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## **To Have Meetings, And Win.**

**Extract from „Tarnen, tricksen, täuschen“ by Gerhard Krug<sup>1</sup>. Translation by Walter Hofmann.**

My favourite issue. Why? It's very simple – in meetings you either win or lose. A meeting can be relaxing or can be an absolute horror. Nowhere else can behaviour be studied as well as it can in meetings.

There is a saying; Are you lonely in the office? Make a meeting. Then you can finally drink coffee (or tea), eat cookies, flirt with the nice colleague from next door and the work hours will just fly by.

Many meetings proceed exactly like this. During them, I have often – very often – asked myself: “What's the point of this?” The most insignificant details have been discussed at length and the major issues were forgotten. They can last for hours and by the end of it there are neither decisions nor consent. Meetings holding 25 to 30 people can often be disastrous, because everyone has to have their say. Result: None. Cost: High. And so on. But now we'll be systematic. Let's start at the beginning.

### **Why A Meeting?**

What do you want to obtain from your meeting? Think about what you want and who you absolutely need to attend. Maybe only the pretty colleague? A cosy discussion for two is then sufficient. Which people are so important that they must participate and who has to be invited for political reasons (my horror)? RE: politics - This is going to be difficult. The larger the company the more there are staff who, though they have nothing to do, are very important and leave nothing to chance. They, therefore, always have to be everywhere. If you can, avoid them by scheduling your meeting so that they find themselves in another meeting which is more critical or interesting for them. Then you can get to work.

There are always reasons why your meeting has to take place at a certain time exactly. Early in the morning or late in the evening are perfect. Killjoys don't like these. Have a look in their diary and find an important reason to set the meeting when they have no time.

Another good excuse is the only free date of your boss's boss, or the boss of your disagreeable colleague. Then he can't moan. If the top boss is only available then, unfortunately that's the only time your meeting can take place. That's it. This is the law and you get rid of the meeting killer. More on this further down.

Now you have invited the participants. Next you need an agenda. If you want decisions, you have to know which ones. Therefore you have to write down all issues you want to discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Krug, Tarnen, tricken, täuschen. Das erfolgreiche Projektmanagement. Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, ISBN 978 3 499 62364 6

Do not pack too much in your meeting. Can you concentrate for three hours? If yes, perfect. Then pack the important issues towards the end, when your colleagues are tired. Then there is less resistance. It's that simple.

Do you want to attain something? Then put the undisputed issues at the beginning. I have been in meetings where after two hours only the first issue had been discussed. And since there was no consent, there were no decisions and nothing at all was achieved. By the way: Your meeting has *tops* and *pressure points*, not issues. Insert lots of foreign words in your invitation. Since you are working in an multinational company, use Member of the Board, CEO, CTO, CIO, CNN, CIA, KGB and so on, this always sounds great.

Also important is that you have typed a fancy invitation with Excel, tediously formatted and distributed it to as many as possible. The more people that are on the invitation the more important the meeting seems. The show must go on. This is rubbish of course, but unfortunately often successful.

### **About Wiseacres And Chatterboxes**

Lets get serious. More than 5 people in a meeting means approximately 10 minutes time lost for each additional participant. That's how easily this can be calculated.

But you must distinguish. If you only want to inform, invite many people. Sometimes this is important, especially if internal organisation is concerned. Here your colleagues are very sensitive and open communication helps a lot.

I always do this for sensible subjects, that way it doesn't get out of hand before lunch. Everyone wants to get to the feeding trough so endless discussions won't happen. This way, the meeting is kept short and sweet. If you schedule the meeting for after lunch, it may last for hours, since everybody is cosily digesting lunch and won't fancy getting up. This doesn't happen before 12 am! I promise.

If you want to attain something in the meeting, keep the circle small and the competence high. Select knowledgeable people (there aren't many anyway) who, in addition, are able (these are even less). That way, you'll get solutions and decisions.

I have known people who have only presented one item in two hours, yet this had it all. These people are the competent ones. You need these people, not the chatter-boxes who always know everything. But watch out, remember there's always politics involved; the chatter-box might be able to help you elsewhere. You'll need him, not because of his competence, but for his contacts and his fast gab.

In meetings which you don't lead yourself, look at the other people and draw a strategogram. Never heard of that? Me neither, it's my invention. In meetings where I'm not involved too much, I write down who can work with whom and who has what strengths. This is kept in my notebook as some wild graphic which outsiders cannot interpret. Since man thinks in images, it is the best way to see who you will have to cut if you want to attain something. Then you'll also have an idea about who to contact and who to avoid.

You will also quickly realise who you don't like, and vice-versa. In the strategogram, a scientific degree of correctness doesn't matter, only your perception. Communication of mankind consists of 90% non verbal communication, i.e. body language. Don't take their words alone. Jesus says: Follow their acts and not their words.

Expressed differently: Preach water, drink wine. Many of your fellow men behave like this. They preach the holy word of a common objective during the meeting, but then contradict themselves and act according to target agreements and their own agendas. By observing posture and expression, hands, feet and eyes, you can see exactly whether words and body work together. Often they don't, but be careful, watch yourself as well!

Not every discrepancy you'll notice necessarily reflects deception. In many companies the pressure on the individual person is so high, that these discrepancies express fear and not falseness. Judge first, sentence thereafter. Not the other way round.

Be critical against yourself and your perception and don't judge negatively just because you dislike her or him. Maybe your judgement is just a prejudice, asserted by their body language. When your strategogram starts to take shape, you have good preconditions to successfully bring off this meeting. When it gets tight, bait the two enemies against each other. In the meantime lay low.

This then sounds like this: "Mr. A might be able to help you on this, but the department would like it done differently". And there it takes off. Therefore, think about who will participate in the meeting, whom you need or are obligated to invite. Depending on the composition of personalities, the meeting will run smoothly or turn into a fiasco.

Would you like an example? For a large project, a meeting was held with 18 people, covering the various *plants* and *units*. Fantastic models were turned over, solutions proposed, and every time a decision should be made, the colleague of an important unit came forward, otherwise never contributing, and would say: "We cannot agree to this". This continued all morning. Not a single decision was made.

People's spirits then heated up. The project manager, the son of a big shot, was completely overstrained, but nobody dared to get involved and take the meeting out of his hands. The spirits were at their low. The meeting escalated in the afternoon. After the social pressure grew bigger, the person concerned admitted that he had been ordered by his superior to reject all decisions. General upset, the meeting continued but without decisions. The end of the day arrived. No decisions, high cost. Project was as it had been at the start of the morning.

Total frustration with all participants, even with the poor bloke who had to torpedo everything for his boss. Again: Look at the motives of every individual.

### **Systematic Preparation**

So if you now call for a meeting in order to obtain decisions, chose to keep the circle as small and as competent as possible. Treat the issues which are urgent or undisputed at the beginning. Then you have at least attained some of the necessary decisions and commitments respectively.

When there is consent already at the beginning, many people will be more relaxed and ready to approve a proposition, in order not to endanger the good atmosphere.

It is best to make clear to your colleagues at the beginning, that you want decisions. Whether they are political or technical is not irrelevant. One usually cannot argue about technical details. Strengths, attenuation values, lethal dose are not very contestable. However, politics very much are. Who wants what?

If the circle is small and rather non-political (which most technicians are), you have a good chance to proceed with your project. Even when politics are involved. Prepare the issues or discuss them in advance with the persons responsible.

The more competent and confident you enter a meeting, the more the colleagues will strive, not to be outshone. If you can show the statistician that he has miscalculated, you may have an enemy, but also a few more admirers. If your competence is generally acknowledged, everybody will pull himself together and appear prepared for the meeting.

This is actually a bad habit in many companies. A decision should be made during the meeting but the person responsible comes unprepared. He hasn't even read the agenda. He doesn't know the facts, cannot verify the statements, and so on.

You then have to make clear to this colleague, that his presence is superficial. Incompetent even. This usually starts with the fact that he hasn't even read the previous minutes and frequently leaves the meetings to make phone calls. He is not interested in the issue or your project's success. This colleague will always endanger your project.

Therefore, think in advance whether you can replace him with another colleague, one who is really competent. For this the Outlook/Notes calendar is perfectly suited again. Look up his schedule and arrange your meeting to take place when he hasn't got time. Else, if it happens over and over again, that this colleague doesn't deliver or knows nothing, write it in the minutes. However, don't write plainly: "Colleague A, hasn't got any idea". This really would not go down well.

There is a much simpler way. Allow the first due date to stand. Write the second below. Soon there will be 4 or 5 dates on which he hasn't delivered. Then you can let it escalate at the very top. The colleague will be angry (which he will be anyway, when he realises that you're putting him under pressure), but your project will progress.

Always think about whether the fight can be won. If your colleague cannot be attacked because he is, for example, the son of the boss, let it lie and look for alternatives. Don't fight a war which you can't win.

Unless, you already have a different job lined up. Then it can be fun. Read Machiavelli, "The Duke".

### **Fighters to the Front**

Purely political meetings like, for example, a reorganisation project, are even more difficult. These meetings mostly serve to attain acceptance for a reorganisation. To this you have to invite lots of people and get across the news that your project now rolls up all departments. Much pleasure.

Here only one imperative applies: Put the best salesman on the desk! Your expertise doesn't help you at all. Be honest with yourself. Are you the technical guru, who masters everything technical, and feels at home therein? If so, you are probably a poor salesman and rather not known as a gifted speaker. This is why you have settled on technology. Because it interests you and you enjoy it.

If you just remotely belong to this category, keep your hands off political meetings. This will not always be possible. Therefore, look for a colleague or maybe a consultant who will stand up and make your people or the customer clearly understand, that although this car hasn't got an engine, it is a great design for the desert, where there are not many petrol stations, as you won't have to fill it up, and therefore can cross the Sahara without problems.

If you are standing there in front and stammer, with lots of *aahs* and *oohs*, these meetings are an agony for both yourself and especially your listeners. If you have people in the meeting who are adverse to your subject, their minds will not be changed.

Just be honest with yourself. If you can't convince the attendees as an exceptionally gifted non-speaker, you can, due to your courteous nature, only hope for pity. Although, the message will probably not get across. Even your competence won't help you. The attendees don't like to change. Humans are natured like this, this has proved itself over millions of years. Change used to happen over generations, not years.

So you have to be convincing, firstly that the project will make everything simpler, and also that the management wants it and has decided this way. Period! Everyone has to believe it's great, because the gods want it and because it's the best for your colleagues and customers. That's how you have to prepare the meeting.

Who is against it, which objections could arise? Prepare the meeting mentally. If a colleague takes over the sale of your project, you have to be present naturally. Consider whether your boss should make the introduction or even a member of the management. This is always super. Offer to prepare the primary issues for him, then he doesn't have to do anything and he is keen to take over the part to show his competence (power). In addition, he will take position on the issues which are important to yourself. It is imperative that he makes clear to the attendees, that things should go one way or the other, because he wants it to.

You also have the advantage, that you can make the exact points on his notes which are important to you which might be disputed by the colleagues. Then everything has already been affirmed by the boss. Resistance will come soon enough, but the first hurdle has been jumped and the project may already be completed, when a dispute breaks out or the departments muddle on as before.

If you take over the introduction yourself, keep it short and let your colleague present the project. You can always answer technical questions. There you'll be on safe ground. Don't forget that if you are unsure yourself and not believe in the goals, this will be communicated to others and you will remember this political meeting as a fiasco. That said, brace yourself and go for it – and sell the project as a benefit for all.

Be honest with yourself and reflect on whether you really are the one to best sell the project. If not, have a colleague do it. What hurt can it do, if he shines up front yet works for you?