

Three mistakes that counter good thinking and effective decision making in meetings

Have you ever left a meeting and thought ‘that was a waste of time ...’? Even good meetings with fully engaged participants can be disappointing when you leave thinking you have a plan, but feeling there might have been a better way. You may be making one of these three basic mistakes ...

1. Having a sub-optimal starting point or purpose statement

It seems simple ... have the correct starting point. Yet because it seems simple, we might not be paying enough attention to the question ‘why are we here?’. Defining a clear purpose or objective statement takes some effort, but investing up front will save teams time in the meeting, and dollars in sub-optimal action planning.

What are some of the common pitfalls? Let’s examine these one at a time ...

Not considering alternative starting points. For example, engineers in charge of an office building spent many futile hours trying to solve the annoying problem of slow elevators. The team had a breakthrough when someone suggested that they change their focus from ‘how to fix the elevators’ to ‘how to distract the waiting people’. This led to the idea of putting mirrors beside the elevators so people could look at themselves while waiting. Complaints dropped drastically and putting mirrors beside elevators has become a common practice. At your next meeting, consider asking ‘why are we doing this?’ and see if this takes you to a more powerful starting point.

Conflating objectives. Sometimes teams create confusion by combining more than one objective in a single statement. This can be a problem when objectives require opposing types of interventions. Consider the example of a humanitarian organization with the objective statement: ‘Design an efficient and effective food distribution system for displaced persons in seven locations.’ The problem here is that ‘efficient’ means least costly, while ‘effective’ means maximum outreach. It may be most efficient to have the people come to one distribution point, however, the most effective way to reach all the displaced person might be to distribute at all seven locations. Teams need to pay attention to how their objectives are written to ensure they are addressing the challenge of mutually exclusive or contradictory objectives.

Misunderstanding terms and definitions. In cases where goals or objectives are long and wordy there is a greater chance of misinterpretation. This is where plain language is a best practice. Continuing with the example of designing an efficient and effective food distribution system for displaced persons, some people might understand the goal to be more efficient and effective for the displaced person (e.g. minimize transportation cost for the person receiving the parcels). However, this would be costly to the humanitarian agency. It is important to ensure everyone clearly understands the objectives, and the definition and meaning of words used in the objective statement, for teams to design the best action plan possible.



2. Allowing confusion in the thinking process

The biggest enemy in skillful thinking, effective decision making, and creativity is confusion. Does this sound familiar? You have identified the purpose for the meeting and you are getting input from around the table. Cynthia provides some information ... Jeff talks about the positives of the issue ... Hasan highlights risks. Rachel tries to put forward an idea to overcome the risks ... Amy disputes Jeff's information and provides some other information. Eric provides additional input on the risks ... Jeff pushes back with additional benefits. The discussion takes a circular tone, looping around points already made. What do you do when you are in middle of all this confusion?

Stop the juggling! Separate these different facets of thinking from each other. Try inviting meeting participants to look at the issue from one angle at a time. Suggest that the group start by providing all the information/data they know about the issue. Once people have provided input, then move on to the next 'facet' of thinking. This could be the benefits or value of the matter at hand. Once all the input is gathered on that particular angle move on to the next, for example the risks or barriers. This simple but powerful rearrangement of generating and gathering input has the team thinking 'in parallel', and collaboratively. This allows participants to bring their considerable thinking power to each facet and enable the necessary thinking to make a robust decision.

3. Not developing a practice and culture of creativity in meetings

You are probably familiar with the idea of brainstorming as a process where we try to generate ideas or innovations and think '*out of the box*'. Your organization likely does this at a strategic planning meeting once a year or so. But why do we save creativity for a special event? Why aren't we using our ability to be innovative and think creatively at every meeting to help with solving the issue at hand?

At a typical meeting, creative thinking and innovative ideas are competing with other ways of thinking and ideas. When judgment is present or other ideas are being discussed, the creative 'sprout' is killed before it has time to take hold. But each meeting can be a venue for creative thinking when the different facets of thinking are separated, and judgement is replaced with the concept of 'movement' related to the issue at hand. By carving out a creative space in each and every one of our meetings, we create a culture of creativity in our organizations.

There are a number of creativity-thinking tools based on de Bono's training methodologies of Six Thinking Hats® and Lateral Thinking™ that can be used to generate 'out of the box' thinking on demand and can supplement and 'turbocharge' your team's creativity. More information on those is available in other *Team Tools* available on the ThinkWell webpage.

Learn More

Let us know what your learning needs are and how we can help. We are happy to explore training and facilitation options that would fit your team and situation.

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