An Advanced Model of Decision-Making in Workplace Meetings

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I am glad to be here and to share some ideas with you. A long time ago, in 1994, I wrote a PhD thesis about the development of human meeting behavior, about meeting manners and civilization in Western societies in the last, let's say, thousand years.

At the first meeting science symposium two years ago, I presented a paper and a pecha kucha about 'Long Term Trends in Meeting Behaviour'. This presentation was mainly based on my thesis; you find the article on Academia.edu.

This time I decided to focus on an important but rather practical and short term process, namely decision-making in workplace meetings. For my presentation of today I mainly draw upon my experience as a meeting consultant in The Netherlands.

I like to share with you an advanced, that is to say: a flexible, efficient and more satisfying, method of decision-making in team meetings. I developed it in the course of twenty five years of consultancy and training in companies and other work organizations. The essence of my argument on decision-making is a shift from content-orientation to process-orientation. I would like to stress that the model is not sanctifying but just an option – and hopefully an inspiring one.

Talking of meetings we usually refer to communication processes in which groups of people orientate and decide on their common future. For me, this is an essence of meetings. People in meetings are somehow, directly or indirectly, focused on issues such as: what are we going to do, why and how are we going to do it and what impact will it have on us, on them, on me, on you.
In other words, decision-making is a constituent element of meeting behavior and therefore deserves our full attention.

In the course of my work as a meeting consultant I came across a lot of meeting suffering in work situations caused by too much and too long meetings. One of the main reasons of meeting suffering is the almost automatic application of a certain, culturally determined, way of making decisions in and as a group. While majority vote is the customary way of making choices in political meetings of elected and associated participants, in workplace meetings this

method is generally unsuitable, since it would allow parties and fighting openly against each other. Companies cannot function well with several captains on the ship and not all noses in the same direction – whether or not sneezing.

In contemporary, parliamentary-industrial, societies, where people are educated to speak relatively freely and frankly, they have a prevalence and inclination to 'deliberative consensus' as Christoph Haug calls it in his article in the *Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science* (2015, 556-584). This type of interactional consensus means in practice: holding substantive discussions until absent of opposition has become apparent. Many people in parliamentary-industrial societies prefer this kind of deliberated consensus to commands or dictates from above.

However, a 'democratic', outspoken habitus is problematic when it collides with company hierarchy and efficiency. When strong leadership ignores or belittles the meeting outcome, this often leads to disappointment and frustration among employees. On the other hand, when leadership is absent, diffuse, unclear or weak, the search for deliberative consensus often leads to endless meetings, deadlocks and postponements of decisions. I am now going to elaborate on this.

There are several reasons why consensus-based decision-making in (egalitarian) meetings often takes so much time. Besides fear of the (consequences of) conflict and avoidance of responsibility there is the common confusion about main and side issues. With this we enter the realm of the chat laws. Do you know what chat laws are? I give you some.

The first chat law has been derived from a fifty years old work of Cyril Northcote Parkinson. It says The less important an issue the longer one talks about it. One can talk about minor issues for a long time because it is easier for everybody to have an opinion on it and go for it.

The second chat law is: everyone always want to say something about the subject at hand and the third one says: the available time is always fully used. These two chat laws draw attention to the importance of strict time planning and time management.

Anyway, probably the most important reason why consensus-based meetings take so much time is the inclination to prioritize personal interests, also known

as 'hidden agenda'. On close inspection, the hidden agenda is a consequence of the power of veto everyone *de facto* has in the pursuit of consensus. After all, there is no consensus as long as one of the participants has objections or articulate disagreement. A veto can be used for all kinds of private, partial, hidden goals, detaining and delaying the meeting.

So, what to do? In order to reduce the risks of endless meetings with deadlocks and postponements, the main thing to do is raising the decision-making process to a higher (meta) level, from consensus on the contents to consensus on the process and procedure. Shifting the attention to questions such as: who is the most appropriate person to make the decisions and in what manner or how structured?

This shift of focus can be summarized and kept in mind by a simple rule, that is **first process than contents**. It means that one first has to agree on the procedure or process architecture and the ownership or management of the decision-making before going into the details of the content.
Often, especially when not the whole group but the team leader has the power of delegation, this question may already be solved before the start of a meeting.

So, the first step then is to reach an agreement on who will be responsible of the decision-making: be it the team as a whole or a part of the team. The first possibility is tricky because in that case we are back to our point of departure. However, there is one major difference: the procedure now has been made explicit. Nevertheless, one should save this time consuming option to really important issues when substantive group consensus is absolutely necessary and time does not really matter (which is, by the way, rarely the case). The second possibility of delegating the decision power is much more interesting and to prefer.

Delegating the power of decision to the most appropriate participant(s), be it the most senior, most competent or most concerned, fits best with the psychology of educated and professional employees and with modern, high-performance organizations that require personal initiative and personal responsibility based on team confidence.
Moreover, it is an effective way of reducing the number and duration of meetings. The role of the team (members) is limited to specific tasks in specific

stages of the decision-making, such as delivering particular information in the beginning, advising the decision-maker in the middle stage and helping to implement and evaluate the decision in the final phase.

As a result, the chosen decision manager feels valued and appreciated by the team, which entrust her with responsibility and power. She will put her best foot forward, to begin with a careful preparation of the next group discussion, if any, about what is now her item.

Now it is quite clear what the purpose of the meeting item is and how the group discussion has to be hold. The decision manager puts an item on the agenda of the team meeting only if she thinks it is necessary and cannot be arranged outside meetings, in informal communication with colleagues and other concerned persons.

When she thinks it is needed to bring the item up for a group discussion, the deliberation can be targeted and strictly managed, so that using the power of veto, spinning out and postponements are less obvious or almost impossible. After all, the group is only advisor of the decision-maker. The meeting is a team play now and not clotting football, which it normally often is. Every participant is specialized, knows exactly what his or her field position is and what is expected from him or her.

If a company is working and holding meetings in this way it is possible to make clear, targeted agendas, saving a lot of meeting time and making everybody happier. In preparation of a team meeting everybody may fill an item according to some fixed parameters: item description, goal of deliberation, what to do for preparation, required space of time, name of the proposer.
The team leader or chairperson helps and coaches team members if necessary and is responsible for the final choice and sequence of items.

This agenda format can be used in any company at any level. Teams don't have to reinvent the wheel again and again. In the end, this sophisticated way of preparing and holding meetings will be internalized and become a company standard, which foster a healthy, efficient and more satisfying meeting culture.