"Productive Meeting Techniques": How a group of people can engage in high-quality dialogue and reach wise decisions without talking to each other

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Abstract. One of the weaknesses of the human condition is that most of us have not been taught how to design or run a productive meeting. So we just bumble along, behaving as we did around the family dining table or in the school yard. When this 'unconscious incompetence' is brought to meetings or group work, the shortcomings multiply. Groups that form with the best of intentions often flounder because of the lack of insight and skill of their members. Frustration, fragmentation, and group failure are a common result. It does not have to be this way. 'Productive Meeting Techniques' provides tools and skills that enable people to engage in positive constructive dialogue without discussion and to reach very wise decisions together without talking at all. Though counterintuitive, these tools can be adopted immediately, are great fun, and have the beneficial bi-product of strengthening relationships as well as leading to much wiser decisions. 'The task is not so much to see what no one has yet seen; but to think what nobody has yet thought, about that which everybody sees' (Erwin Schrödinger 1946)

Introduction

Most people have participated in meetings that occupy the time of dedicated people who contribute earnestly. Yet the end result is often a very poor measure of the time and effort expended. After three days of meetings in a small rural community, I found myself at the local airport, with four hours to spare before the plane arrived.

Being reflective by nature, and driven by a level of frustration over the quality of this particular meeting experience, I listed on my lap-top all of the behaviours that had occurred in these meetings that seemed to distract from the output: people arriving late; side conversations; drifting off the topic; people whose behaviour others found difficult - the list contained those behaviours that most, if not all of us, have experienced. In a separate column, beside each of the original items, I then noted the opposite behaviours. What if meetings could be conducted, guided by these more positive and constructive behaviours? I began to think more deeply about this possibility.

The purpose of this paper is captured in Schrödinger's quote, to offer some observations about the behaviours that occur during meetings and to suggest more constructive alternatives.

Group size

Meetings commonly involve large numbers of people, many of whom are not active participants. However, watch the behaviour of some of the quieter people during the tea break or in the car park after the meeting. They are often in animated conversation with one or two others. So why is that level of energy not evident during the meeting?

The answer lies in the physical structure of the meeting. Observe the size of a normal conversation group when people are free to mingle without guidance. Cluster sizes range from two to four, seldom more. In small groups, people are more inclined to participate; in large groups the same people may be reluctant.

In groups of four or less, there is often not sufficient diversity to enable a stimulating exchange of ideas. However, a group of six is small enough for people to feel comfortable participating. A group of six seems to offer a suitable balance between intimacy and diversity. Therefore, no matter how many participants, it is recommended that your meeting comprise multiple groups of approximately six people each.

The strength of weak ties

On arriving at a meeting, people commonly gravitate towards people that they know. These are often people who share our age, gender, ethnicity and geography. We feel comfortable with people who are like us and whose world view is similar to ours. Unfortunately, because of this similarity, these people are more likely to reinforce our biases than to challenge them.

The concept known as 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) suggests we can learn more by rubbing shoulders with people whose world view is substantially different from ours. The concept is akin to the notion of 'bridging social capital' (Putnam 1995). One of the advantages of working with a group of strangers is that I can come to the conversation with no

history. That is, I'm free to hold to any position I choose, or to change that position, unfettered from any position I may have been known to previously hold. This is therefore a liberating circumstance.

To foster a stimulating exchange of ideas, and to encourage open-mindedness, it is strongly recommended that where possible, in your meeting, you discourage people from sitting with people that they know or who are in any way similar. It is diversity in every sense we are seeking.

Why people talk

As a psychologist, I'm aware that reasons for people's behaviour are largely unconscious. Whilst we generally assume that a person talks in order to convey some information, the real purpose is often more subtle. Addeo and Burger (1973) suggest that people talk because:

1. Talk is power. In talk, there is inherent power because of the possibility of changing the ideas and opinions of others, or of controlling their actions.
2. To be listened to is recognition. Recognition is one of the strongest motives for human beings to do anything.
3. Talk is relaxing, safely releasing tension, and helping to build social relationships.
4. Talk is punishing. Words can be used as weapons.
5. Talk establishes rank. Whoever talks the most has the highest social rank.
6. Talk is revealing. Through talk, we provide subtle social cues to others, painting ourselves as we would like others to perceive us.

Talk does all of these things. Why? Because, talk provides a means of fostering ego, of establishing social 'pecking order' and masking insecurity.

The personality trait of introversion/extraversion is relevant here. Psychologist Hans Eysenck (1967) has postulated that the two differ in brain physiology. Extraverts are under-aroused and seek cortical stimulation through talking. In fact, it has been suggested that talking helps extraverts to think. Introverts, in contrast, have excessive cortical arousal. They are more inclined to think before talking. And more often than not, introverts think and don't talk.

In a meeting, the extraverts do what comes naturally. They talk; generally taking up more airtime than the introverts. Yet, in the Australian population, only 40% of people are extraverts. So 60% of meeting participants, the introverts, contribute less than the minority extraverts. Clearly this is inequitable. More importantly, it is a loss of a great deal of talent.

Another term for extraversion is *surgency*. The derivation of this term means to *surge*, like a wave, an apt description for what an extravert does when someone else is talking. Extraverts are inclined to talk *over* someone else. Because talking helps an extravert to think, what an extravert says is not necessarily what they mean. Talking just helps them get their thoughts sorted, and they can quite easily change their mind without realising it. To demonstrate to yourself the validity of this assertion, invite an extravert, who has just made a lengthy statement, to summarise what they have just said. It is quite likely that they will be struck dumb; because they may not know what they have just said. Or, if they do offer a summary, do not be surprised if it bears little resemblance to their previous utterance.

We do not need to know if people are introverted or extraverted. It is safe to assume that most meetings will have representatives of both types. And the interaction of the two personalities will result in underutilisation of the wisdom and knowledge available. Why? When an extravert is talking, the introvert is faced with two choices: (i) to listen, or (ii) to try to block out the extravert. Both of these choices largely preclude the introvert from doing what he/she does best, namely thinking.

Somehow, we need to get the best out of both. To do so, it is recommended that meeting participants be offered a focusing question and, in response, they are invited to sit and think and write, whilst saying nothing. The introverts love this opportunity for quiet thinking and they get busy. Extraverts are less impressed and may find themselves unable to write. After three minutes or so, the frustration of the extraverts often boils over and they will start to speak. However, this three minute period has given the introverts opportunity to prepare their thoughts, and they are much more likely to participate.

Why people don't/can't listen

According to Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1974), any dialogue is made up of *statements* and *questions*. Yet, an observant person will notice that, in most meetings, statements substantially outnumber questions. There are two reasons for this. First, statements help people

achieve their unconscious aims as outlined above. Second, questions require that the enquirer surrenders their socially dominant position, offering it to whoever responds.

So listening is a skill that not too many of us have mastered. It requires discipline, in order to suspend self-talk and concentrate on another, rather than on ourselves. And it requires empathy, the capacity to put ourselves in the position of the speaker.

Listening also involves the sense of hearing, one of our critical five senses. Yet it is not commonly realised that hearing is not a long-term storage device. When a number of ideas are being offered in the course of a conversation, these ideas are received at different moments in time, each idea following the previous one. With respect to converting hearing to memory, humans are more inclined to remember the first idea (called the 'primacy effect') and the last idea (called the 'recency effect'), whilst the intermediate ideas tend not to register.

What an enormous waste! When we rely on hearing as an input modality, most contributions are lost. If you doubt this, try repeating verbatim the utterances of a number of speakers from five minutes earlier. Or invite anyone else in a conversation to demonstrate their recall. They will commonly fail. Whilst people hear adequately (in an auditory sense), we hear (in a cognitive sense) substantially less. There must be a better way of ensuring that contributions are retained and given due consideration. And of course there is.

To help overcome the normal human cognitive hearing deficit, it is strongly recommended that the thoughts or ideas offered by each speaker in the small group be summarised by the speaker, and then captured by a scribe. The summarised comments of all speakers are recorded on a public list within the small group, written large enough to be visible to all. A flip chart is ideal for this purpose. With ideas captured visually, the need to remember these ideas is removed. When we go to choose from this array of ideas, that is, to decide, they are now all visible in front of us.

Influence and decision making

Imagine a group of people in a meeting. Which factor in the following pairs is more likely, most of the time, to influence a decision the group makes?

1. Male/female
2. Younger/older
3. Tall/short
4. High-pitched voice/deep voice
5. Attractive/plain
6. Junior/senior
7. Wealthy/poor
8. Low status/high status

Now, which of these characteristics has any necessary relationship to wisdom? On average, none of them. Yet you would be correct in assuming that, on average, one of each pair is going to unconsciously influence more the decision of the group. (There are sound evolutionary reasons for this, which space does not permit us to explore here.) And you would also be correct in now recognising that that influence may be unwarranted.

Please note that I'm not arguing that any of these characteristics should be influential. Any observer of social systems globally will recognise that they are influential, whether or not that is desirable. Of course there are exceptions; though they are in the minority.

Next consider how groups commonly are guided to decisions. You have probably experienced the following:

1. Decisions by exhaustion. *'We've talked about this for the last four hours! Let's make a decision so we can all go home'*. Decisions made on this basis are rarely the products of sharp minds considering all options.
2. Decisions by urgency or irritation. *'Mrs Brown has been ringing up every half-hour about her neighbour's yapping dog. It is the least important issue on our plate; yet she is driving us mad. Can't we do something about this to get her off my back?'* Decisions made on this basis, responding to the urgent or the irritating rather than the important, often have unanticipated consequences.
3. Decisions by social dominance. No matter what the rest of us might think, if the boss (or a political clique) wants a certain outcome, that is how the decision will fall. Decisions made on this basis often miss out on critical information and rarely engender the commitment of those who need to implement them.

4. Decision by show of hands. *'Through you, Madam Chair, I'd like to move that ....'.* Whenever there is a split vote, there will be winners and losers. Even when a vote appears unanimous, it is likely that some people voted in favour, due solely to peer pressure, even when privately they may hold another opinion.

5. Decisions based on publicly recognised expertise. Experts are noted for their depth of expertise. The downside is an inevitable lack of breadth. Further, experts are often politically chosen or sanctioned. Decisions made by experts will inevitably miss out on alternate perspectives which may have equal, and sometimes countervailing, validity.

These five describe how many, if not most, social, corporate and governmental decisions are made. Note that none of them necessarily utilise all of the intellect that is available. We use them because we are unaware of more constructive alternatives.

Yet there are much better tools for making decisions, which involve all of the wisdom available, which generate commitment and some of which take but a fraction of the time. And, surprisingly, these decision tools require no discussion whatsoever. So it is strongly recommended that meetings use decision tools that avoid the shortcomings of methods commonly in use. 'Productive Meeting Techniques' offers a whole suite of these more constructive decision methods.

The wisdom of crowds

In his widely acclaimed book 'The Wisdom of Crowds', James Sirowiecki (2004) makes the strongly supported claim that a group of diverse and independent people will make the wisest decisions when they do <u>not</u> talk with each other. Sirowiecki asserts that under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. And what are those circumstances? They are:

• Diversity of opinion – where the contributions come from a range of sources (Weisbord & Janoff 2007). In most conversations, it is useful to include the voices of: (a) those in authority over the matter being considered, i.e. people who can sanction or block whatever is decided; (b) those who have some level of professional expertise; (c) those who will be required to resource and/or implement the decisions; (d) those with local indigenous knowledge; (e) those who will be the potential beneficiaries or victims of what is being proposed; (e) those who are dispassionate with respect to the topic, are outside of the sphere of concern, yet who can act as an impartial 'devil's advocate', commenting on what is being considered from a more global or holistic perspective. If the decisions made are likely to have any enduring consequences, then for purposes of intergenerational equity, include a nominal voice for our grandchildren's grandchildren.

• Independence. If the participants in the conversation are able to influence each other, then the quality of the decision is potentially diminished. Think back to the paired influencing characteristics mentioned earlier. If each party is able to arrive at their conclusion without any knowledge of the opinion of others, the aggregate of their decisions will be wiser.

• Decentralisation. Related to the concept of diversity, decentralisation of decision makers means that they do not all come from the same place, and therefore do not hold similar world views (which are more likely to hold a common bias).

• Aggregation. Having diverse, independent and decentralised decision makers is of no value unless there is also a means by which those individual decisions can be aggregated. Sirowiecki suggests that the opinion held by any person on any topic contains an element of accuracy and an element of error. The amount and direction of that error is unknown and unknowable. Yet when a large number of diverse, independent and decentralised decision makers pool their opinions, the error components cancel each other out, leaving only the accuracy.

• Transparency. Decisions resulting from the aggregation of diverse, independent and decentralised decision makers will be accepted provided that the means of gathering and aggregating those opinions is regarded as logical and equitable, fully transparent and open to scrutiny. Democratic political voting processes are designed to work on the five characteristics just described.

In its July 2007 edition, the *National Geographic Magazine* published an article entitled "The wisdom of swarms". Below are summary ideas extracted from that article:

• Bees, ants, schools of fish, and flocks of birds all have one thing in common. They live in mass groups, they are collectively clever, and they have no leader. How do they do it?

- In biology, if you look at groups with large numbers, there are very few examples where you have a central agent. Everything is very distributed. The creatures do not communicate with each other. They act on local information. And they are all anonymous.
- This is how swarm intelligence works: simple creatures following simple rules, each one acting on local information. No one creature sees the big picture. No one instructs others what to do. No leadership is required.
- In other words, there is decentralised control, response to local cues, and simple rules of thumb. Conversely, a group won't be smart if its members imitate one another, slavishly follow fads, or wait for someone to tell them what to do.
- With as many as 50,000 workers in a single hive, honey bees have evolved ways to work through individual differences of opinion to do what is best for their colony. The bees' rules for decision-making are simple: (i) diversity of participation, (ii) independence of contributions, (iii) free comparison of ideas (peer review), (iv) time for all ideas to be considered, (v) an effective mechanism to narrow choices, and (vi) total transparency. Note that these conditions are very similar to those identified by Surowiecki for wise groups.

Productive Meeting Techniques

'Productive Meeting Techniques' are a set of meeting protocols for people that mimic the processes found naturally in nature and which align, in large part, with the conditions for wise decisions, as recommended by Sirowiecki. These rules are also practiced in the on-line digital world by the Web and resources such as Wikipedia and open-source software.

In comparison, Western human systems are commonly hierarchical, with levels of seniority and experience. My doctoral studies (Plowman 2005) revealed that hierarchy inevitably blocks innovation, wisdom and capacity to respond. Those with the greatest authority and power are frequently not in the best position to know, whilst those who do know, frequently in the technical professional middle of an organization or community, are often not in a position to influence.

Even in apparently non-hierarchical systems, such as community or industry meetings, many people endeavour to establish a social 'pecking order', (hence hierarchy) by the way they behave. How that occurs has been partially described earlier in this paper. 'Productive Meeting Techniques' are designed to get around these unconscious human blockages to effective conversation and wise decision making. In so doing, the processes free up creativity and foster innovation.

The protocols of 'Productive Meeting Techniques', some of which are outlined in this paper, have proven themselves to be remarkably robust in a whole range of contexts. They have been used in team building workshops, in strategic planning meetings, in community consultation and in conflict resolution. Participants have included industry groups, scientists, communities, local government, high school students, women's groups and indigenous groups. They work in normal face-to-face meetings, in email conversations, or in teleconferences.

The skills and processes involved are considerably different to those that people commonly experience in meetings. Yet, they are very easy to learn and apply, even by people with limited literacy or education. And because they operate at the level of microskills, they can be used in conjunction with, and to enhance, more meso-level meeting processes such as Open Space, World Cafe or Sociocracy. Any facilitator or extension officer can use these 'Productive Meeting Techniques' in their work with groups. Or group members can apply these tools themselves as they go about their collective work.

The benefits of using the 'Productive Meeting Techniques' include greater individual participation, greater creativity in problem-solving, the removal of disagreements, improved quality of decisions, substantially reduced time, substantially reduced costs, greater willingness to contribute in future meetings and overall improved morale.

However, there are also costs. 'Productive Meeting Techniques' require participants to exercise self-discipline, to be aware of the behaviour of the group and the people in it, and to have a desire to improve their collective investment in meeting time. This is not to suggest the techniques are difficult to learn or apply - far from it. They are exceptionally easy to learn and joyful to use.

This paper has commented on, and made recommendations with respect to some of the 'Productive Meeting Techniques'. These techniques can be applied immediately and will result in the benefits just articulated. By changing the individual and collective behaviour of members of

a group participating in a meeting, we can facilitate a quantum leap in performance and wisdom.

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