

we can't go on meeting like this!

recognising the role of meeting dynamics

a white paper from **LANZen** - secure information solutions



A large bank I was working at had a project manager who had an enviable reputation for getting things done on time, no matter what.

Unfortunately, the “no matter what” included failing to allow any time for discussion of what was being delivered, or if that “deliverable” would actually add any value. In short, he failed to capitalise on the wealth of knowledge around him and ignored a vital element - the meeting dynamics.

Delivering a project isn't just about driving the player's bus to the football match. You need a game plan, ensure everyone knows the position they're playing in and everybody wants to win. Just getting there isn't enough.

Projects cost money - good project meetings ensure the best returns are delivered from that money. Surprisingly, a lot of money will be wasted by meetings scheduled wrongly, with insufficient discussion time and without the right people. Most importantly, not considering “meeting dynamics”.

This white paper describes how meeting dynamics can ensure your meetings achieve what they set out to do. Using the wealth of knowledge available around you, you can be more certain that the right solution will be delivered, on time, on budget and in agreement with all concerned.

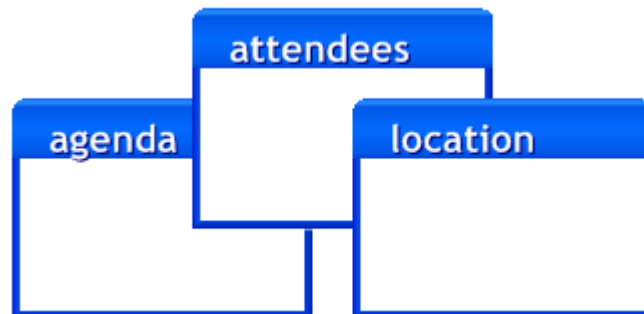
That heading may sound obvious - but it's rarely achieved at the average project meeting. There's a world of difference between *hearing* what's said and actually *listening* to a suggestion or objection. We need to create a fertile environment to introduce ideas and agree any necessary changes.

Project meetings are absolutely vital for any successful project. Let's establish that from the word go. So what do you need to make them worthwhile?

Successful project meetings don't just happen, they are based around three essential elements - **agenda**, **location** and above all, **people**.

So far so good. I doubt if anyone would disagree with those three parts. But in what order of importance?

Firstly, we obviously need something to discuss - the agenda. Build this up carefully, including only the aspects that need to be



discussed, not irrelevant items that your attendees can add no value to. Keep the agenda in line with the project tasks in hand and publish them in advance so people can prepare. Be flexible about the time needed to reach agreement.

Next, invite those who have a real contribution to make - those who understand the topic to be discussed, those who will be effected by the change. If anything is likely to be contentious, think about a meeting to iron out any issues before you involve the budget managers as you should present a united front to them.

Funny thing, most employees and users generally know their jobs. They do them every day. They know what works, what doesn't and if you ask them, often know what would work. Remember, we don't have the monopoly on ideas. *Ignore the people at the coal face at your peril!*

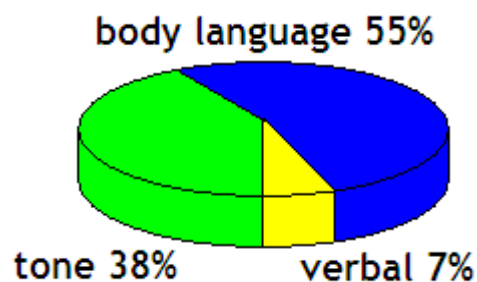
Finally, choose a location to suit the majority, but away from any interruptions likely to extend the meeting beyond the time your attendees have available.

Travelling to meetings represents a large investment of people's time, both in attending and returning to catch up with time lost from their daily role.

Teleconferencing - or video conferencing if such facilities are available - can be useful tools to resolve trivial matters quickly. But they can jeopardize the very outcome of a meeting - this is because they mask the *dynamics*.

Dynamics are the subtle, almost subliminal aspects of all interaction. They exist in every inter-personal exchange - even between animals. They are the cues we take from others that indicate agreement, surprise, anger, unease or confusion.

No-one with any degree of common sense would ever choose to ignore such indicators. Yet this vital element is highly impaired through teleconferencing and virtually completely lost with written communication like email.



Research has shown that only around 7%¹ of the meaning of any communication is taken from words alone. The overwhelming proportion - 93% - comes from the meeting dynamics. What's the use of a meeting that's less than 7% effective?

Teleconferencing should therefore be used with care and such meetings where a participant is sitting there alone avoided whenever possible. Sometimes, however, a meeting with remote participants may be the only way. Is there a way to manage such meetings so that value can still be returned from them?

The next section answers this by introducing an essential role - and explains how observing dynamics, you can truly ensure the success of your meeting.

¹ Professor Albert Mehrabian, UCLA "How Meaning is Derived" and "Why Business People Talk like Idiots", Free Press.

the meeting conscience and how to avoid a project mutiny

It is often assumed that because the chair of the meeting has brought it to a close and signed everything off, that everything is now agreed and things can move forward. Very often, privately dissenting parties can leave the meeting unhappy. You are on the way to a project mutiny.

Projects have enough factors ready to bring them crashing to spectacular failure. It shouldn't be the project members themselves that bring it on!

It's easy to get carried away by emotions or enthusiasm for your idea or a spirited exchange of views. You may well miss the look on the face at the end of the table, the uncomfortable shuffling on the seat or the sideways glance to a colleague by one of the delegates. In a remote meeting, the risks of that are very high indeed. For those meetings, you should try to retain some of the otherwise lost dynamics by putting someone you trust in the room with the remote parties.



This introduces a new role. The *meeting conscience*. This is someone assigned the role of interpreting the dynamics of the meeting - seeing who's happy or unhappy with proceedings, who's not involving themselves or contributing fully - or maybe even who's wasting time for some reason or suppressing someone who may want to make a contribution.

The meeting conscience's role extends beyond that of simply observing, however. They note the attitudes around the meeting, personally contacting those concerned afterwards or reporting back to the chair. Choose this person carefully. Make sure they're the kind of person sensitive to such dynamics and able to convey what they've observed properly, as certain signs can be misread fairly easily. It's a good idea to combine this role with that of minute taker, as they're often not actively engaged in the meeting.

The meeting conscience should be there wherever a decision is made. An ill-considered decision isn't a decision at all - it is a mistake.



Meetings are opportunities to share knowledge and to use that knowledge to make business decisions. From the first meeting to discuss the viability of a new project, throughout the regular meetings occurring within your project's life cycle, to the final sign off, each one should be run with open minds and with consideration for the views of everyone concerned. Observing dynamics.

LANZen are IT strategists and secure information solution architects. We believe strongly that only through consideration of all the knowledge available can proper business decisions be made and the right solution delivered.

When you involve LANZen in your project, you will find that philosophy used throughout the process. Some of the greatest value we can bring is achieved by releasing the capabilities and knowledge you already have.

Changes should always be for the better. Better call LANZen today!

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