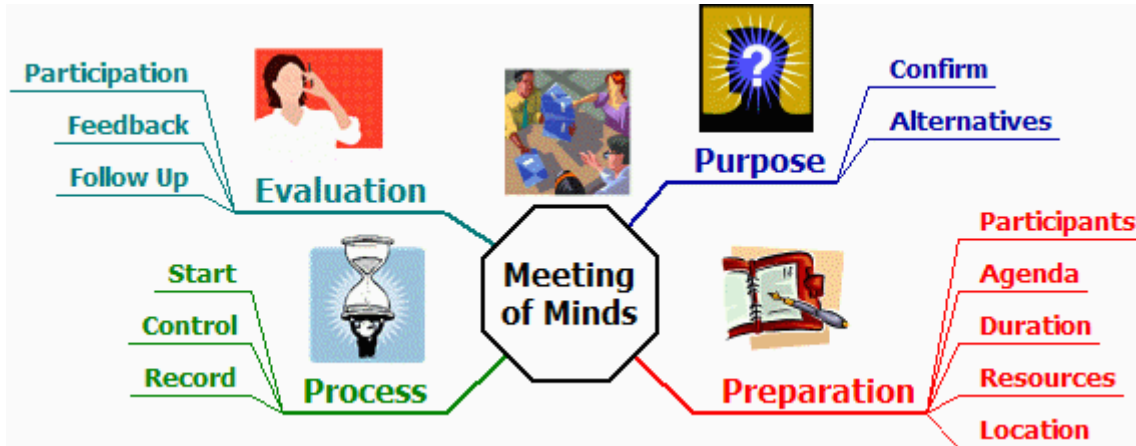


CHAPTER 9

Meeting of Minds



How to make Meetings Work

Meetings are a great trap. Soon you find yourself trying to get agreement and then the people who disagree come to think they have a right to be persuaded. . . . However, they are indispensable when you don't want to do anything. -John Kenneth Galbraith

If Romeo thought that parting was such sweet sorrow, he could have made the same comment about meeting. Meetings can occupy as much as 60% of the working day and most of the proceedings are a waste of time. What can we do to make meetings shorter, more productive and more to the point? Use visual mapping. There are a great many aspects of that process that will help you to get where you want to be.

Why Hold the Meeting?

Start with a planning map. The first branch to place on your map is the reason for holding the meeting in the first place. Imagine the meeting as a finished entity. What happened? What results were accomplished? What are the next steps? If you don't find immediate answers to these questions, consider why you are holding the meeting at all. There may be better ways to deal with the issue at hand. Perhaps you need to speak to one person, not an entire group. Perhaps the meeting could be better accomplished by a telephone conference call or an online conference, particularly if the participants live in different cities. If your main purpose is to convey information, it might be better to simply send a memo. If you are making an important announcement, why not throw a party? Before you call the meeting, decide the appropriateness of holding it at all.

Set the Stage

If you are going to proceed, compare a meeting to a theatrical presentation. There is action in three parts of the theater, -- backstage, main stage and in the lobby following the show. The

backstage effort, -- the gathering of the props, the rehearsal of the scene, the preparation of the program are going to determine the overall success of the performance. Start your visual map with a branch that includes the participants. Follow by mapping the agenda items. Put them down as fast as they come to you in random order and get them all down on the page. Look at which items are simple and straightforward, which are controversial, which involve the whole group. Look at who should report on the various issues and who might present the topics.

Now it is time to order this raw material and put it into a clearer order and time frame. Decide on the duration of the meeting. Confirm who needs to attend. Decide on the order of the items on the agenda. It is well to warm up on non-controversial items and place the most contentious issue in the middle. It is also a good idea to follow the controversial issue with a neutral one, or deliberately delay decisions on the items following the controversial issues, so that opponents won't use the remainder of the meeting to seek revenge for past action and kill each other off.

Decide on the resources that you will need for the meeting. Do you need a projector or flip chart? Do you need background papers or other references? Insofar as possible, send the agenda and its attached documents to the participants well in advance of the date. Encourage participants to read all reference materials in advance. Otherwise you are going to convene a meeting of readers, whose faces will never rise during the meeting because they are buried in reference documents. How can there possibly be any useful contribution on any issue if the meeting is the first time people know anything about it? It will encourage the Quadrant D idea people at the expense of the Quadrant A analysts and their need for information, the Quadrant B planners and their need to set the issue in context, and the Quadrant C's with their concern for human resource issues.

Now it is time to move to center stage. Choose your meeting room carefully. If possible, get a room with good natural light. Pay attention to ventilation and temperature because these are vital to the energy of the people attending the meeting. It is important to bar interruptions. Deactivate the phone in the room. Place a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door.

Provide the proper materials. Make sure that any additional printouts and reference materials are available for each participant. Have a flip chart with markers of the appropriate size at the ready. If you really want to stimulate the participants, provide them with bright markers and highlighters. If money is no object, equip the room with an electronic white board so that all proceedings can be recorded in VisiMap as you go. In some situations, audio tape recorders and videotape machines are useful as well.



On With the Show

I've been on a calendar, but never on time. -Marilyn Monroe

Start the meeting promptly. Don't penalize those who arrived on time by waiting for the latecomers. Don't interrupt the proceedings to acknowledge the latecomers and bring them up to date. You're simply reinforcing their tardy behaviour and making it acceptable.

If you are the chairman, it is your responsibility to control the process. Your meeting agenda prepared in VisiMap is a constant reminder of the material that you have to cover. You will need to worry less about the talkative participant who will have always plenty to say when you have the big picture in front of you. If you are smart, you may have already asked the most garrulous or the most bothersome member of the group to take notes. Balance participation by inviting the quieter ones to comment. Often their contributions will be more worthwhile than those of the chatty types. Summarize the proceedings as you go. Emphasize the positive and show appreciation for all contributions.

Map the Minutes

Good meetings result in action and it is what happens between meetings that determines their success. Minutes can also be taken and distributed in VisiMap format. One of the advantages of this technique is that it limits the content and focuses on action. What is to be done? Who will do it? When will it be done? If the answers are complex, you can use the notes section of VisiMap to flesh out the points in text form and use your main visual map as an outline. In most regular meetings, however, the actual points can be short and simple. Don't provide any more content than necessary. You want participants to spend their time on the necessary follow-up, not on reading. If possible, distribute the minutes in graphic format or in converted outline format right on the spot.

Be Your Own Best Critic

Evaluate each meeting. What went right? What went wrong? Who participated? Who was silent throughout? What feedback did you receive? Be prepared to spend time following up with participants who have concerns arising from the meeting. Be prepared to hear from those who said little during the meeting because something was probably upsetting them.

Last, but not least, keep good records. Visual maps provide excellent recall of what happened and can be reviewed quickly. If you have a number of memos and minutes for an organization, a committee or a department, consider keeping the documents in a three ring binder rather than in flat files. That way it will be easier to retrieve the documents you need.



The Show Must Go On

The last meeting's minutes always provide the starting point for the next. Start the cycle by reviewing your previous visual map agenda and minutes and see where you stand on the issues which were addressed. Some matters may have been delayed and need to get back on the agenda. Some need review. Some persons need to be commended for their achievements. Others need to be reminded of reports that should be made. Using VisiMap as your planning tool will really get your show on the road.

Brain Waves

- **Plan a future meeting using visual mapping from beginning to end.**
- **Create an agenda in VisiMap and distribute it.**
- **Take the minutes in VisiMap and distribute them either in graphic or outline format.**
- **Use the previous minutes written in visual map format to set the next agenda.**