

MEETINGS are a very important part of the management process in any organisation and the main objective is to meet up to discuss and come up with solutions to work problems. From my perspective, however, meetings are probably the most badly managed of management functions in Malaysian organisations. From informal surveys carried out with participants in my training sessions, I gather that we tend to suffer from what I call, the "meeting disease". The complaints are usually focused on three items i.e.

- There are too many meetings.
- They take up too much time.
- They are not effective, i.e. a ball park figure of 50% is usually given.

There is also the cost factor to be taken into account during unproductive meetings. Firstly are the salary costs of every meeting participant. If you are holding an hour-long meeting for the top 10 people in your company, it's going to be very expensive. Meetings also keep people away from the tasks they were hired to perform and then there are the costs of bringing people to the meeting who are outstation or even overseas.

The question therefore asked is, "Why do so many organisations continue to conduct meaningless meetings?" My view on this is as follows:

'The Meeting Disease'

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A Routine Meetings

Routine meetings are one of the biggest culprits. How many of us walk off to the meeting room on a Monday morning and don't even know the agenda, just because we have to attend this ritual "manager's meeting".

B Weak Chairman

Many a time, meetings take a long time because the chairman is unable to control the meeting and allows individuals to dominate proceedings. Weak chairmen also allow the discussion at meetings to deviate from the

original agenda without any justification.

C Habit

When something goes wrong at the Operations department for example, the usual habit is to call for a meeting of all department heads. The Sales Manager stays quiet for three hours at the meeting, and then leaves without having made any contribution as he lacks knowledge of the issue being discussed.

So what can be done to improve meeting management? Some things I recommend are as follows:

Is a meeting necessary?

Firstly, before calling for a meeting, ask whether "there is a need for a meeting in the first place." Are you calling a meeting because it is an organisational ritual, or it is the best way to solve a problem? Also give a thought to the costs involved.

Ground Rules

Always have ground rules during meetings. Cover things such as speaking rules; focusing on issues; staying on the agenda, etc. When people are aware of what is expected of them, they are much more likely to contribute to more productive meetings.

The Agenda

One of the most important items before a meeting is the agenda. Outline ahead of time what is the objective of the meeting and the points that will be covered. Distribute it to participants ahead of time. This will help participants to be more prepared for the meeting.

Set a Time Limit

Time limits are important as they create pressure on the chairman and the members to have quality discussions. The time limits set must be realistic and in congruence with the objectives of the meeting.

Conclusion

Bad meetings are probably one of the most pervasive yet underestimated problems in Malaysian organisations. They are "expensive" and there is also the human cost such as poor morale, frustrated management, etc. On the other hand, good meetings can be a very powerful way to communicate and solve organisational problems. Managers must realise that it is a necessary management tool and what they have to do is to be able to use that tool as effectively as possible so as to create a positive impact on organisational effectiveness and efficiency.

