***	.60
The goals of the meeting are clear and well defined	3.72	0.95	.61***	.65***	.56
Meeting decisions are acted upon in a timely and efficient manner	3.54	0.77	.40**	.66***	.49
Factor 3 Systematic Approach					
Decisions made during the meeting are put in writing	3.64	1.28	.12	.34**	.83
The minutes from the previous meeting are reviewed at the beginning of the next meeting in a timely and efficient manner	2.34	1.46	-.04	.21	.73
A written agenda is given out to members before scheduled meetings	2.79	1.10	-.01	.14	.55
Someone outside the group evaluates the decisions	2.51	1.26	.16	.40**	.54
Factor 4 Timeliness					
The meetings begin on time	3.66	1.17	.32**	.36**	.78
The meetings end on time	3.13	1.15	.30*	.12	.78
Factor 5					
Meetings are formal	2.15	0.99	.09	.01	.82

Table 1 (continued)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Goals <i>r</i>	Sat <i>r</i>	Factor Loading
	Factor 6				
You attend group meetings	4.33	0.86	.12	.02	.90
	Factor 7				
The meeting leader remains impartial rather than speaking out and expressing his/her views	2.75	1.03	-.04	.34**	.92

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

goals" which measured goal attainment; and (2) "You are satisfied with the group's decisions" which measured the degree of decision satisfaction. (Additional items dealing with influence attempts were included, but are not discussed in this article). Subjects were instructed to use as their reference one particular group whose meetings they regularly attended and indicate how often each meeting procedure occurred based on the following 5-point scale: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), and almost always (5). (All 20 meeting questionnaire items are reproduced in Table 1.)

Procedure

Of the 126 questionnaires distributed, 67 were returned for a return rate of 53%. For the communications and the appliance manufacturing companies described above, questionnaires were distributed to several managers at different hierarchical levels within the organization to complete and to distribute within their department. For each academic setting, questionnaires were circulated within the selected department. The remaining subjects were single representatives from 26 organizations who volunteered to participate in the study. Subjects were assured that responses were anonymous and that participation was voluntary. While this sample was chosen largely on the basis of availability, it provides a range of meeting contexts which should help insure generality of the findings.

RESULTS

Significant correlations were observed between 16 of the 20 meeting procedure items and meeting effectiveness. The following items were

significantly related to both criteria of meeting effectiveness: clear, well defined goals; timely and efficient action on decisions; active participation; full exploration of decision consequences; exploration of a variety of options; commitment of time and effort to the meeting; agenda integrity; meetings that begin on time; comfortable feeling about working with group members in the future; and more satisfaction than frustration derived from the meeting. See Table 1 for item descriptive statistics and factor loadings.

In order to more fully understand the major dimensions of meeting behavior, the meeting procedure items were included in a principal components factor analysis with orthogonal varimax rotations. This procedure yielded seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, although only the first four factors had more than one item with a factor loading greater than .50. The first four factors accounted for 55.2% of the item variance and all 7 accounted for 72.4%. The first four factors were interpreted as: open communication, task-oriented focus, systematic approach, and timeliness. (Items in Table 1 are arranged by factor.) All items in the open communication factor, the task-oriented focus factor, and the timeliness factor are positively related to at least one of the criteria of meeting effectiveness. Two of the items in the systematic approach factor were related to meeting effectiveness.

DISCUSSION

Correlations between the meeting procedure items and perceived meeting effectiveness provide at least partial support for each of the five hypotheses. The results are in many ways consistent with findings from small group research and with suggestions offered by meeting theorists, and suggest that procedures used within a meeting may have important impacts on the effectiveness of the meeting.

Results provided partial support for Hypothesis 1 and suggestions of group and meeting theorists (e.g., Janis, 1982; Tropman, 1980) that leader impartiality leads to more effective meetings. Leader impartiality was not related to rated success at reaching meeting goals, but was related to member satisfaction with the group decision. Since the implementation and thus the effectiveness of many decisions is largely determined by member acceptance (Vroom & Jago, 1988), leader impartiality may result in decisions which produce more effective results.

While leader impartiality is suggested by theory and by the present study, results indicate that most leaders did not remain impartial. Only 24% of the leaders were described as often or almost always remaining neutral; 43% rarely or never remained neutral.

Hypothesis 2 received partial support. Although there has been an

emphasis on agendas in previous literature (e.g., Doyle & Strauss, 1976; Tropman, 1980), the present study found that the use of an agenda did not improve meeting effectiveness. On the other hand, Tropman's (1980) concept of "agenda integrity" was supported. When an agenda was used, following it was significantly related to meeting effectiveness. Perhaps an agenda is not needed in all situations. An agenda may be unnecessary if meetings are for informational purposes, cover routine matters, or if other means of coordination are available. The issue of when an agenda is needed is worthy of further attention.

All items loading on the open communication factor were related to effectiveness, providing strong support for Hypothesis 3. This is consistent with previous research which also suggests that open communication is important for group performance (Harper & Askling, 1980; Lanzetta & Roby, 1960; Laughlin, 1988).

Exploring a number of options and the consequences of a decision are generally regarded as critical to effective group decisions (e.g. Janis, 1982; Hoffman, 1965; Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Patton & Giffin, 1978). The results of the present study were consistent with previous research, thus Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Consistent with the principle of temporal integrity (Tropman, 1980) and Hypothesis 5, both beginning and ending meetings on time correlated with effectiveness. However, additional formality may not be useful. Formality of the meeting and the review of the previous meeting's minutes in a timely and efficient manner were not related to meeting effectiveness. Excessive formality in operating procedures may, in fact, limit the expression of ideas, alternatives or disagreement thereby adversely impacting effectiveness (Cherns, 1987).

Goals and commitment to group goals are generally regarded as essential for effective teamwork (e.g. Zander, 1971; 1982). Also, having access to necessary information (Hackman, 1987) and the use of action planning as a necessary step in decision implementation have been emphasized in past research (e.g. Patton & Giffin, 1978; Yukl, 1989). In the present study, having clear goals, committing time and energy to the meeting, having access to necessary information, putting decisions in writing, and acting upon decisions in a timely manner were positively related to meeting effectiveness.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study provide empirical support for a number of suggestions of meeting theorists. Meeting effectiveness is related to: open communication, generation of a variety of options, full exploration of decision consequences, a task-oriented focus, action planning, temporal integrity, agenda integrity, and leader impartiality. These findings emphasize the importance of appropriate processes for effective meetings. A meeting represents a substantial investment of human resources which can be more effectively managed

through the use of appropriate group processes thus ultimately leading to better outcomes and results.

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