How to Improve Meetings

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Introduction

In my consulting work I find a single recurring problem in almost every organization I encounter -- the problem of how to improve meetings. Whatever else is going on, managers complain that there are too many meetings, the meetings are not productive, the committees in the organization should be abolished, etc. Yet these organizations have meetings or committees or task forces because they need them to get certain tasks accomplished. The solution to the problem is not to abolish committees or meetings, but to make these vehicles more effective so that they get their job done in less time. The set of practical guidelines presented below is intended to be a first step toward helping a manager improve the meetings in which he is involved. I start with the assumption that the purpose of all meetings is to solve problems which require communications and teamwork. If the meetings have some other purpose, the points listed below might have to be modified (i.e. labor-management negotiations, gripe sessions, etc.) The points below are arranged in terms of a chronological sequence -- 1) The origin of the meeting 2) Designing and calling the meeting 3) Conducting the meeting, and 4) Follow-up after the meeting. Each stage has its pitfalls and problems which will be identified below.

A. The origin of a meeting

  1. Why hold a meeting in the first place?

Someone in the organization must perceive some need for a meeting before a meeting should be called. If the need is a recurring need, then the meeting should be made a regular recurring part of the schedule, but meetings should never be held unless someone sees a clear need or purpose for the meeting.

Some meetings are clearly related to the day-to-day work of the organization. The need is clearly related to the organization's task performance. Another kind
of meeting might be called because of a need for mutual education, for information exchange, for policy setting, or for long-range planning. Thus a sales group may see a need to get together periodically to review the whole sales effort, to share information about clients and sales approaches, to engage in development activities, etc. Such a need is just as real as the operational need to pass a project from one stage to another, or to solve a specific operational problem, but again, the principle should be "no need, no meeting." If a group is meeting on a regular basis it may lose touch with the reasons why it started to meet in the first place. It is therefore desirable for any group to review periodically what needs are in fact being met by the meetings, and to decide on what basis to continue to meet.

The commonest trigger for having a meeting is that someone in a position of authority has a specific need, e.g. to give out information, or gather information, or check a policy, or get help in the creation of a policy, or assert a new policy, etc. In this instance, the person in authority should ask himself precisely what the need is and what kind of communication process or meeting is therefore needed. One of the commonest reasons for poor meetings is the fact that the person who called the meeting is not clear in his own mind about the need for a meeting, leading to the group "spinning its wheels" or otherwise getting confused and feeling that it is wasting time. If the person calling the meeting (hereafter called the "convener") is clear in his own mind about the reasons for the meeting, he can usually get this across to the members of the group and thereby create a more productive atmosphere for the meeting.

Why is it so important to establish a clear need for a meeting? Most people do not realize how much of an investment of time and energy is involved in attending meetings. We are asking a great deal of another person when we ask him to attend a meeting, especially when that other person is fully involved in his own job. If
the meeting turns out to have an unclear agenda or if the reasons for the meeting are vague, then the person will feel he has wasted his time and will be less disposed to attend future meetings. Even if the reasons or the needs for the meeting are clear, it is possible that some people attending the meeting will feel that their time has been wasted because they will not accept those reasons or needs as valid. If there is a risk of that happening, then the convener should consult a few potential attendees before the meeting as to whether or not they agree on the need for a meeting. If the need does not make sense to others, perhaps the person intending to call the meeting should reconsider or at least be prepared to persuade others of the need.

Conclusions:

1) Don't have a meeting unless a clear need for the meeting exists.
2) The person who sees a need and intends to call a meeting should check out with a few others whether they also see the need.
3) Groups which meet regularly should periodically check out what needs are being met by the meetings, if any.

2. Who should convene a meeting?

In principle anyone who sees a need for a meeting should be in a position to call a meeting. In practice this process often does not work out because too many meetings are called, schedules begin to conflict, and people begin to be lax in their attendance, leading to frustration on the part of the convener. The convener should therefore go through some preliminary steps before he actually calls the meeting:

a) Consider how busy people are and what the likelihood is that they will attend if a meeting is called.

b) Consider his own authority position and the likelihood that if people are feeling in conflict or too busy that they will skip the meeting.

c) Consider his options -- is there some other way for the need to be met besides a meeting?
d) Check out with other key people whether or not they also perceive the need for the meeting and elicit their help in giving the meeting legitimacy and importance; this often means checking things out with someone higher in the authority chain and enlisting their help in getting the meeting off the ground.

**Conclusion:**

1) The convener should be very realistic in assessing how people will react to having a meeting called.

2) The convener should enlist whatever aid he needs from others, especially in higher positions of authority before calling the meeting.

**B. Designing and Calling the Meeting**

Several of the questions addressed below have to be treated simultaneously in the convener's head -- 1) when to hold the meeting, 2) where to hold it, 3) whom to invite and for what length of time, 4) how the meeting should be designed -- what preparation the attendees and the convener should have, what audio-visual aids should be prepared ahead of time and what plans should be made for how the meeting is run, 5) how the meeting should be announced and in what form the agenda should be circulated and 6) how attendees should be followed up to insure their attendance. Each of these points will be discussed separately below but they are all inter-related.

1. **When to hold a meeting.** There are a number of considerations in deciding when to hold a meeting. Probably the most important of these is to develop empathy for the schedules of the people who are supposed to attend. To call a meeting on short notice for example, runs the risk of either grossly inconveniencing people (leading to possible resentment and less contribution to the meeting), or of simply having people not attend because of commitments they have made which have higher priority than the meeting. The only justification for meetings on short notice, therefore, is if there is a **critical** need which can be justified to the attendee. If such a critical need exists, it is still important to check out people's calendars to determine if there is a better or worse time to have the meeting. Even though it is time consuming to try to coordinate the calendars
of a number of people, it is time well invested if the attendee feels that the convener is concerned enough to put in effort to get people to the meeting without creating too many schedule conflicts. If people have some voice in when to hold the meeting, they are more likely to attend and more likely to be psychologically present and contributing to the meeting.

The next important consideration is time of day. The needs of the meeting have to be balanced against the needs of attendees to do their other work. It may be good for the meeting to start early in the morning when people are fresh, but that may also be the time when some members count on doing other critical work. Meetings often work well if they are put into time ordinarily viewed as non-working time such as lunch, but then it becomes critical to have good facilities for a luncheon meeting. There is nothing worse than a luncheon meeting which is cluttered by waiters or waitresses trying to serve while the group is trying to conduct business, or a meeting in a restaurant that is so noisy that people get distracted, or an in-house meeting with food that is so bad that people become pre-occupied with their resentment about the food and lose touch with the agenda. Here again, the best safeguard is to involve the potential attendees before the meeting and give them some opportunity to express their preferences. Even if no consensus is reached, the convener will still be better off taking into account the various opinions expressed rather than simply legislating a time and place in terms of his own needs.

Some people advocate late afternoon meetings on the theory that this minimizes probable conflicts with other duties. Before drawing such a conclusion the convener should check out several points -- how tired are people likely to be by the end of the day, are potential attendees in car pools or committed to certain commuting arrangements and hence would be dislocated by an end of day meeting, do people tend to schedule other important work for the end of the day, how do people
feel about working past the end of the day and taking time away from family
time? Before prejudging all of these questions, the convener should gather
information about the potential attendees, involve them in the decision if possible,
and at least make an effort to take into account the needs of the attendee.

Some further comments on dinner or lunch meetings should be made. If a
group is going to work on a tough agenda which will require a fairly open, deep
discussion, it may be desirable to start the meeting with a meal in order to
loosen up the group and to provide maximum opportunity for people to get to
know each other informally before they tackle their formal work. It is important
to recognize that this does cost time and money and should therefore only be
done when there is a good reason to do it. If a meal is to be involved, especially
an after working hours dinner, it is important to call the meeting sufficiently
far in advance to permit attendees to plan their calendar and work out potential
conflicts with family commitments.

If a dinner (or lunch) meeting is called, the convener should be sure that
the facilities permit informal communication during the meal. Going to a noisy
restaurant or one that has only long narrow tables, or one that is so gourmet
oriented that eating and service become more central than conversation can be
self-defeating. The ideal is probably a restaurant that has pleasant, small,
private dining rooms with round or square tables. If the formal meeting is to
be held after dinner it is also important that the amount of food and alcohol
be kept to a very reasonable level. The purpose is not to overwhelm people with
creature comforts but to get into a setting where informal conversation can precede
formal work.

Conclusions: 1) The convener should think about and consider the needs of the
attendees in planning the meeting time.

2) The convener should involve the attendees as much as is practical
   in decisions about meeting time.

3) Time of day for the meeting and whether or not it is combined with
a meal depends on the nature of the meeting, its length, and the constraints on the attendees.

4) If a meal is involved in the meeting, the location and facility should be carefully chosen to facilitate informal communication.

2. Where to hold the meeting and in what kind of room? There are two basic issues in regard to meeting location -- whether or not to have the meeting on-site (at the place of work) or off-site, and what kind of meeting room to use for the meeting. The issue of on-site vs. off-site depends upon the agenda, the length of the meeting, and the facilities available. The more policy oriented, long-range, fundamental the agenda, the better it is to go away from the office so that prolonged work without interruption is possible. The more the meeting is directed toward immediate operational issues, is intended to be short, and may have to be called on short notice, the better it is to find a meeting room at the place of work. If there are many operational meetings of short duration, the company should build adequate meeting rooms which are sound-proof, permit square or circular seating to avoid a "head of the table effect", and permit adequate audio-visual presentations. Meetings in offices should be avoided as much as possible because of a) the difficulty of concentrating on the agenda, b) the fact that offices are typically not set up for meetings, and c) the likelihood of interruption by telephones or visitors.

If the meeting is to be held away from the office it is essential that the convener check out carefully the facility to be used. If each of a number of people are going to invest several hours in a meeting, it is important that the facilities support this degree of investment of time and effort. Make-shift meeting rooms in motels, small meeting rooms with long narrow tables, rooms with inadequate partitions which permit sound from adjacent rooms, loud air-conditioning all can ruin a meeting. It is well worth the convener's time to check out the facilities himself or have someone check them out for him before committing to a particular location. If the meeting is going to last a half day or more it becomes
particularly important to check out the chairs to insure that people will be sitting comfortably.

A final consideration for off-site meetings is the location and access to it. Some groups deliberately pick remote places for one or two-day meetings in order to feel that they are really away from the office. If such a decision is made it should be checked out with the attendees to insure that no-one is seriously inconvenienced either by the distance to be travelled or the nature of the facilities. For example, if a group decides to "rough it" by going to a mountain cabin where two or more people will be sleeping in a room and where very basic food will be prepared, it is important that all attendees be consulted in relation to special diets, special preferences regarding sleeping arrangements, etc. This issue may sound trivial, but one never should second guess who will be made nervous or anxious by what kinds of arrangements. The convener should be very sensitive to such issues because it is easy for group pressure to force someone into a situation where he will be uncomfortable and will, as a consequence, be less of a contributor to the meeting.

Many organizations use meetings of several days' duration in remote locations as a way of building a new team which must work together. If people have to live together as well as work together, they get to know each other more intimately which, in the long run, facilitates communication and team-work. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this type that I know of is a South African company that sends new executive teams out on a safari together into fairly dangerous areas. The common adventure welds the group together, provided the members of the group are agreeable at the outset to this kind of experience, are physically and emotionally ready for the "adventure", and have a chance to express their preferences at the outset on the nature of the physical arrangements.

Meeting rooms should be well designed from a sound, ventilation and comfort point of view. I also believe that basic seating arrangements should be round or
square if the goal is to facilitate maximum communication and the building of teamwork. If it is at all possible, the table should be round so that everyone can maintain easy eye contact with everyone else. Oval tables or square tables are the next best but they do "isolate" some members from each other by making it difficult for people who are sitting on the same side to see and hear each other. A horrible example is President Ford's table (shown in Fig. 1) where he is meeting with his economic advisors. He is sitting at the center, not the head, of a long rectangular or oval table. The advisors have to lean far forward and look around others who are sitting between themselves and the President in order to catch his attention and be heard. One cannot but wonder whether the physical arrangement undermines in subtle ways the degree of interchange and communication in the group.

The walls of meeting rooms should be designed for easy display of visual materials, i.e. it should be possible to tape up or hang charts, graphs, and other displays. It is particularly important to be able to cover walls with displays so that one does not have to remove one to put up another -- simultaneous display of all materials shown is an important aid to communication so that people do not forget what has been said before. Simultaneous display also gives the group a sense of progress in that it is possible to look back to where one has been in relation to where one is at the present time. Groups typically recycle through previous points rather than moving in a linear fashion, making it important for all prior data to be available.

The furniture in a meeting room should be flexible. Since the size of the group will vary and since the agenda will call for different configurations at different times, it is desirable to have tables and chairs which are moveable rather than fixed. Rooms which are to be used for training and seminar activities must have furniture which makes it possible to break the group into sub-groups with a minimum of inconvenience.
Ford, flanked by Kissinger and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, at last week's Cabinet meeting.

Figure 1
Conclusions: 1) Decide on whether or not to have the meeting on-site or off-site in terms of the length of the meeting (the longer the better to have it off-site), the nature of the agenda (the more long-range policy the issue, the better to have it off-site), and the nature of the facilities available on site (avoid meetings in offices wherever possible unless part of the office is specifically designed for meetings and the phone can be controlled).

2) Meeting rooms, whether on-site or off-site should be well ventilated, soundproof, and comfortable.

3) If long off-site meetings are to be held the arrangements should be checked out will all participants to insure that individual needs can be met.

4) Meeting rooms should have walls which permit the simultaneous display of all visual materials to be used in the meeting.

5) Meeting rooms should contain as nearly as possible round tables and flexible furnishings to permit sub-groupings.

3. Who should attend and how long should the meeting be? The next set of issues to be discussed concerns the key question of who should attend and the closely related question of the length of the meeting. These issues interact in that if the meeting is too long, it is certain that some people simply will not attend even if invited. Yet if the meeting is too short the problem to be addressed may not be resolved. How then should the convener decide on length and membership? The first criterion is the original need which motivated the meeting. If the convener has a clear concept of why he is calling the meeting, he can usually also list out who has to be there in order for the problem to be properly worked on and decide how long it is likely to take. The convener should avoid rules of thumb and try to think out how long it should actually take, given what he knows about the problem and the group of people who will be at the meeting. The larger the group, the less the members know each other, and the more complicated the problem, the longer the meeting will take. The convener should recognize that groups need time to warm up, need time to fully understand the problem, and need time to sort out interpersonal issues before they can concentrate fully on the task at hand (see Schein, 1969, ch. 3, 4, and 5 for an elaboration of this point). Giving a group too little time to solve a problem only
leads to frustration. Giving a group more time than it needs lead to a kind of Parkinson's Law of filling up whatever time is available. The convener should therefore put maximum effort into reaching a good diagnosis of how long the meeting should take, and should consult others about the issue if he is not sure.

The decision on how long to make a meeting becomes even more complicated if there are several items on the agenda. What the convener must weigh here is the gains to be achieved once a group of people have finally been gotten together if they can process many issues which concern them, against the losses of having the group feel overloaded, confused, and uninterested in items that occur late on the agenda. I have seen groups become totally frustrated by tackling a large multi-item agenda and getting through only half of it in the time allotted to the meeting, even though the amount of work they did in the half of the agenda which they did cover was highly productive. Had the convener produced a shorter agenda or been able to give the group a sense of progress through the items which they did cover, they might have felt a sense of success and pride in their meeting. As I will indicate later, part of the process of managing the meeting is to involve the group in decisions about how much of the agenda to cover and how to set realistic targets for the meeting once it had been convened. This does not get the convener off the hook, however, of doing some careful planning of how much time to allocate to each item as a first approximation.

I have said that the larger the group the longer the meeting will take (unless the meeting is purely a one-way information giving process by the convener of the group). It is therefore desirable to keep the number of people at a meeting to a minimum. By what criteria should one decide who comes? The convener should think about the need which originated the meeting and first list out all the people who are centrally involved in the issue because:

1) The have critical items of information

2) They are accountable for decisions which will be reached
3) They are critically involved in implementing decisions which may be reached.

The most important issue in who is to attend is the first one -- who has relevant knowledge or resources. If the group tackles a problem with second hand or partial or incorrect information, it will probably reach incorrect solutions and will feel it has wasted its time. Whoever convenes the meeting must consider these criteria very carefully and determine the costs and benefits of more or fewer attendees carefully, not simply jot down a list of people who "might have an interest" in attending and invite them willy nilly.

Having said that rules of thumb should not be used, I can nevertheless state some guidelines on numbers and lengths of time. A group that has worked together in the past can probably have a productive meeting on operational problems in 15 to 30 minutes. If the group has not worked together before or if the agenda item is complicated, involving policy issues, one hour is probably the minimum time that should be allocated. If major policy issues are to be covered in the meeting or if a large number of separate operational items are to be covered, two or more hours is probably realistic. Half-day, full day or even two day meetings are appropriate for long-range planning or policy making groups who are trying to reach consensus on major issues which will influence a large variety of operational problems. Such longer meetings might be interspersed on a monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly basis with short weekly meetings.

In terms of the size of the group one can generalize that the larger the group, the longer it will take people to get comfortable with each other because there will be more pairs of relationships to be established. Therefore, if the meeting must involve larger groups it will take longer for the group to "get up to speed" or to be ready to work. Three to five people can probably get acquainted fairly rapidly and can work productively in a one hour meeting. Six to ten people probably need initial meetings of two hours or more to get acquainted and can then drop to one hour meetings once they know each other. Groups larger than ten will have a
tough time getting started, but once they have met for three hours or more, possibly over a period of several meetings such large groups can be highly productive. In other words, larger groups need more start-up time and need to be managed more carefully during the meeting, but they can work and should not be arbitrarily excluded as an alternative if there are other reasons for that many people to attend.

The next issue to be addressed on "who shall attend" is the matter of rank -- should groups have multiple ranks or authority levels within them? Should one invite a boss and a subordinate to the same meeting? The answer to both questions is "it depends". If each party has relevant items of information, if each party has some accountability, and/or if each party is involved in implementation or has a need to know what is going on at the meeting, then it makes sense to have multiple levels. However, the price may be loss of spontaneity of communication. Depending upon the relationship between the members at different levels, either one will do all the talking or they will tend to paralyze each other. It may take time for a group with multiple levels to overcome the ambiguity of who is supposed to speak for whom. Such groups can work, but they need more start-up time and team building effort before they become genuinely productive.

Similar problems of lack of open communications arise in groups in which some members feel that they have to represent the interests of some other group. If such representation issues are valid, it is important for the convener to acknowledge the needs of that member to check points with his group between meetings or even during a meeting, rather than forcing him into taking positions which he may not be able to uphold later. If implementation of decisions is important, then getting realistic commitments from members becomes critical, and, if representatives are invited to meetings they must be given the freedom to act as representatives.
Conclusions: 1) Meetings should be as long as the agenda requires, consistent with the schedules and needs of attendees, and the past history of the group; the more the group has met, the shorter its meetings can be.

2) New groups require a longer start-up time and therefore need longer initial meetings.

3) The larger the group, the longer the meeting must be, unless it is purely an information dissemination meeting.

4) The criteria for who should attend are (in order of importance) a) who has critical information in relation to the agenda items to be covered; b) who is accountable for the decisions to be reached at the meeting; c) who will have to implement the decisions.

5) If several rank levels or representatives from other groups are involved in the meeting, the meeting may be less open and may take longer; the convener should design the meeting to deal with these constraints realistically, e.g. allowing more time, allowing representatives to check with their groups, etc.

4. The design of the meeting. It is the responsibility of the convener not only to decide where, when, for whom, and on what topic or agenda to have the meeting, but also to think about the actual conduct of the meeting and to design it prior to its actual execution. Most meetings which leave people unsatisfied were not carefully designed in the first place. What do we mean by "meeting design?" A meeting is the creation of a social, interpersonal process whose purpose is to achieve some goal through an exchange of information and opinions. Such a social process usually involves a number of people with different styles and temperaments, but, equally important, must reflect the kind of problem or task to which the meeting is addressing itself. Such processes should not be allowed to just happen spontaneously. The convener should attempt to design a process which is appropriate to the task and the people who will be involved. The main processes to be designed are: a) communication processes; b) problem solving processes; c) decisions making processes; and d) leadership processes.*

*Background material on these processes can be found in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of my book Process Consultation (1969).
4a) **Communications Processes.** The convener must decide what kinds of information are relevant to the agenda and **how best to get that information shared in the meeting.** He has many options including preparation of materials for circulation prior to the meeting, asking people to bring materials to the meeting, asking members to report specific issues, or simply letting communications flow spontaneously. As we will see in the discussion of the actual conduct of the meeting, the convener may have to abandon some aspects of his original design in terms of what actually happens at the meeting, but he should think out some contingency plans ahead of time. **It is probably safe to generalize that "those information materials which can be prepared ahead of time and circulated should be."** It is not a safe generalization, however, to assume that if things have been circulated that they have been read and/or understood. Therefore, part of the communications process at the meeting must be a review of information circulated to insure that all members are operating with the same information base.

In deciding on who should report on what and when, the personalities of the attendess should be considered as well as the nature of the agenda. For example, some groups have members who always need to be heard on every subject. If the convener knows this, he can facilitate the meeting by planning at the outset to call on the talkative member to present his point of view and even discussing this plan with the member prior to the meeting to reassure him that his needs to be heard will be met. Similarly, if the convener knows that some members are very reticent to contribute spontaneously, he can ask those members to present formal reports and thereby forwarn them that their opinions will be solicited. Such forwarning is preferable to calling on a person during the meeting and catching him off guard and possibly unprepared.

The convener should think through carefully his own role in the communication process. **How much time should he take at the beginning of the meeting? Should he enter the discussion as a major participant or should he take some other role such as "traffic cop" or "taker of minutes" or "consensus tester"? The convener**
should ask himself what kinds of roles are needed to get the problems solved and how he can insure that all those roles will be fulfilled. Should he assign a secretary or recorder; should he play that role himself; should there be a time-keeper, should there be other roles? Probably the one safe generalization is that the convener should be prepared at the beginning of the meeting to set the stage by restating the purpose of the meeting, who is there and why, how much time is to be devoted to the agenda item, and how he wants the group to proceed. In other words, the convener must manage the communication process, even if he does not enter into it as a major participant on the actual content of the problem. More will be said about communications in the section on running the meeting.

4b) Problem solving processes. The convener must have in his own mind a clear model of how problems are identified and worked on in groups. He cannot simply announce a meeting on some problem and expect the group to figure out how to get to work on it. Instead, the convener must understand at the outset that one of the critical pitfalls in any group problem solving process is an unclear understanding of just what problem is to be worked on. Different members see the problem differently and often introduce information and/or opinions which are relevant to them but strike other members of the group as irrelevant. To avoid this kind of confusion and potential waste of time, the convener must consider what he can do prior to the meeting to clarify the agenda (the problem to be worked on), and how he can reinforce this understanding at the beginning of the meeting. For example, when the meeting is first announced, the convener has the choice of describing the agenda in very vague general terms or in very specific focused ways which get members to think about the issue before the meeting.

It is my own conviction that the more concrete the agenda is about the nature of the problem, the easier it will be for the group to work. Let us assume that the company is having a problem of declining sales and that the general manager of
a division calls a meeting to deal with this "problem". If he waits for the actual meeting to introduce "the problem of declining sales", he can predict a wishy-washy, possibly defensive, rambling, unfocused discussion which may lead nowhere. What could he have done to prevent this? First of all, he could have thought out and put down in a paragraph or two his own view of the problem, distinguishing carefully between Symptoms which suggest that there may be a problem, and the actual Problem to be identified and worked on. Having done this, he should share these insights as part of the initial material sent to members prior to the meeting. Also included should be some questions which will focus the discussion initially. For example, the written agenda might state:

"We will start the discussion with 1) my review of how I see the problem, then 2) ask all of you whether you agree, and then 3) what you would add or modify? Next in our discussion 4) we will try to reach agreement of what our problem really is that is causing the symptoms (e.g. declining sales), and then 5) will ask ourselves what we can do about it."

By putting all of this into the initial agenda, the convener prevents the group members from coming into the meeting with instant solutions or premature evaluations of what the problem is. Such instant solutions often lead to instant debate and much wasted time. By structuring the problem identifying and problem solving process at the outset, even in the call to the meeting, the convener is not only helping the meeting but also is training the group in how to solve problems effectively.

4c) Decision making process. Groups can make decisions in a variety of ways from doing nothing about a given suggestion or point of view, to letting a minority dictate, to majority voting or polling, to consensus and unanimous agreement. Typically, groups use the whole spectrum of these decision making mechanisms depending upon the topic. The problem for the convener is to decide ahead of time what kind of decision making mechanism is appropriate for the problem that is to be worked on and to announce to the group what that mechanism is to be. For example,
if the issue is a short-run operational one the convener may tell the members that the purpose of the meeting is to get out some facts so that the one member who is accountable in that area can go ahead and make his own decision. At the other extreme, if the group is trying to solve an important problem (as in the example of falling sales mentioned above) or is setting a policy, the convener may say in his initial announcement that the meeting will attempt to reach a consensus that everyone feels comfortable about. If the members know ahead of time that they will have to reach consensus they will be psychologically better prepared for an in-depth discussion and will not fidget and wish that the chairman would just decide and get the meeting over with.

If the group has an agenda consisting of multiple items, not only should each item be clearly stated in the form of a question to be answered, but the convener might consider putting next to each item what decision making form he thinks to be appropriate for that item. It is often the case that some items require consensus, others require decisions from the accountable person, while others require no decision at all, simply a discussion for information and clarification. It is my argument that a group will work more effectively if it knows ahead of time what decision making method is to be used for each item.

If the group disagrees with the convener, that can be taken up at the beginning of the meeting and resolved. But if different members have different assumptions (some expect to vote, some expect the boss to decide, some expect consensus) about the decision making method, it is almost a certainty that the group will begin to waste time and misunderstandings will begin to occur.

4d) **Leadership processes.** The convener has a choice of how to lead the group and should make his choice as explicit as possible ahead of the meeting. He can simply be the catalyst who is bringing together a relevant group of resources
to solve a problem; in that case he will concentrate on being the process leader, insure that communications are good, help the group to reach a decision, but enter very little on the content of the actual group agenda.

Whether or not he chairs the meeting once it has been convened is a choice that must be made in terms of the actual agenda to be worked on, and the personalities of the participants in the meeting.* If the convener does not have accountability or authority in reference to a given problem for which he calls a meeting, he can ask the person in authority to chair the meeting, but continue to provide process help to the chairman. On the other hand, there may be no one clearly accountable person, in which case the convener may choose to be the chairman in order to avoid a political hassle in deciding which of several competing peers should be chairman. Some groups solve this problem by having the chairmanship rotate. Sometimes the person who should chair the meeting in terms of his organizational role is particularly inept in that kind of group role. The convener may in those instances ask to chair the meeting himself or ask that someone else who is better at chairing meetings take the role. Whoever chairs the meeting, the convener (the person who originally saw a need for the meeting and called it or got it to be called) should continue to be responsible for creating an effective meeting. This process leadership role cannot and should not be delegated away. If the convener feels the need for a meeting, he should be responsible for insuring that it will be a good meeting, whether or not he is chairman.

Leadership during the course of the meeting can be highly directive/autocratic (calling on people, making decisions, keeping time, etc.), consultative (seeking information and opinions but retaining decision making authority), democratic/participative (sharing decision making authority with group members), or laissez-faire (letting the group run the meeting and make the decisions). Which style is

*One of the best discussion of the range of leadership styles can be found in Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958).
appropriate depends upon the task, the amount of time available, the personalities of the people at the meeting, and the past history of the group. The important point is to plan ahead. The chairman of the group should decide ahead of time what leadership style he will use and why. If possible, he should even tell the group at the outset what leadership style he will use and why. Groups get into trouble when chairmen, conveners, and group members drift into roles without awareness and when these roles come into conflict with each other. People can accept autocracy if they know the reason why; similarly, they can accept laissez-faire if they know the reason why. But groups get very upset if they feel that leaders are overcontrolling or undercontrolling without any idea of why this is happening other than "the personality of the chairman."

Most effective groups do not rely on the chairman and/or convener to provide most of the necessary leadership roles. Instead, these roles come to be distributed among the members and the members begin to feel responsible for effective communication, problem solving and decision making. Summarizing, testing consensus, checking out whether the problem is clearly understood, reducing the destructive conflict within the group, etc. all come to be performed by whoever sees the need most clearly. The role the convener and/or chairman must play is to create at the outset a climate which builds expectations that such leadership will be a shared responsibility. If such a point of view can be gotten across in the initial statement of the agenda, it is easier for the group to work effectively during the meeting itself.

5. Announcing the meeting. The implications of the above four sections are twofold: 1) the convener must think out as clearly as he can the design of the meeting in terms of communication, problem solving, decision making and leadership; and 2) he must try to communicate as much of his thinking about the design and his own assumptions in the initial announcement of the meeting. The assumptions
and pre-decisions usually have to be communicated all over again at the beginning of the meeting, but if they have been put down on paper as part of the call to the meeting, time will be saved at the meeting itself. Furthermore, if there is strong dissent, it will be identified prior to the meeting when something can still be done about it, instead of having strong members undermine the meeting itself and thereby wasting everyone's time.

People want to know what will go on at a meeting, and will participate more effectively if they know ahead of time. Most meeting announcements that I have seen over the years are disasters in terms of brevity, ambiguity, and lack of clarity. Agendas tend to be single words or phrases like "budget review" which make it absolutely impossible for a participant to second-guess the issues and/or problems and therefore to prepare for the meeting. Most agendas do not spell out the expected role of the participant -- listener, information giver, opinion giver and/or decision maker, hence make it impossible to prepare. Rarely is anything said about who will chair the meeting, what kinds of decisions will be made, how many topics will be covered, how the time will be allocated, who will be at the meeting, and what, if anything the participant should prepare in the way of pre-work. If conveners can just solve the one problem of thinking about the meeting clearly ahead of time and announcing clearly what the meeting will be about, they will have solved half the problem of unproductive meetings.

6. **Follow-up to insure attendance.** Once the meeting is announced, the convener or his secretary should call each of the people who are to attend the meeting to remind them of the meeting and to re-iterate the expectation that they should attend. This communicates concern for the importance of the meeting and the importance of each member's attendance. If at this point the convener discovers that some people cannot attend or have questions about the agenda, etc. there is time for negotiation or, if necessary, replanning. If someone cannot attend but the meeting must be held anyway, the convener can select an alternate plan to have the member's input avail-
able. If someone does not understand or agree with some aspect of the agenda or the meeting design, there is still time to clarify and modify the design or persuade the dissenting member. In any case, follow-up of some sort is essential to avoid the unpleasant surprise of a key person not showing up or coming with unexpected resistance to the agenda or the meeting design.

Conclusions: 1) The convener must think through and manage the communication processes prior to the meeting and must plan that process for the meeting itself, both in terms of the personalities of the attendees and the task to be performed.

2) The convener must understand group solving processes and must help the group by initially identifying clearly what the task of the group is; as much as possible he should put his own formulation of the problem into the written, pre-meeting agenda in question form.

3) The convener should think out what kind of decision making method is appropriate for each agenda item and should announce ahead of time how he expects decisions to be made.

4) The convener is responsible for leadership of the process of the meeting, whether or not he is the actual chairman. He may or may not get involved in the content of what the meeting is about, but he must be sure that the chairman provides an appropriate process, and must be prepared to intervene on that level himself.

5) The chairman of the meeting must decide ahead of time what kind of leadership to provide based on the task, the group members, the past history of the group, and the amount of time available; if possible he should let the group know what kind of leadership method he will use.

6) The convener and/or chairman should help the group members to recognize that leadership is a shared function among the members, and that everyone should be concerned with developing effective communication, problem-solving, and decision making processes.

7) The announcement of the meeting should be as complete as possible in terms of clearly stated agenda questions, roles expected of participants, who will be at the meeting, who will be chairman, how the meeting will be conducted and how decisions will be made, what prior preparation is expected, and how much time will be allocated to what.

8) After the announcement has been circulated and before the meeting, each person who is expected to attend should be called to insure that he plans to attend and understands the purpose of the meeting.
C. Conducting the Meeting

The conduct of a meeting is a complex orchestration of human processes. I have said above that half the battle is to think out as much of the meeting plan ahead of time and to communicate plans clearly to members. But as with all plans, once a group of people begin to interact they change the plans and go off into new and often unexpected directions. The problem of conducting a meeting is how to stay on some kind of path toward the original goals without completely constraining participation and risking losing the input which necessitated the meeting in the first place. It is very easy to get frustrated in a group when it wanders off the topic, when conflicts erupt unexpectedly, when people who should say something remain inexplicably silent, when others use up air time with points that seem not to be relevant to anything, when side conversations start up while someone is trying to make a point, when it is obvious that people are not listening to each other, when topics that have seemingly been laid to rest resurface suddenly, when people get up and walk out of the room at a critical moment, and so on.

The key to managing groups in the face of all these potential frustrations is to expect the kind of behavior described above, to treat it as normal and symptomatic of legitimate feelings in the group, and to move forward in spite of such behavior by clarifying, restating, summarizing, and consensus testing over and over again.

Groups operate in a cyclical rather than a linear fashion. They move three steps forward and then two steps back. They go over the same issues again and again, but they do move forward and do make progress if one is watching for it. The basic reason for the cycling through the same issues over and over again is probably that different members come to understand the issues at different points in time, and the group cannot really let an issue go until some critical mass of its members understands and reaches a conclusion on the issue. The reason why
clarifying, summarizing, and consensus testing are such important functions is that different members finally "hear" at different times. If the chairman cares about the total group commitment, he must be prepared for the cyclical type of movement and the repetition of some points over and over again.

Every group operates at two levels -- the level of the overt content or agenda and the level of the covert interpersonal and group processes which occur among the members -- the "interpersonal underworld." The two levels are constantly intertwined and the person running a meeting must listen for both levels if he is to understand and influence what is going on. When things don't make sense at one level, the explanation usually can be found at the other level. For example, when people are having a difficult time agreeing on a seemingly simple issue, the real reason may be that two or more members are subtly competing with each other for influence in the group, and are arguing with each other in order to test each other, not because the issue merits it.

At different stages in a group's life different interpersonal issues become central, and the more the convener/chairman come to understand these issues, the easier it will be for him to move the group forward on its task. Therefore, anyone who has to run a lot of meetings should begin to acquaint himself with what is known about group dynamics by reading and attending workshops, or simply by observing carefully what actually goes on in a group. **

The remainder of this section will describe more specifically how the chairman should help the meeting to reach its goals, but these specifics should always be taken in the context of the general group issues alluded to above.


**I refer the reader especially to Chapter 3 and 4 of Process Consultation for a summary of phases in group functioning.
1. **Review of agenda, meeting design, and goals.** Every meeting should be started with a review and the setting of goals and targets. Even if extensive preparations have been made, one should assume that some members will not have read the material or will have forgotten or will have thought of new issues by the time of the meeting. It is important to clear the air in reference to new issues and to reach consensus on what the goals of the meeting are to be. The chairman should start the review by restating the agenda and asking if anyone needs to have anything clarified. The meeting should not move forward into any of the agenda items until the chairman is satisfied that members really have a common understanding of what they are working on, even if it takes 10 to 15 minutes of the meeting's time to reach such common understanding. One way to test this understanding is to set targets -- where does the group want to be by the end of the meeting, or by a certain time of day? Such questions force all of the members to think through their goals and to get committed to achieving those goals in a certain length of time. Instead of the chairman remaining responsible for the progress of the group, the members collectively become responsible if they commit themselves to specific goals for the meeting in each other's presence. It therefore pays to test for consensus around goals and to make sure that objections are heard early in order to avoid being sandbagged later in the meeting.

If there are pre-designated ways that the communication process, the problem solving process and the decision making process will be managed by the chairman, it is important to review these at the beginning of the meeting. For example, the chairman might say:

"On this issue of how we get our sales up next quarter, I plan to ask Pete and Joe to give some initial reports to fill us in on what we need to know; then we should spend about a half hour defining what our problem really is; if we can agree on that, I would like to do some brainstorming on possible remedies and take the final part of the meeting to try to reach consensus on what our next action steps will be. I think it is important that everyone
contribute to the discussion so I will try to keep communications flowing. Whatever decisions we reach should not be mine or Pete's or Joe's alone; I want them to be a real group consensus because we are all involved in implementing whatever we decide on. Is there anyone who feels we should conduct the meeting in a different fashion? (Discussion) Okay, here is what we have agreed on in the way of our agenda.

The chairman then gets up and puts down on the board or chart-pad the main parts of the meeting and some time estimates so that the group can collectively monitor itself against the agreed upon schedule. It is especially important that he write down the goals of the meeting so that members do not forget them as they get into the nitty gritty of the discussion.

If consensus is important, and if certain members have key information to contribute, it is also important that the chairman double-check the time schedules of the participants. Is everyone planning to remain for the whole meeting? If anyone is planning to leave early, how can his input be captured before his departure? If anyone is "on call" or may be called out of the meeting, how can the group work around this? These issues should be faced at the beginning of the meeting so that they don't catch members by surprise. I have seen groups left high, dry and angry when a key member suddenly announced he had to leave at a time when his contribution to a given agenda item had not yet been made. Instead of blaming the member who left, we should blame the chairman for not finding out at the beginning or even prior to the meeting that this person would have to leave, and re-adjust the agenda accordingly.

Once the group has agreed on its goals, has put the proper priorities on its agenda (if there is more than one item on it), has some sense of how the meeting will go, and has had a chance to "settle down" (catching up on gossip, meeting a new member, conducting side-business with someone whom a member has been trying to catch, etc.), it is ready to go to work.
Conclusions: 1) The meeting should always begin with a review of the agenda the design of the meeting, and the goals and time schedule for the meeting.

2) The chairman should check out members' time schedules to insure that the key people will be present for those parts of the meeting where their input or decision is needed.

3) The chairman should allow time for the group to cover its informal business before starting the serious work.

2. **Managing communications, problem solving, and decision making.** I will treat these three topics together because they are so intertwined in a group's functioning. The group cannot really gather information and opinions relative to a topic of discussion (a communications issue) until it has decided what topic it will discuss and for how long (a decision making issue) or until it has defined a problem to be worked on. The best way to think about this area is in terms of a problem solving cycle which starts with agreement on the definition of the problem, then moves on to gathering information and opinions on alternative ways of dealing with the problem, then moves on to evaluation of the alternatives, and finally to the development of an action plan.

At each stage the group may redefine the problem, thus recycling through the first stage, and at each stage it makes many decisions concerning how to gather information, which information to treat as valid, how to gather opinions, how to deal with conflicting opinions, and so on. In order for the chairman and the other members to retain their bearings, they must keep the problem solving cycle in mind and allow for constant recycling. If they have written down the goals of the meeting, and the initial problem formulation, these serve as anchors while the group is working. It is therefore very important to write the goals and the problem down legibly in a readily visible place to permit the whole group to retain its bearing.
As the discussion proceeds, the chairman should be asking himself the following kinds of questions:

"Who has relevant input on what we are talking about?"

"Are the persons who have relevant input speaking up? If not, why not? Should I do anything to help John into the conversations by asking him to comment or asking him a direct question?"

"Are people listening to each other? If Pete has made an important point which should be heard by everyone, should I restate it, or clarify it, or build on it? Should I write it down on the board so that everyone can remember it?"

As different points relative to a topic surface, the chairman or someone designated as recorder should take notes on these points, and preferably should take the notes on a chart-pad in front of the group so that the group's work is shown in a cumulative fashion for all to see. If points are not put up explicitly, they will be forgotten by one or more people and will make it harder at a later time to reach a decision. As pages of the pad are filled they should be torn off and taped up on the wall so that they remain visible to everyone. In an effective group discussion one often finds members reviewing or going back to points which were made much earlier. It is very facilitative if they can go to the chartpad page and point to the issue to which they are referring, rather than trying to get other to remember something which may have happened in the discussion some time back.

I have referred to the recorder role. Should the chairman always be the recorder, or should this role always be delegated? It is a fact that the person at the blackboard has a position of power because he can choose what to put down and can choose the wording of how it gets put down. Therefore, this power position should not be given to someone who will abuse it or who has no legitimacy in the eyes of the other group members. If the members have skills by having practiced
the role, it is possible for anyone to be the recorder and it may be helpful
to the chairman, in that case, to delegate it. But he should always retain the
role himself if he feels that he should retain the power, if the skill is lacking
in other group members, or if other members would not be acceptable in that role
to the group. In other words, the role of recorder should be allocated carefully
and with clear forethought of its implications. Many groups end up working in-
effectively because they either do not think about who is recorder and what
implications this has, or they treat the role as an undesirable chore and give
it away to someone incompetent, or they discover too late that someone to whom
they have given it is abusing it by doing too much editing of what is said, thereby
distorting group output and/or necessitating constant hassling over what really
should be put down on the board.

As the discussion proceeds, the chairman should begin to ask himself another
set of questions:

"Are the points which are coming out clear to everyone? How much should I
think about clarifying any given point by restating it or elaborating on it?"

"Are there sufficient points out on the table to attempt to summarize the
discussion? Can I summarize it? Should I ask someone else to summarize
if I am not sure how best to do it?"

"Are we near to reaching agreement on problem formulation? Should I state the
problem as I see it and check for consensus?"

The above questions are the critical ones in terms of moving the group forward
from one stage of the problem solving cycle to the next. If members of the group
are doing the clarifying, summarizing, and consensus testing, then the chairman
does not need to worry about these functions, but typically the members are so
involved in the discussion that it just bounces from one point to the next. If the
group has accumulated enough information and opinions, then the chairman must step in
and attempt to do the summarizing and consensus testing.
One of the commonest problems the chairman has in this and all other phases of group problem solving is the eruption of an argument between members on matters of fact and/or opinion. One way to deal with such arguments is to first differentiate clearly issues of fact from issues of opinion. If people disagree, the chairman can attempt to locate criteria or information which would resolve the disagreement factually. If the disagreement is not resolvable by new information, this should first be identified overtly to be the case so that everyone becomes aware that it is a difference of opinion. In that case the chairman has several options. He can simply close the argument by acknowledging the disagreement and asking the group to go on in spite of it. Or, he can resolve the disagreement himself by taking a position in favor of one alternative or the other. Or, he can state the alternatives and ask the group to resolve the issue through voting or polling the group. Or he can let the argument go on until the parties to it terminate it. Or he can let the disagreement stand and lift the discussion to a higher level by summarizing the positions, and acknowledging that the issue is unresolved, and asking the group to continue on a new tack with the understanding that they will return to the unresolved issue at a later time. The last alternative is often the most desirable one because it saves the face of the parties disagreeing without compromising the issue or reducing it to a lowest common denominator. In other words, compromise should be avoided in a task oriented discussion. Diagreements should either be resolved in an integrative fashion or allowed to stand until new information is brought to bear on them. Looking for middle ground just to get over the argument is likely to lead to lower quality decisions. The chairman, by implication, must have a high tolerance for conflict in the meeting, and must think through creatively his options for how to manage conflict.

If there is a great deal of disagreement within the group, the chairman can suggest a period of "brainstorming." He can note that individual alternatives are being debated before the full range of alternative is known to the group,
and can ask that judgement be suspended for 10 to 15 minutes while the group just concentrates on getting out all the relevant alternatives. The group recorder should then write down the alternatives so that the group can scan the entire array as a basis for reaching a decision. It is usually easier to make a decision when one can compare several alternatives than when one is evaluating a single alternative. If the group goes into a brainstorming mode, the chairman must monitor the process closely to insure that judgement and evaluation is in fact suspended. This may mean ruling some member comments out of order, if they are evaluative or judgemental. After the major alternatives are out in the open, the chairman can then reinvite evaluation and thereby terminate the brainstorming period.

As the discussion moves toward a point of decision, either because of no new information coming out, or the group is running out of time, the chairman must decide how to make the decision. His first criterion is what he stated at the beginning of the meeting would be his decision making method. He must either stick with that or give some credible reason for changing it. He may have said he would try to reach consensus but the pressure of time makes it necessary for him to decide unilaterally or to ask the group for a quick vote. Whatever mechanism of decision is to be used, the chairman must consider the costs and benefits, not simply slide into something as a matter of convenience. For example, voting may be quick but may leave the group polarized. Making the decision himself may be efficient but may leave some members unhappy because they feel they have been over-ruled. These may be prices the chairman is willing to pay, but he should do so with his eyes open.

Once any decision has been reached (e.g., what the problem is or what to do about it), it is important for the chairman to restate the decision and write it down. Groups get into endless difficulty by failing to understand and/or agree on what was decided. Someone may have stated the decision but members may have heard it
differently. Only if it is written down and reviewed can one be sure that everyone understands what was actually decided. One good reason for using chartpads rather than blackboards is that individual sheets can be taken down and later copied as the basis for constructing the minutes of the meeting. If things are recorded on a blackboard it is essential that someone either photograph the board or be charged with the responsibility to copy down what is on it. In no case should one rely on memory of what was decided.

To review, the problem solving process starts with problem identification and problem formulation. Decisions are needed at the consensus level of what the problem is. Once the group agrees on the problem, it can move into alternatives to solution. At this point some brainstorming may be needed to insure full exploration of alternatives. This exploration also serves as the basis for deciding whether or not the group is working on the right problem. The option should be opened up to reformulate the problem if necessary. If the right problem is being worked on and the alternatives are out in the open, the group can move toward the evaluation of alternatives and make decisions on what to do next. At each stage the chairman must worry about the communication flow by clarifying, summarizing, and consensus testing. Once a decision has been reached it must be restated and written down, and consensus must then be obtained to insure that everyone understands the decision and its implication.

Conclusions: 1) The chairman should insure that at each stage of the problem solving cycle the right members (the members with relevant information/opinions) are participating and are being heard.

2) The chairman should be the group recorder or assign that role to someone who has the skills to do it and will be accepted in that role by other members.

3) All relevant points should be recorded in full view of the group and all records should be kept in full view throughout the meeting so that members can easily refer back to earlier points.

4) The chairman's main role as the discussion proceeds is to clarify, summarize, and move toward decision by testing for consensus or suggesting other decision making mechanisms.
5) If the group is bogged down in debating too few alternatives, the chairman should suggest a period of "brainstorming" to insure the identification of all relevant alternatives.

6) As decisions are reached they should be restated and written down for all to see to insure clarity and agreement.

3. Planning for implementation of decisions. All of us have had the experience of going through a meeting, identifying and solving a problem, only to be surprised that the actions after the meeting bore little relationship to the decisions which were reached. Sometimes the wrong things are done after the meeting, more often nothing is done at all. The problem is that reaching a decision does not guarantee that the decision will be implemented. Each person at the meeting may be assuming that others will do something, or everyone waits for the chairman to do something. What all of this implies is that part of the process of an effective meeting is to explicitly plan for implementation of decisions and, most important, assign responsibilities for implementation to specific people. The assignment of such responsibilities often involves a time-table and series of checkpoints or plans for reporting back to the group either the progress achieved, or new problems which may have been encountered.

Once a decision is reached, the meeting, in effect, enter a new phase which involves identifying all of the things which have to be done to implement the decision and then assigning those new tasks to specific people. If the people who are responsible for implementation have not been party to the decision making, some process must be planned to insure full communication of the decision to the implementers. Often the naive assumption is made that if one simply tells the decision to another person he will understand and implement it. The problem is that if that other person has not gone through the process of identifying the problem, looking at a variety of alternatives, and finally reaching a single decision point, he cannot possibly understand all of the considerations which went
into the decision. If he does not understand the decision fully, the chances are the he will make implementation errors without even realizing that he is doing so.

Conclusions: 1) Once a decision has been reached the group should plan specific implementation steps and should assign specific implementation or follow-up responsibilities explicitly to members of the group -- specify who does what by when.

2) Check-points or review meetings for reporting on progress should be planned before the meeting adjourns.

3) If implementers are involved who have not been at the meeting, specific plans should be made to communicate the full import of the decision to them.

D. Follow-up After the Meeting

1. Minutes or other records. It is very important that the output of a meeting be documented. Not only is it important to have a record for communication to other groups or individuals, but it is important at a future meeting to have records of past meetings. What is actually put into the minutes will vary with the purpose of the meeting. One should not automatically record everything that goes on. By the same token, one should not limit the minutes to just very general statements of what was discussed. Ideally, the minutes should capture the problem(s) identified, the major alternatives considered, and the final alternative selected. Decisions reached should be clearly stated and the implementation plan should be clearly noted in the minutes, including the names of members with specific responsibilities and the time table and reporting back mechanisms which were agreed upon.

The minutes need to be fairly complete at this level to insure that the group has a record of its own accomplishment. Such minutes do not necessarily have to become public or be widely circulated. If it is important to communicate to others, the chairman can abstract from the minutes those things which should be communicated to various other individuals or groups.
2. **Follow-up of implementation plans.** The chairman should note carefully what plans were made for implementation and should follow up on those plans himself by calling group members who undertook specific responsibilities to see what progress they are making. Such calls should simply be requests for progress reports. They should communicate to the person being called that he did make a commitment at the meeting which should be followed up, and that the work of the group or the meeting is important enough to warrant follow-up on the part of the chairman. If the meeting is held but nothing much happens after the meeting, it is all too easy for members to forget about the meeting and go back to their regular work routine. It is the responsibility of the chairman to remind members of the importance of what was done at the meeting by his follow-up calls.

Conclusions: 1) Minutes of the meeting should be kept and issued after the meeting. They should contain essentials of the problem formulation, the alternatives considered, and the conclusions reached; they should also contain the implementation plan, including names and time-tables for assigned responsibilities.

2) The chairman should follow up with individual members after the meeting to communicate the importance of the meeting and to insure that implementation plans stay on target.

Conclusion

The best way to conclude this set of guidelines on how to improve formal meetings is to reassert that conveners, chairmen, and group members must learn to observe group process, and must learn to manage that process toward their goals. Poor meetings are simply mismanaged meetings. Unproductive groups are groups which do not know how to manage the problem solving, communication, and decision making processes in groups. If a group wants to become more effective, it should start by learning to observe its own processes, take time out to discuss these processes, and make explicit decisions about how it wants to manage those processes. Such a learning process is an investment of time initially, but it pays off in more effective group meetings later.
Learning to observe and discuss group processes is not easy or automatically doable by group members who may never have thought about groups at this level of analysis. To get the process started it may well be helpful to bring in an outside consultant to provide some of the key dimensions to be observed and to give the group some training exercises to get it started. The simplest of such exercises is to assign one member to be a "silent observer" during the meeting and then to have him give feedback to the group on some of his observations after the formal part of the meeting is terminated. The group can agree ahead of time on some of the dimensions which they would like to have observed, e.g. participation patterns, are people listening to each other, who talks to whom, how are decisions reached etc. The important groundrule is that the observer must remain silent, thereby forcing him to concentrate on the group process (since he knows he cannot influence the content of what is being discussed if he must remain silent). Where this exercise has been tried, without fail it is reported to be one of the most significant learning experiences which the group member ever had. Most of us don't observe what is going on around us simply because we have not taken the observer role. When that role is forced on us by common agreement, we find we can observe all kinds of significant events which can serve as the basis for improving group functioning.*

If an outside consultant is either impractical or undesirable for other reasons, the group can read some materials on group process and simply assign itself the task of reviewing its own processes at the end of the meeting. Many effective groups take the last 15 to 30 minutes of every meeting to "review how we feel about today's meeting; how could we have improved on it; how can we improve future meetings?" Once a group makes the commitment to analyzing its own process it can usually identify fairly readily where that process can stand improvement. Hopefully, the ideas presented in the above pages will also be helpful in identifying the process issues which can and should be managed if formal group meetings are to be more effective.

*One of the best books on learning to work in groups is by Mathew Miles (1959).

