

Human Processes Keith Harrison-Broninski

Minutes = Weeks

Like most people reading this column, I spend a lot of time in meetings, ranging from large-scale workshops booked weeks or months in advance to small-scale discussions with one or two people about a single issue. Meetings, whether conducted face-to-face, virtually or a combination of both, are fundamental to business culture and not likely to reduce in quantity any time soon. So why are meetings nearly always conducted so badly?

To be specific, the aspect that is conducted badly is the part where you all confirm what you agreed.

Large-scale meetings are typically written up by a nominated person, who may take scribbled notes during the meeting that all attendees can see on a whiteboard or flipchart, or private minutes that only they can see. In both cases, the attendees may confirm at the end what to do about each noted item, but the usual practice is for the note-taker then to go away and write up the notes formally. The written up notes may then go into a set of structured logs (e.g., RADIO – Risks, Actions, Decisions, Issues, Opportunities), an email to the attendees and others, and/or a document recording “Meeting Minutes”. This is done without participation from the meeting attendees, who may find that what was recorded does not exactly match what they personally took away from the meeting.

Small-scale meetings are often not written up at all. It is surprisingly common for the attendees to walk away each with their own personal understanding of what was decided – understandings that may of course vary. When such a meeting is written up, again it is typically done after the fact, and again the understanding recorded may vary from that held by some attendees.

Hence, in all cases it is critical that the understandings formed are written up, then reviewed by all attendees, then corrected if necessary, to ensure that everyone eventually shares a common understanding. The broken part of typical meeting procedure is that such reviews may well not take place, and when they do take place, the reviews are done **after the meeting** – so the inevitable corrections require a combination of emails and other messages, informal discussions in person and virtually, and often a repeat of the original meeting.

A particularly wasteful syndrome of this behavior is the standard agenda item of steering groups in which the minutes from the previous meeting are reviewed. A more pointless way to spend the time of a large group of people could hardly be imagined. Further, for many organizations, projects can stall entirely due to people not realizing or remembering that they have been assigned actions, or to actions being confirmed only several weeks after they were originally agreed.

All these practices are a legacy of the days – now several decades in the past – when it was not easy to produce and confirm meeting minutes during the meeting itself. Most people could not type fast enough to take down notes verbatim, so you needed a secretary to do so. The notes taken were often in a format that was in appropriate for sharing, such as Pitman shorthand – and even when notes were taken in plain text, it was not easy to make words written using a typewriter visible to the others in the room.

Now that we have laptops and projectors, and most people can type reasonably fast, there is simply no excuse for such inefficient practices. When you next hold a meeting, write down each agreement as it is made, asking everyone to pause the discussion for a few seconds while you do so if necessitated by your typing speed. Then stop the meeting 5 minutes before the time is up, and ask everyone to review exactly what you have written down so you can correct it as necessary. Then email the agreed notes to everyone immediately.

This simple and cost-free change to meeting practice will result in a huge improvement to the efficiency and effectiveness of your collaboration, and to that of all your colleagues.

Author



Keith has been regarded as an IT and business thought leader since publication of his 2005 book “Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management”. Building on 20 years of research and insights from varied disciplines, his theory of **Virtual Team Planning** provides a new way to describe and support collaborative human work. Keith speaks regularly in keynotes to business, IT and academic audiences at national conferences. More information about Keith is available at <http://keith.harrison-broninski.info>

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