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## How to increase the effectiveness and productivity of leadership team meetings

*A six-step action plan can make leadership team meetings more collaborative, beneficial and engaging, says Dr Achim Preuss.*



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In a classic cartoon by US satirist Scott Adams, the micromanaged office worker Dilbert says that researchers have discovered a way to double the perceived length of a human's life. He explains: "It's something called 'meetings'."

Meetings occur at every level in organisations and many of them are a catastrophic and boring waste of time. This can be highly frustrating and demotivating for those who attend. But the consequences of unproductive meetings are even worse for leadership teams as they can result in poor decisions, unresolved problems and missed opportunities for the organisation.

Professor Henning Bang of the University of Oslo has undertaken a groundbreaking 36-year research study of the characteristics of effective management teams. He claims that 40 per cent of the time that executives spend in meetings is unproductive. To help, he has developed a comprehensive model of management team effectiveness that has been tested in over 100 organisations in the last 15 years.

The model highlights the conditions, processes and behaviours that influence and predict high team performance. For example, the team should have a compelling purpose, it should comprise a balanced mix of competent people and it should work on the right tasks. The team's meetings should have clear goals and they should add value to the organisation and contribute to the personal learning and wellbeing of each individual. Meetings should also be conducted in a supportive environment, which facilitates a productive and respectful team spirit.

Using insights from this research study, here are six actions that can make leadership team meetings more productive:

**1. Be very clear about the purpose of the meeting.** Professor Bang's research found a definite link between goal clarity and the effectiveness of team meetings. Senior leaders should set precise objectives for each meeting, outlining what they want to focus on and what they intend to achieve. Is it really necessary to meet? Could the same objective be achieved via email or over the telephone? For example, electronic tools could be used instead of update meetings about a project's status. Leadership meetings should predominantly focus on high-value strategic aspects. Lower-level, day-to-day operational issues should be delegated.

**2. Ensure that everyone attending is adequately prepared.** Distribute important data and reading materials in advance and specify what must be read and why, so that each person comes briefed and equipped to contribute. Brainstorming meetings will be more effective if individuals have had time to generate new ideas beforehand, in quiet, focused solitude. Specify the agenda, to avoid any confusion, and ensure that those attending have the necessary skills, insights and operational responsibility to action any decisions. Prioritise the agenda items according to each issue's long-term impact on the organisation.

**3. Control the process.** The discussions should be structured so that evidence comes before interpretation and interpretation comes before decisions. Keep each stage separate. Stop people from jumping to the next stage or going back over old ground. Stick to the point and stay within the allocated time for each topic. Speak up if the meeting is veering off track.

**4. Manage the relationships.** To create a high performance spirit, the team members should respect each other's contributions and look for the positive aspects in everyone's ideas. Capitalise on the diversity of the team, in terms of the different backgrounds, experiences, genders and personalities of the team members. Ensure the team understands and accepts that it will operate within these parameters. Don't allow one person to dominate. The meeting should be a psychologically safe environment for expressing opinions, asking questions and disagreeing without belittling others. Conflict is a healthy consequence of group dynamics, however don't let conflict get out of hand and become a personal attack. If you anticipate conflict, prepare for it and focus on the problem not the personalities.

**5. Summarise the decisions and action points.** Explicitly agree what has been decided and specify the resources of time, talent and money that are needed to execute the strategy. Ensure these actions are implemented with accountability.

**6. Benchmark your performance.** The productivity and effectiveness of leadership team meetings can be assessed against Professor Bang's model of team effectiveness, using an online diagnostic questionnaire. Each executive can self-evaluate how well their team works together, how it performs in 24 categories and whether it is meeting the needs of individual team members and the business. The results can then be benchmarked against an international norm group comprising over 200 management teams. This is different from a 360-degree feedback assessment, as the leadership team won't necessarily rate each other. Instead, they'll assess what they observe in the team, how it functions, its strengths and how the team's productivity can be improved. This survey-based approach encourages executive teams to reflect on their performance and to further enhance their efficiency and effectiveness.

By following these six actions, leadership teams can run collaborative and productive meetings that will not only be more satisfying and engaging to attend, they'll also help the business to make better decisions, increase performance and achieve its goals.



#### About the author Dr Achim Preuss

Dr Achim Preuss has a degree in psychology and a doctorate in applied computing science. Over the years, he has published a number of articles on knowledge engineering, prediction methodologies and psychometrics in talent management. Achim Preuss is Chief Technology Officer of international assessment specialist *cut-e*. He can be contacted via [achim.preuss@cut-e.com](mailto:achim.preuss@cut-e.com)

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