

Bloody meetings and getting inspiration flowing

by Rob Sheffield

Wouldn't it be nice if you had a reputation for organising and running meetings that were engaging, fun, productive, and used the talents of the people in the team? Maybe you do already...



As the pressures grow to become 'leaner' and to 'do less with more', time for training and development everywhere is squeezed. However, there are a myriad of techniques for running effective meetings that are useful when used skilfully. This article is aimed at people who are interested in people. What makes them tick, and what motivates them?

Dr. Michael Kirton (kaicentre.com) says that whenever a team comes together it immediately has 2 problems. Problem A is the task it's been given to achieve. Problem B is how it's going to work together to achieve Problem A. If the team is spending more time on problem B than A, it's a sign that all's not well.

There's nothing magical about what's here, though the techniques can have real impact. For me, what makes the difference is having the gumption to say something different in a meeting, and risk, at worst, looking foolish. Also, having a spirit of wanting to experiment a little and see what happens when you do. Learning! There's a certain amount of jargon, as with every pseudo-discipline. Change it if you don't like it.

The situation...

You know that you have 3 or 4 meetings for the new team to agree a plan of action and communicate it to the rest of the school. The new government policy needs careful thinking. Oh, and then you have to implement it by the end of March. These meetings will likely take place at lunch time, or at 16.00. You'll have an hour maximum, and more likely, 45 minutes, once everyone arrives. And even when they arrive, are they really there...?

Clearing muddled heads...

On my first training course for trainers, I remember the instructor – Alan Margolis – introducing something called 'Wants and Needs'. Before we got started he'd ask us, individually, to *state our wants and needs* for the next day, or afternoon, or next session.

Process: go around the room, asking for volunteers, or from one person to the next, and ask that person to state, **briefly**, what they want from the next hour, and then what they need. (The 2 are usually different.) Write it where everyone can see it: E.g. "I want to have a productive 45 minutes; I need to make a quick phone call" Then on to the next person. One of the unsung advantages of this is that you can also establish some instant rapport between people. Once finished, ask people to remember what everyone's said, and move on to the agenda. Should take around 5-10 minutes.

This did 2 things for me: it stopped me thinking about whatever flotsam was currently cluttering my mind. It also made interesting listening, as others often said completely different things, and helped me concentrate on being here now. Use it if your people have had busy or sapping prior sessions and need some help to focus. It changed my state. I became more present.

How many times have you been in a meeting that's seemed to have no sense of purpose and direction? You've wondered what you're there to do and to achieve. You question your sanity, and stare at your shoes. Your mind starts to drift... Genie Laborde (2001) suggests using **PEGASUS** in meetings, as a way of helping you to focus on other people, rather than your own anxieties and thoughts.

Further reading and sources:

Genie Laborde,
Influencing with Integrity, Crown House Publishing, 2001

www.kaicentre.com
for more information about the work of Dr. Michael Kirton

Briefly...

Present outcomes: what are the “outcomes” or things you want to have achieved at the end of the meeting? E.g. create a plan of action for the team for the next month. From my experience, this is often easier to say than fully agree. Write down your desired outcomes somewhere where people can see them. A whiteboard or flip-chart are best, just make sure it’s visible and remains in view as the meetings continues.

Explain evidence for these outcomes: say what you think the criteria are for a successful meeting. What will you see, hear and feel that will tell you that you’ve been successful?

E.g. “As well as creating a plan of action for the team, we ask around the team members and check we’ve all agreed to it. We will feel the energy in the room. We’ll hear each other disagree as we go along, and we’ll debate and then agree a way forward. At the end we’ll see the finished plan written on the flip-chart.”

Gain agreement: ask team members, individually, to check if they agree with what you’ve said so far. Of course, this feels like a risky stage. What if they disagree? But, better to get these differences aired and understood now, rather than spend weeks wasting time because you have different mental maps of where you’re going. If anyone disagrees with the outcomes, spend time now in gaining their agreement. Be prepared to revise and change them to suit. (Incidentally, Laborde (2001) considers there to be a difference between influencing and manipulation. (The latter is about getting what you want, whereas influencing is about ensuring that you work towards others also getting the outcomes they want.) So far, this should take around 20 minutes, but it’s time well spent, should ensure a smoother and quicker rate afterwards.

Activate sensory acuity. If this sounds increasingly like a how-to-build-your-own computer manual, relax... All this means, is pay attention to what people are saying and not saying, and their body language. Incongruity is when a person says, yes, but the tone or body language reveal something else. We often notice these signs but dismiss them. We don’t want to deal with the possible repercussions. “You seem unsure about this idea”. If you challenge, make it a direct and genuine enquiry, rather than a personal attack. You want to know what the person is thinking about in order to get a better decision.

Summarise each major decision: do this and people know what’s happening and what’s agreed. They feel a sense of things taking shape and progress being made. How you say it matters. Take people’s worries into account: “Peter is concerned that we won’t have enough time to get this started for the new term. Jan has agreed to speak to the Head and try to get our deadline extended by two weeks.”

Use the relevancy challenge: Ann says, enthusiastically, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could get Peter from Geography onto the team?” The relevancy challenge is to ask the question “How is this relevant?”. It only works once you’ve agreed the outcomes. You can use it autocratically or with politeness. Again, how you do it matters. It has the advantage of bringing people back to what you’re here to do. It also encourages people to think before they speak! Use it in an open-minded way, rather than as a bludgeon, and meetings should get shorter and more productive.

Summarise the major decisions, the final outcome and what has to be done next by the group and by individuals, and by when. Sometimes, a visible sheet, with peoples names and actions assigned to them, can show who’s collected most (and least) of the things to do. Can be revealing and tends to have a self-organising aspect, in that work gets redistributed as needed.

PEGASUS!

Problem solving as a managed process

All tasks can be thought of as presenting us with the opportunity to work through a problem-solving process. For example, from defining the problem, agreeing the problem, generating ideas for solutions, selecting and agreeing solutions, implementing solutions, and evaluating the implementation. There are hundreds of techniques you can use for specific parts of the problem-solving process, with varying degrees of structure, chaos and fun. All are aimed at getting agreement, and a better result than would otherwise have been achieved.

For example, you may want to ensure that

everyone gets a fair chance to speak at an important time in the meeting. Again, in the spirit of treating people with mutual respect, one technique involves holding an object – a ball, say – so that only the holder is entitled to speak. The holder decides to whom they’ll pass the ball. Don’t do this for the entire meeting - just for the parts that need a balanced involvement from all. People are usually fair in giving others a chance to say their bit.

Pegasus was brought to Mount Helicon by Bellerophon and with one kick of his hoof, he caused the spring of Hippocrene to flow. Hippocrene is said to be the source of inspiration to poets. **TEX*



Rob Sheffield is a self-employed consultant, working in team management & leadership development. He is also a visiting lecturer at the University of the West of England on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate business courses.