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4Cs to Meaningful and Productive Meetings

By Wendy Tan

It is no secret that meetings take a good deal of time. Research shows 35% for middle managers and up to 50% of upper management’s time. Despite the time invested, executives consider 67% of meetings a poor use of time. We want meetings to be engines of productivity. The reality too often falls short. How can we really have meaningful and productive meetings?

Meetings are about clarifying tasks and deepening relationships. They are also about discussing action steps as well as about learning. The culture of the team is embodied in its meetings. How many of your organization values—teamwork, excellence, innovation, etc.—are expressed in real time during meetings?

Here’s an example how a sales team in BP China created more powerful meetings to respond to the challenging business environment. Masan, the sales director, wanted to propel his team to transcend its default state. As consultants, my colleagues and I worked with the BP sales team to create their team charter of values. Ultimately, the team aimed at making the impossible possible, looking for new opportunities, and growing one another as champions for greater speed and productivity.

The team agreed, signed, and displayed the charter that clearly articulated the team’s values. However, day-to-day business meetings continued to focus on the business targets with little mention of the charter. The soft cultural elements, behaviors, and mindset seemed independent of the hard performance targets and numbers. Should they?

“The team charter is meant to be alive, a spirit that we embody in our work,” remarked Masan. The question is, “How do we integrate both mindset and business performance?” This was the question of central focus.

In the next offsite, Masan’s team learned about whole meetings. Wholeness in meetings integrates opposing and complementary polarities:

- » task + relationship
- » action + reflection
- » speed + depth
- » divergence + convergence
- » performance + culture

To address these polarities, we introduced the BP team to the 4Cs framework—Connect, Content, Commit, and Cherish—to guide and structure conversation in meetings hand-in-hand with the values

articulated in the team charter. These 4Cs guide the integration.

Connect

“Connection before content,” suggests Peter Block, author of *The Answer to How is Yes*. Before people can be fully engaged, they need to be connected. The quality of relationships determines the quality of conversations.

Beginning with connection fits perfectly with one of the values expressed in the team charter: “valuing one another as family.” This changed the way the BP sales team held meetings. Now, before plunging into the tasks, they spent a few minutes discussing these questions:

- » What’s on your mind?
- » What’s going well?
- » What exciting development . . . ?
- » How are you feeling?

This was more personal than weather talk and provided the opportunity to get a pulse of fellow team members.

Content

Next came the main content of the meeting—to explore possibilities, discuss issues, generate ideas, and determine action steps. Guiding questions were used, such as:

- » What’s the possibility we want to create?
- » What’s working?
- » What if?
- » What are we learning?
- » What are the success factors?

Any change or transformation effort is fraught with uncertainty without guaranteed outcomes. Too often, teams generate a list of actions and try to figure out how to incentivize, enroll, or push others to do it. In those cases, the change effort becomes a selling job. Instead, at BP, we invited commitment from the genuine belief in the meaning of the work rather than uncertain benefits. With commitment came meaningful action planning not the other way round.



Figure 1 . 4Cs: Connect, Content, Commit, and Cherish

In this process, the most critical piece was to articulate the possibility they wanted to create together. Many of us are well-schooled in generating actions, but actions for what? Without a conversation on the possibility we want to create, the actions generated create a future that is little different from the past.

The team also needed to get comfortable postponing the need for clarity or action steps. Like a lotus flower that emerges from murky water, new possibilities emerge from chaos or confusion. Harness the energy from successes and strengths by validating what is going well and then explore how to have more success.

Commitment

As the team got clear on what they wanted to create together, they started to talk about who needed to do what. This was the third phase—Commitment—from which came action. For genuine commitment, the team needed to consider:

- » What doubts/reservations do you have?
- » What is at risk for you?
- » My request to you is . . .
- » I commit to . . .
- » Who, what, how, and when?

These questions created space for each team member to talk directly about their concerns, doubts, and reservations, rather than leave them to private chats along the corridors or in the pantry. Clarifying post-meeting commitments made the meetings meaningful.

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Instead, at BP, we invited commitment from the genuine belief in the meaning of the work rather than uncertain benefits. With commitment came meaningful action planning, not the other way round. The team members contracted with one another to affirm who did what by making offers and requests to create a simple summary of action plan backed by real commitment.

Cherish

How we end meetings also tells us about the culture. Before creating the team charter, the BP sales team typically ended meetings at action planning. However, using the 4Cs, they became more deliberate. One of their values was “to support

and help one another grow as champions.” The 4Cs framework supported them in doing just that at the close of meetings by inviting them to appreciate one another and give feedback. This brought the focus from task to people and from differences to reconciliation. So instead of waiting for training workshops to learn and grow, they did it in every meeting. These are some of the prompts:

- » Thank you . . .
- » I am sorry . . .
- » I appreciate your . . .
- » A gift I received from you is . . .
- » How are you feeling about the meeting?
- » Your contribution made a difference . . .

Conclusion

These 4Cs focused on both what and how the BP team conducted meetings. In fact, the 4Cs is a framework that provides structure for improved meetings in any setting. In essence, the 4Cs allow groups to address both doing and being, attending to the task and deepening relationships. Such meetings include space for both action and reflection. They allow for divergence of ideas before convergence of decisions. This integration creates a sense of engagement, empowerment, and enablement. The way we “be” together and conduct our meetings is a microcosm of the future we create. The 4C framework is a valuable tool for making meetings meaningful and productive.

References

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