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**THE NEW
INTERACTION
METHOD**

**HOW
TO MAKE
MEETINGS
WORK**

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**PLAYBOY
PAPERBACKS**

CHAPTER 2

What Goes Wrong at Meetings

Productivity, creativity, efficiency, participation, and commitment are results. If you want these results from your meetings, you have to understand the process that produces them. You don't get better at doing something unless you stop to think about what you've been doing—to analyze your process.

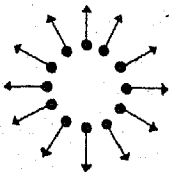
Take the example of athletes. Joe Namath and Billie Jean King don't go out every day and play for real. Even the best performers spend most of their time practicing. A football team may practice forty hours for every one that counts. After every game the players analyze the films to figure out what worked and what didn't. That's how they develop teamwork. They break down the complex activity of football into fundamentals and plays, practice them, and then put them all together in a game.

Meetings are one of the most complex activities you "do." The success or failure of a meeting has a significant impact on you and your group. When things go wrong in a meeting, does

your group stop and analyze what worked and what didn't? Do you know and practice the "fundamentals" of meetings? Probably not. Even though you may attend many meetings every week, if you are like most people, you have never had any formal training in how to conduct (or participate in) meetings. When you first began attending meetings, you probably picked up skills by osmosis, by modeling your behavior on the behavior of other meeting participants, who, in turn, may have learned the same way. One generation has taught the next without questioning what it learned from the generation that came before; it's the blind leading the blind.

That's why we will look at some of the most common things that go wrong with meetings. We are going to stop and analyze why, and what the consequences are. We are going to illustrate some basic meeting problems, but our discussion will not be exhaustive. After our analysis, we will introduce those parts of the Interaction Method that are designed to cope with these problems, show you how they work, and discuss some of the benefits.

THE MULTI-HEADED ANIMAL SYNDROME



THE MULTI-HEADED ANIMAL

THE TENDENCY TO GO OFF IN ALL DIRECTIONS SIMULTANEOUSLY

You've heard it and we've heard it—"You can't do anything in a meeting. Everyone wants to do it his own way." Or: "The

more people, the more impossible it becomes." Or: "A committee is a collection of the unfit chosen from the unwilling by the incompetent to do the unnecessary."

Why are all that many people all that down on meetings? Why do things seem to get more complicated with each additional person at a meeting? Let's listen in on a couple of fairly typical meetings.

Mr. Roberts, the chairperson of a fund-raising committee for a nonprofit organization, has called a meeting.

Mr. Roberts, insistently: It's clear to me our problem is that we need to raise membership dues by \$5 a year.

Mr. Peters, aggressively: Our membership would drop if we did that. What we need to do is change our name to something that's more appropriate to our real function.

Mr. Roberts, less insistently: What would happen if we raised our membership dues by only \$1 a year in all categories?

Ms. Orlando, hopefully: I know the name of a good fund-raiser we could hire.

Mr. Peters, returning to his agenda: What about changing "association" to "committee." That sounds more contemporary.

Ms. King, jumping in for the first time: Couldn't we cut our budget for this year? What is it, anyway?

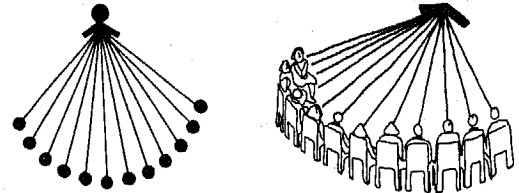
What was going wrong here? Everyone was trying to be helpful, but each person saw the fund-raising problem differently and had a preconceived solution to his or her version of the problem. Mr. Roberts saw the problem as "how to raise more money" and had the solution "raise membership dues." Mr. Peters saw the problem as "a poor name for the organization" and offered some ideas about how the name could be changed.

And Ms. Orlando and Ms. King had other solutions. Each of these perceived problems may have been valid, but the meeting won't go anywhere until they decide to focus on one problem for a period of time and put all their creative energies into investigating it.

ONE ITEM AT A TIME

We've just illustrated one reason why individuals in a group can have more difficulty solving a problem than they would experience by themselves. One of the useful features of your mind is that it allows for just one point of attention. You can think about only one thing at any instant in time. Try listening to two conversations at once. You will find yourself jumping back and forth between the two. You can't listen to two people at the same time. Now, try mentally to feel your left ear and your right big toe at the same time. Can you catch yourself vibrating between the two? What this means is that all the stimuli from your environment and from your subconscious must line up and file by your attention in single, discrete chunks. This is useful because it keeps you from getting overloaded and scattered. True, when you get harried, you can feel like a chicken with its head cut off, running frantically around and not getting anywhere; still, it could be much worse if you were mentally to become twenty chickens running around. Your single point of attention is a built-in safety device.

A group has no such single focus. In fact, there are as many foci as there are individuals in the group. Each person can be focusing on a different problem at a given time. If everyone mentally heads off in different directions, the result can be confusion, tension, and lack of productivity—the multi-headed animal syndrome. To work effectively, a group needs a single focus.



Let's look at another example.

This is a PTA committee meeting of fifteen people in Oakland, California.

President of the PTA, opening the meeting: Good evening. Our principal called me today to say that he had an unavoidable conflict and wouldn't be able to attend this meeting. But he did request that we put together a list of school problems as we see them. So, who wants to begin?

Ms. Brown, trying to get the ball rolling: Violence in the corridors.

Ms. Elliott, reacting: I think the solution to that problem is more monitors.

Mr. Jones, sarcastically: They tried that last year and it didn't work.

Ms. Elliott, indignantly: I think it would have. They didn't try it for long enough.

Ms. Brown, still trying to keep the ball rolling: The use of drugs in the school.

Ms. Frank, out of the blue: My Johnny came home with a bloody nose just last week.

The meeting isn't working. They aren't getting anywhere. We can discover one of the reasons for this lack of progress

if we analyze this segment of the PTA meeting step by step.

SEPARATING THE "WHAT" FROM THE "HOW"

The example begins with the president suggesting a problem for the group to work on, but she has fallen into one of the most common traps of meetings. She has posed a problem, but she is in difficulty. The group has not agreed to work on it. More important, she has not gotten agreement on how to approach the problem. To achieve a common focus the group must agree on what they are going to discuss for the next period of time as well as how they are going to discuss it.

This distinction between the content (the *what*: problem, topic, or agenda) and the process (the *how*: approach, method or procedure) is a difficult but vitally important concept to grasp if you are going to understand why meetings don't work well.

The PTA president had suggested a content focus for the meeting, but not a process focus (a way for the group to work on the problem.) Let's look at what happened.

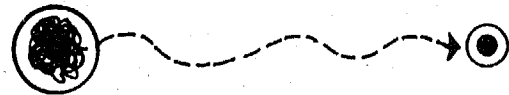
Ms. Brown immediately agreed to the content focus—a list of issues for the principal—and implicitly decided that the best process was to toss out suggested issues. So she volunteered an item for the list. It all might have worked out all right, but Ms. Elliott, rather than following Ms. Brown's lead and suggesting a further item, decided to offer a solution to Ms. Brown's problem of violence in the corridors. Ms. Elliott thus changed her content focus from a list of problems to the specific problem of violence in the corridors.

Then, to make things worse, Mr. Jones came along and evaluated Ms. Elliott's solution, and everything began to fall apart. The multi-headed animal began to bite itself. Naturally, Ms. Elliott came back to defend her solution, and before Mr. Jones could counter, Ms. Brown valiantly plugged

on with her listing process and offered another item: drugs in the schools. At the end of this portion of the PTA meeting Ms. Frank tosses in an example in support of something. It's not clear what. Perhaps she is only lamenting that violence is still a problem.

"PROCESS" IS LIKE CHEWING GUM

It's worthwhile to discuss this process/content distinction in more depth. The process of melting is not the state of ice nor the state of water; it's what happens in between. In problem-solving, the *process* is how an individual or group solves the problem. The problem and solution is whatever is acted on; it is the *content*. If you want an easy way to remember it, suppose you are chewing gum: chewing is the process, gum is the content.



THE "WHAT"
CONTENT
PROBLEM

"HOW"
THE PROCESS

"WHAT"
CONTENT
SOLUTION

In our sample PTA meeting, making a list is the process. The list itself is the content or object. Another way of putting it would be: listing, evaluating, and solving are processes; what is listed, evaluated, or solved is content.

The important thing to keep in mind for now is: in meetings, a group must agree on a common problem and a common process or it will fall prey to the multi-headed animal syndrome.

Let's look at another common problem.

The setting is a high school faculty meeting in the Midwest. The topic of discussion is the recent buildup of racial tensions in the school.

Dick (a black-studies teacher), angrily: Man, I've said this over and over, until this faculty begins to reflect the student population, until more black men and women are hired, there's going to be nothing but trouble around here.

Bob (a black athletic coach), chiming in: Last year there wasn't one black hired.

Peter (a math teacher): Hey, we've heard this before. You know that there wasn't a qualified black for—

Dick, interrupting: Says who?

Mary (an English teacher): But how is this going to help our racial problems now?

Peter, turning toward Dick: According to our committee on hiring—

Mary, still trying to be constructive: I think that we should set aside a day for student/faculty dialogue.

Dick: What a dumb idea! More of your touchy-feely stuff. We want action. *(Turning to Peter)* How many blacks were on that hiring committee? Huh?

Peter: Don't run that number on me again.

Mary gives up and pulls out some student papers and begins to correct them. Dick and Bob continue to fight it out with Peter.

This exchange illustrates a problem common to many meetings, particularly those without a chairperson or discussion leader. The floor is grabbed by whoever can talk loudest and fastest. People who are basically not outspoken (like Mary) have a hard time being heard. Yet it's often these individ-

uals who put a lot of thought into what they say and whose contributions would be valuable if they could just get a fair hearing. Moreover, when a quiet participant of a meeting finally gets the floor and then is jumped upon, he or she may give up and pull out of the meeting altogether, as did Mary.

"GROUP RAPE" CAN GET YOU

Think how many times you have been in a meeting and have had to devote energy merely to pick a good time to jump into the conversation so you'd be heard. When you finally did manage to get the attention of the group, it was either too late to make your point or you had forgotten what you were going to say in the first place.

And haven't you ever been in a meeting and volunteered a suggestion, only to be attacked so hard that you wished you could crawl into the woodwork? The response to your suggestion didn't exactly encourage your participation, did it? In situations like that, other members become guarded, too, because they know they could be attacked next. They are afraid of what we call the "group rape syndrome."

So, two things seem clear. You won't participate in a meeting if you feel you are not going to receive protection from attack or don't feel confident that you can protect yourself. Second, in a meeting of more than four to five people without some kind of guidance, a good deal of your energy is wasted trying to time your jump into the conversational flow.

To maneuver your way out of this trap, think of vehicular traffic. When there is light traffic at an intersection, stop signs are adequate; when traffic is heavy in all directions, a great deal of skill is required to time your entry into (or across) the traffic flow, and accidents are more likely to happen. Some kind of signaling system, traffic lights or a policeman, ensures safety

and also increases the rate of flow through the intersection. You heave a sigh when you discover a policeman at a busy intersection and don't have to poke the front part of your car into cross traffic and pray that the other cars will stop.

The same is true of a meeting. If you know someone is concerned with seeing that everyone is heard, that no one is attacked, that individuals can signal for entry into the conversational flow, you are relieved of a great deal of unnecessary tension. You can devote more of your energy to listening to others and thinking about what you want to contribute.

EVERY MEETING NEEDS A TRAFFIC COP

A human system of regulating flow is almost always more responsive than a mechanical one. Have you ever had to sit at a red light when there was a lot of traffic on your street and none on the cross street? A policeman would immediately see the situation and adjust the directional flow to meet the momentary need. The same applies to rigid rules in a meeting, like speaking in a fixed order. It is hard to get a constructive dialogue going. A human system—a sensitive moderator—could adjust to the moment-by-moment needs of the individuals in the group without letting anyone dominate the meeting for long.

Clearly, every meeting of more than four or five people needs a leader who will keep an open and balanced conversational flow and protect individuals and their ideas from personal attack.

WHO DOES WHAT

One of the biggest barriers to effective meetings is the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. You've probably been in a meeting and heard some of the following complaints: "Who is he and what is he doing here?" "Are you making the decision

or are we going to vote?" "I thought you were just going to be an observer." "I don't want any so-called expert in here telling us what to do." "I thought the discussion leader was supposed to limit discussion to this one subject." "I thought we were going to have the final say."

For specific periods in a meeting you can accept almost any role for yourself or someone else, as long as it is clear in advance who is playing what role; you can agree to remain silent or participate fully or to speak only when called on by the group. But if you enter a meeting with one understanding only to discover that everybody else is playing by different rules, then naturally you are going to feel confused and perhaps deliberately deceived.

While it's hard to generalize, it tends to be true that the more you change your role, the more you are going to inhibit the effective functioning of a group. If a meeting begins with the understanding that you are to be a silent observer but you get so excited that you can't help making your own contributions, sooner or later members of the group are likely to get irritated. At that point, you should either see if the group will agree to let you change your role from silent observer to active participant or you should leave the room. This problem of multiple roles is particularly true for managers in meetings, as we'll see in the next case history.

HOW POWER IS MISUSED IN MEETINGS

A meeting of a division manager of the Acme Widget Co. and his supervisors.

Joe, division manager: I have been directed by the president to cut our production costs by 15 percent within the next three months. It's going to be tough, but we are going to do it. Here's what I think we should do: Ask all employees to pitch in, direct all employees to keep coffee breaks +

fifteen minutes, cut out free coffee and doughnuts for supervisors in the morning, place a hiring freeze on temporary employees, and stop Sunday overtime. Well, that's it. What do you think, Bill?

Bill, nodding his head mechanically: Oh, certainly, Joe. Sounds fine. Those changes should do it.

Joe: How about you, Juan?

Juan, cautiously: I'm not sure about the idea of stopping coffee and doughnuts. It won't save us much, and coffee and doughnuts are good for morale.

Joe, abruptly: Yes, I know it's only a token gesture, but we've got to set an example. How about you, Rico? What do you think?

Rico: I don't think the crews are going to like not being able to work Sunday overtime. Besides, I don't see how we can keep up our monthly output that way.

Joe, defensively: Dammit. I have looked at all the alternatives and that's the only one that will make a major dent in lowering our costs. I know it's going to be unpopular, but it's the way it has to be. You got any ideas, Marta?

Marta: Well, as you were suggesting when we talked the other day, we could reduce inspections from every third item to every fifth.

Rico, jumping in: If we do that, our quality control will be shot to hell. And you damned well know how those consumer groups have been getting on our backs lately.

Juan: Yeah, I agree. I don't think—

Joe, breaking in: I think you are absolutely right, Marta. Let's make inspections on every fifth item. Well, that's about it.

I'll prepare the paperwork and you can tell your people what we've decided. Meeting adjourned.

Exchanges like this are common in meetings, particularly in hierarchical organizations. This one illustrates several major problems. Joe, the manager, probably went back to work feeling that it was a good meeting. It was short, quick, and to the point. He might have thought to himself, "I gave them my ideas, got their reactions, and made my decisions." He did give them his ideas and made some decisions, but did he get meaningful reactions?

TELLING THE BOSS WHAT HE WANTS TO HEAR

When Joe said, "Here's what I think we should do. What do you think, Bill?" he placed his subordinate in a classic double bind. Bill thought to himself, "Do I tell him what I think, or do I tell him what he wants to hear?" He decided, as many subordinates do, on the latter and safer course: reinforce the boss's ideas, don't stick out your neck.



THE MANAGER PLAYS

A DUAL ROLE

A POWER ROLE

AND

A PROCESS ROLE

Did Joe really want an honest answer? Was he willing to be told that his ideas might not work? The way he abruptly and defensively dealt with the objections of Rico and Jaun indicated that, in fact, he was convinced his ideas were good and only wanted them rubber-stamped and supported.

In fairness to Joe and the thousands of managers like him who are under constant pressure to perform, he probably did want to know if there were any real dangers in implementing his ideas or if there were even better solutions to the problem. Didn't he ask every member of the group for his opinion? Yes, but he didn't give them the chance to develop their own ideas. As a result of his heavy-handedness, Joe cut himself off from the accurate information he needed to make his decisions. He wasted his time and the time of his staff by having a meeting and not tapping their creative potential. He wasn't making the most of the meeting and the talents of the people in it. It would be like going to an orgy and staying with your date.

FIVE INGREDIENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MEETING

So far in this chapter we have established five basic criteria for a good meeting:

1. There must be a common focus on content.
2. There must be a common focus on process.
3. Someone must be responsible for maintaining an open and balanced conversational flow.
4. Someone must be responsible for protecting individuals from personal attack.
5. And, in general, for the duration of the meeting everyone's role and responsibility must be clearly defined and agreed upon.

Clearly, a good meeting needs structure and leadership. But what kind of leadership?

The position of leading a group, determining who speaks and how the meeting is to proceed, is obviously very powerful.

Process control can result in content control; by controlling the process of a meeting, you can determine to a large extent what is going to happen.

To return to the traffic analogy: If a cop is stationed at a point where many lanes converge on an approach to a bridge and allows certain lanes to go ahead and deliberately ignores other lanes, he not only will impede the overall flow of traffic, but also is likely to encounter some damned angry motorists. If a meeting's chairperson selectively permits certain people to talk and ignores others, he or she can manipulate a group in a preferred direction. That is just what happened when Joe asked Marta for her thoughts, discovered that Marta's idea was the one that he had suggested himself, and then quickly cut off any objections to the idea.

WHY BOSSES SHOULDN'T RUN THEIR OWN MEETINGS

Some bosses may find this difficult to live with at first, but it is almost impossible to run a fair, nonmanipulative meeting when you have a personal investment in the subject matter. There is no way you can objectively lead a group that is considering whether or not to discontinue a project of your own. Even if you try not to influence the group, you will find that your body language reinforces those who want to keep your project going. Your eyes will light up when someone says something reinforcing. You will shrug or frown when you disagree—or more likely, openly object. It is only human. You should be in the group fighting for your ideas, not trying to lead the group toward a rational decision.

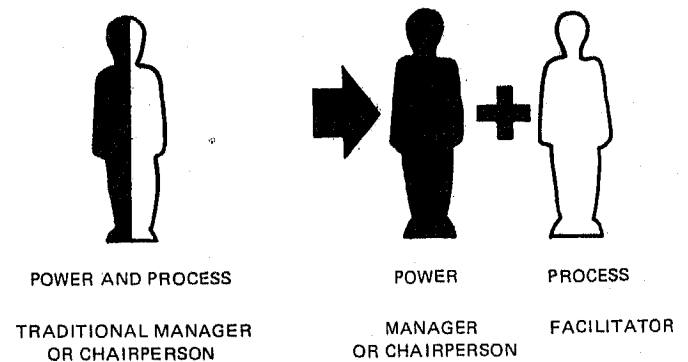
It is also easy to use the leadership role as a way of "keeping the floor" and doing all the talking—which can result in a rubber-stamp meeting. Managers who run their own meetings tend to be the most active participants by far; we find that they

talk on the average more than 60 percent of the meeting time. That doesn't leave much opportunity for others to contribute, and it's one more reason why participation in meetings is low.

To summarize, then, in most meetings of hierarchical organizations run by conventional methods, the manager with the most authority and decision-making power is generally the chairperson. As such, this manager controls how the meeting proceeds, deals with conflict between participants/subordinates, talks more than anyone else, and is responsible for making all final decisions. The result is often low participation and morale, poor data, and a waste of the manager's and group's valuable time.

Aside from all these handicaps, the big trouble is that the manager attempts to play too many roles at one time. It is like trying to be referee and scorekeeper as well as captain of the team. No matter how experienced, efficient, and smart he is, a manager can't do a good job of filling all these important and conflicting positions at once. As we have seen, it is almost impossible to be heavily invested in the subject of a meeting and run the meeting without bias. As a manager, since you are responsible for all decisions made by your staff, you must participate in a meeting and must continue to be captain of your team, but you cannot at the same time function as a competent referee and scorekeeper.

Picture yourself, for a moment, as President of the United States on the way to the airport in your limousine with your top advisers, having a last-minute meeting with them. You wouldn't want to be driving the limousine at the same time, would you? Having to deal with traffic would be a distraction, a waste of your time. In a similar way, you are too important to your group or organization to run your own meetings. Steering a meeting, like steering a car, demands total concentration. We therefore strongly recommend that managers and chairpersons not run their own meetings.



ENTER THE FACILITATOR

The key to solving the problems of authority, participant contribution, and managerial overload is to separate the process role (often played by the manager as chairperson) from the power or decision-making role. The manager maintains his or her involvement in issues and responsibility for making decisions and delegates all the procedural functions to another person—the facilitator.

The facilitator is a meeting chauffeur, a servant of the group. Neutral and nonevaluating, the facilitator is responsible for making sure the participants are using the most effective methods for accomplishing their task in the shortest time. The manager, as decision maker, participates fully in the meeting, fights for his or her ideas, sets constraints, and does not give up any power and responsibility.

In the Interaction Method the role of facilitator in both hierarchical and horizontal organizations is to deal with the common problems we have discussed so far. For instance, to avoid the multi-headed animal syndrome—the tendency of group members to go off in different directions—the facilitator

gets the group to stick to a common subject and a common process at all times. The facilitator might say, "Hey, wait a minute. You've agreed to work on problem A, but how are you going to tackle it? Are you going to try to define it in more detail? If so, how are you going to begin? Do you want to make a list of possible causes? Does each person want to describe the problem in his or her terms?"

HOW THE FACILITATOR WORKS

The facilitator holds the group back, offers a menu of possible ways of attacking the problem, and waits until there is agreement on one particular process. Then the facilitator helps keep the group on track until it has accomplished what it set out to do or wants to change direction. By getting all the group members to use the same tool at the same time on the same problem, the facilitator can transform a group from a multi-headed animal to a creative, coordinated organism.

To make sure that all participants have an opportunity to participate, that everyone will be protected from personal attack, and that no one is allowed to dominate the meeting, the facilitator is empowered to act as a cop. When the group is working well together, the facilitator may not need to do much and lets group members speak spontaneously. When things become heated or bogged down, the facilitator steps in and becomes more forceful in his or her use of power to direct the meeting process, signaling who should speak next, cutting off aggressive behavior, and keeping the group to its agreed-upon task.

Don't confuse our definition of a facilitator with others you may have heard. The Interaction Method is designed to accomplish tasks. It is not, as we have said, encounter or sensitivity training. The facilitator oils the tracks for groups to work effectively in meetings—to accomplish something. When a group is

able to concentrate its creative energy, to work hard, and to accomplish a task in a positive and constructive fashion, group members feel better about themselves and each other.

The facilitator agrees to remain neutral, not to contribute his or her own ideas, and not to evaluate the ideas of others. At times it can be very hard not to get involved in the content of a meeting, so if you are a facilitator, do ask your group to let you know if you are favoring a point of view, criticizing an idea, not letting certain people speak or cutting them off too soon, or in any other way manipulating the meeting. It is obvious that nobody can be totally neutral; you are going to have feelings and opinions about what is being said in the meeting.

It is the responsibility of group members to make sure that your thoughts and feelings are not allowed to influence the meeting; ultimately, they have the right to remove you from the role of facilitator.

This nonmanipulation pact between the facilitator and the rest of the group is one of a set of social contracts that is distinctive about the Interaction Method. It creates a self-correcting system.

Three of the four key roles have now been introduced: the facilitator, the group member, and the manager/chairperson. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to make sure that group members work together and to protect them and the manager/chairperson from personal attack. It is the responsibility of the group members and the manager/chairperson to keep the facilitator from manipulating the group in any way. And it is the role of the manager/chairperson to keep the group focused on the agenda, to set realistic time limits and to be clear about organizational constraints.