FOR RESPONSIBLE NEGOTIATION MEETINGS: CONCOCTING A VACCINE AGAINST MEETINGITIS

Alain Lempereur

Alan B. Slifka Professor of Coexistence and Conflict Resolution, Brandeis University
Faculty Associate and Executive Committee Member, Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School

Abstract: A workday is often summarized as a succession of meetings, much too numerous and often unproductive! This frustration that affects many negotiations is nicknamed "meetingitis." This text proposes a vaccine against this disease of our time. Our prescriptive three-step approach aims at a more responsible use of meetings from the introduction to the conclusion, via the main body of the meeting. The prologue or introduction focuses on people first, building connections with the participants, before turning to process, or the organization of the meeting itself. The dialogue, the central part of the meeting, is devoted to problem solving through different stages: identification of issues to address, invention of solutions, evaluation of them before making a decision. The epilogue or conclusion refocuses on the process, addressing next steps for proper implementation, before reconnecting to the people. In brief, the meeting script is "people and process first, problems next, and finally process and people."

Key words: *Meetingitis – Meeting Management – Negotiation – Prescriptive Approach – Responsible Negotiation – People First – People Care – Process Facilitation – Process Moves – Products – Problem Solving – Implementation*

If you describe a workday, it is often experienced as a succession of meetings. When it is time to go home, the overall impression is that the day was filled with too many meetings and that on top of that, they were mostly disorganized and not much got done. This common observation invokes frustration that affect many negotiations to such an extent that many people hate meetings and avoid them. This disease that is contracted at the office spreads every day more and more; it has been nicknamed "meetingitis." This briefing proposes a vaccine to mitigate its risks and hopefully prevent its prevalence.

We propose a three-step approach to better manage meetings, suggesting a more responsible use of time from an introduction to a conclusion, via the body of the meeting. We suggest a sequence of eight purposes from the beginning of most meetings to their end. We associate each of them with ad hoc process moves or methods that increase the chance of delivering products, or indicators of success. The following *Table 1* summarizes a script for the different steps of a meeting; it will be explained and detailed in the next paragraphs.

		PURPOSES (objectives) →	PROCESS MOVES (methods) →	PRODUCTS (deliverables)
PART I: **INTRO-DUCTION OF MEETING**	**PEOPLE**	*(1) Connection*	Handshake, giving a chair, use of first name, gift offering, personal presentation, small talks, schmoozing, coffee, dinner, icebreaking, joke	Smile, working atmosphere, motivation to work together
	PROCESS	*(2) Organization*	Setting or recalling the agenda: purpose(s) of the meeting, process moves, products, participants, planning, place; role allocation	Agenda, rules, people's roles, working methods
PART II: **BODY OF MEETING**	**PROBLEMS**	*(3) Identification of problems*	Questions, listening, going around the table, joint fact finding	Joint diagnostic, priority issues to address
		(4) Invention of solutions	Brainstorm, proposal, creativity	List of many solutions
		(5) Evaluation of solutions	Discussion, SWOT, pros and cons, cost/benefit analysis, classification, ranking, testing	Shortlist, some ranking of ideal solutions, some exclusion
		(6) Decision	Summarizing, one-text procedure, reporting, drafting, giving consent, unanimity, consensus, majority vote, hierarchy	Mandate, contract, settlement, MOU
PART III: **CONCLU-SION**	**PROCESS**	*(7) Implementation*	Next steps: who does what for when, setting dates for next meetings	Action plan, monitoring mechanisms
	PEOPLE	*(8) Reconnection*	Coffee, congratulations, celebration, champagne, dinner, handshake	Increased trust, pleasure of joint achievement

Table 1: A Script for a Structured Meeting

A Meeting is First about People and Process

What we often miss about a meeting is that it is first and above all about people being together in a room. It is a gathering of participants, whether they are two or more. In that respect, our first purpose should be for everyone to establish a *strong connection* with each other in the room. And our first move to meet this purpose should be to make every person part of the team.

> *In a mediation session in Sierra Leone, the facilitator arrived early in the room and made sure that she saluted each participant entering the room. For example, the first person who came in was an unidentified man who sat down. The facilitator got up, welcomed him, thanked him for being there and made sure he was comfortable. Fortunately for her, because this person was an important official in the host country and he felt acknowledged by such a gesture. But it does not matter how important the person is. If she is in the room, she is important. This way the facilitator started the day in good conditions and that person who happened to be the minister of defense made a significant contribution to the group work.*

The second priority in the introduction phase is the organization of the process of the meeting itself. Maybe an agenda was set before the meeting; it is time to recall it. If none was established, it is important to clarify "6Ps":

1. Purpose(s) of this specific meeting and maybe of other meetings to be scheduled;
2. Process moves or methods to meet such purposes (brainstorming, one-text procedure), as well as rules participants must follow among them to increase efficiency (maybe raising one's hand to speak, keeping intervention short, no interruption, confidentiality of the exchanges, etc.);
3. Products that participants seek and that become indicators that they delivered on the purposes;
4. Participants who need to be at the meeting as well as their roles (moderator, timekeeper, reporter, flipcharter, expert, sponsor, observer, etc.);
5. Planning, i.e. how much time we have in total and we need for each point;
6. Place, how it must be arranged, what kind of room is most appropriate according to the purpose, the logistics in the room (roundtables, video-projector, flipchart, markers, etc.).

When participants have structured the process and have agreed to it, they are ready to proceed to the central part of the meeting that will address the problems at stake.

The Main Body Requires a Step-by-Step Approach to Problem Solving

Because we want to move fast from the problem(s) to its solutions and get it over with the meeting, we run the risk once again of going too fast and neglecting the importance of a structured approach to problem-solving itself. In that respect, if you want to increase the chance that your solutions fit the problems, respond to them adequately, and thus act responsibly, you might want to address sequentially four purposes:

1. *Identification of the problems:* Sometimes a problem surfaces but appears as a symptom of something deeper that requires analysis and data collection.

   Two associates in a software company fight about the ownership of a software that one of the associates has developed on her spare time. Though the problem looks like a legal issue, by exploring it further, by interviewing the two associates, a mediator discovers that the company the associates created is dysfunctioning and that their relationship is broken. Suddenly, the problem has several layers that need to be addressed for the solutions to be sustainable.

2. *Invention of the solutions:* When the problems have been clarified, sometimes, protagonists might believe that their first idea of a solution is the only available one and the good one. They become positional, and ignore other possibilities that might be more beneficial and create value for all the parties at the meeting.

   One of the associates may think that the only solution is to sue the other side for breach of the employment contract. If he is pushed to think further and to brainstorm, he will discover there are negotiated solutions, too. Both associates can come up with ideas to fix the company, to restructure its governance and its sales division, making the software problem solution part of a bigger arrangement, while restoring a working relationship and trust between them.

3. *Evaluation of the solutions:* The human mind is prompt to judge and evaluate. However it is only when the previous stage has brought many ideas or options of solutions that the latter need to be examined for their best relevance. The use of a cost/benefit analysis for example might help identify which solutions are more likely to work in a context.

   When confronted with the choice of litigating the case or settling out of court, the associates realize that the latter solution might be less costly, risky and exhausting for them. They also figure out that the fixing of the company can create much value that can solve in return the question of

> *the software that could be reintegrated in the company or outsourced willingly by the company to a venture capitalist.*

4. *Decision:* As protagonists progress, they must put on a paper their arrangement and try to reach a decision that they can all live with.

> *The mediator uses a flipchart to summarize what the two associates have come up with. She checks with them that she gets it right. They confirm, shake hands, and sign the settlement.*

Keep Five Minutes at the End to Refocus on Process and People

Often, participants believe they are done with a meeting when they have concocted the agreement. However, words need to translate in the reality. Parties should not forget to pay attention to *implementation* as a next purpose. They need to be precise about who will be doing what for when. An action plan is more than just an agreement; it clarifies next steps and also addresses monitoring mechanisms, including the following meetings where the agreement will be revisited, completed and adjusted if necessary.

Moreover, a meeting is not finished until participants reconnect as people. Long meetings bring their share of frustration, and thus take a toll on the relationship. It is time to congratulate the participants for their hard work and achievements. In order to re-motivate the troops, let us move away from the working table and get to know each other better in a more informal setting. Why would we not go for a coffee or even dinner? Let us celebrate! The alpha and omega of meetings is people.

To put it in a nutshell, the script of a meeting can be summarized by an introduction that cares for people and facilitates the process, a body that is about problem-solving and an end with a focus on the process of next steps and on the people again.

To go further:

Read the case *Powerscreen,* that was written by Bruce M. Patton, Deputy Director of the Harvard Negotiation Project with the help of Mark N. Gordon and Andrew E. Clarkson. Copies are available online at www.pon.org, telephone: (800) 495-1684, (617) 495-1684, email: chouse@law.harvard.edu.

Read *The First Move. A Negotiator's Companion,* co-authored by A. Lempereur and A. Colson, edited by M. Pekar (Wiley, 2010), available editions in Chinese, Farsi, French, Georgian, Portuguese, Russian and Swedish, forthcoming in Japanese and Spanish.

Beyond instinctive practices, this *Companion* proposes a negotiation approach that combines a general philosophy and specific techniques. Reinforced by the authors' experience in consulting and training, it allows negotiators to do the right thing at the right time, to reduce the risks of deadlocks and tensions and to multiply their chances of success.