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A scout leader was trying to lift a fallen tree from the path. His pack gathered around to watch him struggle. "Are you using all your strength?" one of the scouts asked. "Yes!" was the exhausted and exasperated response. "No. You are not using all your strength", the scout replied. "You haven't asked us to help you."

Years ago in their book, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, predicted, "It is obvious that teams outperform individuals... teams will be the primary building blocks of company performance in the organization of the future... if there is new insight to be derived from the solid base of common sense about teams, it is the strange paradox of application. Many people simply do not apply what they already know about teams in any disciplined way, and thereby miss the team performance potential before them."



As organizational complexity and speed has increased over the past few decades, many organizations use teams to increase effectiveness. Research consistently shows that highly effective teams dramatically boost levels of engagement, customer service, quality, safety, and productivity.

Effective teams meet frequently. At the senior management level, there's often a correlation between how frequently a team meets and the amount of vertical management -- departmentalism, territoriality, turfdom, etc., in that team. Some leadership teams rarely meet. The senior management group of a company we worked with hadn't met since their last retreat two years prior. As we reviewed an internal survey they had just conducted, not surprisingly, one of their biggest organizational problems was poor communications. If senior management doesn't frequently get together and talk to each other, how can they expect the rest of the organization to do anything but follow their lead?

Some teams reduce their meetings because it's a waste of time. A central component of team effectiveness are meetings -- either in person, electronically, or a combination of both. Meetings should re-energize and refocus. Most don't. If your meetings are a chore, or have become a meeting of the bored, you've got a leadership skill problem.

With all the practical resource materials, workshops, and training now available there's no excuse for poorly run meetings. This is where a modest investment in learning and skill development can pay incredible dividends in saved time and frustration. If your meetings were just ten percent better (25 - 40 percent improvements aren't uncommon after good meeting leadership training), how long would it take to repay your learning and skill building time?

Skilled team leaders use meetings to transform a group from what they are into what they could be. This issue looks at common meeting problems and provides ten key components of effective meetings. We also look at the negative impact of whining, wallowing, and blame storming. These habits cause personal and team pain and suffering.

The humorist, Dave Barry, said, "If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be 'meetings.'"

Like any tool, in highly skilled hands meetings help teams soar to new heights. In unskilled hands, meetings sink teams in the swamp.

Are You Suffering from Binge Meeting Disorder?

Is your organization meeting itself to death? Do you often feel like you are in the midst of a meeting frenzy? Do you sometimes want to poke yourself with a sharp object to keep from screaming when a meeting drags on and on? How do your meeting participants feel?

Meeting research shows that executive time spent in meetings has increased from 10 hours a week to nearly 23 hours over the past fifty years. This reflects the collaborative approaches of today's more complex world and matrixed organizations.



Meetings can energize or enervate. When meetings are effectively run, they create that elusive synergy that dramatically boosts a team's effectiveness.

But way too many meetings waste time, zap energy, and reduce the collective IQ (and EQ) of a group of very bright and effective individuals to the stuff of cartoons. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "Stop the Meeting Madness," in a survey of 182 managers across a range of industries, 65% reported "meetings keep them from completing their own work" and 71% said "meetings are unproductive and inefficient."

The only explanation is ignorance. Leaders just don't know any better, or they would make sweeping changes. Many leaders blithely accept the wasted time and energy that are allowed to pass for meetings. If leaders were allowed to waste money the way they waste meeting time, heads would roll. The Meeting Madness survey reported that 54% of managers suffered "a triple whammy of meetings that are (1) too frequent, (2) poorly timed, and (3) badly run, leading to losses in productivity, collaboration, and well-being for both groups and individuals." Sound familiar?

Meeting Misery or Mastery Depends on the Leader

Sometimes a meeting of six people is really a meeting of three people with three spectators. So why are they all there? If they all had something to contribute, the leader should have drawn it from them, but didn't. If three didn't need to be there, why waste their time?

If not well managed, conflict can quickly wrench a team apart. Whether conflict helps or hinders the team depends largely on the meeting leader's skills. Getting a group of diverse people with conflicting interests and varied backgrounds to pull together is a big part of what team leadership skills are all about.

As poorly run meetings sputter to a close with people distracted by their screens and rushing out to other meetings, team leaders often leave groups hanging. Consensus, commitment, and even action are left in a state of suspended animation. Team members wander out unclear what's to happen next.

Effective meeting leaders are strong facilitators. When the meeting leader is the boss, there's a delicate balancing act between facilitating the group discussion and unwittingly issuing management directives. If, for example, the boss presents his or her opinions early in the discussion, healthy debate is often curtailed, options are narrowed, "moose-on-the-table" (touchy issues) will be avoided, participants who disagree will sit on their hands, and the boss's view will prevail.

Meetings Are a Microcosm of Your Culture

The Spanish novelist and dramatist, Cervantes, wrote, "By a small sample we may judge of the whole piece." Meetings are a small slice of the leader's mini-culture. Taken together, an organization's meetings paint a picture of the whole culture.

Take a look at your meetings. What do they say about meeting leadership and culture? Who attends them? How do you split the airtime within the group? How much diversity is encouraged? How is conflict handled? What process do you use for problem solving? Do you draw contributions from the whole group?

Is your team or organization over meeting? Are you suffering from meeting indigestion?

Ten Essential Vitamins to Avoid Meeting Indigestion

When leaders sharpen their meeting leadership skills and practice good meeting hygiene, team collaboration, psychological safety to speak up, team results, engagement, and energy levels soar. Many pre-post studies show increases of 40 – 50%.

Given that "meetings, bloody meetings" are such a big source of frustration, overall job satisfaction often jumps when meeting effectiveness goes up. It's like getting that Bull Moose hoof off your aching foot; it feels so much better to relieve the pain and be able to walk again!



Ten Meeting Essentials:

1. Clear agendas with timeframes, objectives, and desired outcomes for each agenda item.
2. Flexibility to add or delete agenda items/issues.
3. Clarity about whether decisions/actions for each agenda item will be by command, consultation, or consensus.
4. Processes for dealing constructively with conflict and disagreements.
5. Clear action plans and next steps for each agenda item.
6. Documentation and communication follow-through for this team and beyond.
7. Regular evaluations of meeting effectiveness.
8. Skilled leaders that know how to keep things on track and focused.
9. An atmosphere of openness and trust.
10. Ground rules everyone agrees to and follows.

These can be put in two main groups; disciplined meeting processes (1 – 7) and respectful participant behaviors (8 – 10).

Ground rules (sometimes called group norms) can make a big difference in guiding respectful participant behaviors. It's a simple approach that's often overlooked. Getting meeting participants to establish and agree to follow basic behaviors in working together paints the white lines and puts up the guard rails to keep discussions out of the ditch. These often include respecting timeframes, use of phones or other devices, keeping debates and disagreements in the meeting room, focusing on the issue or behavior, not the person, not cutting each other off, avoiding side conversations, and the like.

Periodically involving participants in meeting checkups will keep making your meetings better. This can be done through anonymous surveys, third-party interviews, "**moose hunting**" exercises, or asking what should we keep/stop/start doing to continually improve our meetings.

With discipline and skill building, healthy meetings can become a habit that boosts everyone's well-being and performance.

Further Reading:

- "A Coach's Playbook for Workplace Teams"
- "Use Virtual/Physical Meeting Effectiveness Checklists to Boost Their Effectiveness"
- "6 Dysfunctional Leadership Team Behaviors"

No Whining, Wallowing, and Blame Storming

Recently our two-year old granddaughter couldn't find her favorite toy character from her farm set. She was frantic. It was all she needed right then to make her life complete. Her mom and dad looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Her dad offered the sage advice, "Mya, why don't you focus on all the toys you have, and not the one you don't have right now?" If only parenting a toddler was so easy!

Last week Reuters published a story with a photo of a "No Whining" sign on the Pope's door. Under the slash symbol the sign states in Italian, "violators are subject to a syndrome of always feeling like a victim and the consequent reduction of your sense of humor and capacity to solve problems." It continued, "the penalty is doubled if the violation takes place in the presence of children. To get the best out of yourself, concentrate on your potential and not on your limitations."



To wallow is to take a bad situation and make it worse. When we wallow we often "blamestorm" rather than brainstorm in our search for someone to point the finger at. Wallowing often means craving certainty and longing for the "good old days" -- which many used to complain about and would resent actually returning to. When we wallow we're unhappy with "now" and want to be anywhere other than in the present moment. To wallow is often to be overwhelmed by the problem and narrow our field of vision to few or no options.

Many senior leaders are quick to complain about whining, wallowing, and blamestorming in others. However, many don't recognize their own behavior being reflected back. And the leader often doesn't realize the negative and pessimistic swamp he or she is mired in.

In positions of power, wallowing leaders use fear to "motivate" and manipulate. Pessimistic leaders believe most people are incompetent and can't be trusted; they focus on weaknesses and gaps. Wallowing leaders use punishment, criticism, and threats to shove others toward higher performance. Bullies are usually wallowers. Wallowers set up destructive magnetic energy fields of negative vibrations.

Wallowers often play the victim. Their world is full of conspiracies with lots of "they" talk; "They are out to get us"; "They don't understand"; "They never listen to us." Wallowers routinely ride the Bitter Bus down Helpless Highway through Frown Town past Pessimism Place, Whining Way, and Dead End Drive into Pity City. Many wallowers drive the Bitter Bus and actively recruit fence-sitting followers to join them.

As film director and actor, Woody Allen once put it, "More than any time in history, mankind now faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

It is a choice -- albeit often a tough one to own up to. We can either **lead, follow, or wallow** (click to see a chart outlining each choice). We can move from groaning to growing.

The Pope's sign closed with this smack on the side of the head: "Stop complaining and take steps to improve your life." Thanks. I needed that.

Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Articles



This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure. You can follow me on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JimClemmer>

My original tweet commenting on the article follows each title and descriptor from the original source:

This Zenger Folkman study provides "behavioral bridges" for leaders to avoid the either/or trap and deliver both.

"6 Keys To Having It All: Outstanding Results And Engaged Team" -- Joe Folkman
www.forbes.com

"Is it possible to be a high-standards, results driven leader; while at the same time building an engaged, fun-to-work with team?"

I find the "ultradian rhythm" applies personally and with workshop/retreat groups I am facilitating.

"The Faster Your Brain Moves The More Time Off You Need" -- John Rampton
<https://www.inc.com>

"Science shows us that your brain can only focus for 90 to 120 minutes at a time."

Joe's research shows how aggressive, autocratic, and arrogant leaders may look strong and bold, but aren't effective.

"3 Signs You Are A Counterfeit Bold Leader And How To Improve" -- Joe Folkman
www.forbes.com

"These leaders were perceived as being bold but created dissatisfaction and frustration within their organizations."

Zenger Folkman research shows a very high correlation between coachability and outstanding leadership effectiveness.

"How Coachable Are You? 5 Quick Ways To Improve" -- Joe Folkman
www.forbes.com

"Here are our specific suggestions for conveying to others your receptiveness to coaching and to practice being more coachable."

Leverage this new research on the behaviors that managers associate with high performance.

"What Drove Your Last Performance Evaluation?" -- Jack Zenger
www.forbes.com

"While performance evaluations are not dead, they are clearly evolving. The strongest employees and leaders can make their evaluation better by focusing on the five behaviors that can drive their ratings up."

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly blog during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published **over twelve months you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book**. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at Jim.Clemmer@ClemmerGroup.com or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [FaceBook](#), or my [blog](#)!

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!



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