

# Working Meetings: A Tool for Building or Destroying Trust in knowledge Creation and Sharing

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses and examines the role of working meetings as a tool for building and destroying trust in knowledge sharing and creation. Working meetings are one of the basic tools in organizations for collaboration and group cohesion, and a significant vehicle for communication. They play an important role in information and knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, coordination, decision making, problem solving and strengthening of group relationships inside and outside the organization, and contribute to build or destroy trust. Trust is manifested in commitment, open communication, ethical behaviour, predictability and doing the best in any activity. It creates openness and freedom at the individual and group level, so it plays an important role in knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. But as necessary and important working meetings are, they are also very costly and frequently unproductive. Unless properly managed, they can be a waste of valuable financial and emotional resources, with negative impact on organizational performance, culture, innovativeness and overall competitiveness. Good meeting planning, preparation, realization, assessment and follow-up are needed to achieve meeting effectiveness. Meeting facilitators, as “leaders”, play a critical role to create a positive-trustworthy atmosphere and conduct and manage the meetings with effectiveness. The main point of discussion is crystallized in the suggestion that meetings have an impact in integrative group behaviour, cooperation and knowledge sharing and creation. Building and maintaining trust are of utmost importance in it, to develop human capital for sustaining vitality and competitiveness in organizations. Originality of the paper is based on exploring the role of working meetings in relation to trust building for knowledge creation and sharing. Implications are made of how to increase working meetings effectiveness .

**Keywords:** explicit knowledge; knowledge sharing; knowledge management; tacit knowledge; trust; working meetings

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## 1. Introduction

Working meetings have been recognized as an important tool in organizational life (Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). Much of the time, particularly at management level, is consumed in working meetings and the trend is increasing (Romano and Nunamaker, 2001; MCI Inc, 1998; López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010). According to an MCI white paper (1998), approximately 11 million meetings take place in the United States every day; Van Vree (1999) found that in organizations with 500 or more people, managers spent around 75% of their time preparing and executing meetings, and at least 10% in companies with fewer than 10 people.

People meet because “holding different jobs they have to cooperate to get a specific task done. The knowledge and experience needed in a specific situation are not available in one head, but have to be pieced together out of the knowledge and experience of several people” (Drucker, 1967). Belief in the adage “two heads are better than one” may be found in the widespread employ of meetings in many societies (Hill, 1982; Cortina, 2013; Schwartzman, 1989). Research shows that group performance exceeds individual performance (Hall, 1994; Hill, 1982) and employees express the desire to work together in groups. Hall (1994) found in a three-year survey of more than 10,000 U.S. employees that 97% reported they need conditions that encourage collaboration to do their work.

Meetings are a common tool, used for a variety of purposes, that develop in “focused” interactions between people. For instance, meetings play an important role in information sharing, knowledge creation and knowledge management, coordination, decision making, problem solving, employee involvement, socialization, shaping the culture and strengthening of group relationships (Rogelberg et al, 2007), both inside and outside the organization in the relations with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. As a vehicle for communication and collaboration, they are a mechanism to disseminate vision, design and deploy strategic plans, make decisions, develop products, share information and for training, among others (McComas, 2003; Rogelberg et al, 2007; Tracy and Dimock, 2003). In meetings plans are made, problems are solved, important organizational processes take place (Cohen et al, 2011; López-Fresno and Portocarrero, 2009) and trust is built or destroyed (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010). Meetings reinforce formal and informal reporting structures and provide clues about organizational values and how power is distributed. Meeting effectiveness is affected by organizational culture as well as they contribute to reinforce or modify it.

Meetings are necessary and important in any organization as mechanisms to induce action and reinforce group cohesion and cooperation, antecedents for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. But although necessary, meetings are often unproductive, being a waste of valuable financial (Mosvick and Nelson, 1987; Monge et al, 1989; Romano and Nunamaker, 2001) and emotional resources (López-Fresno and Portocarrero, 2009; López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010; Rogelberg et al, 2010), with negative impact on organizational performance, culture, innovativeness and competitiveness. Overall, meetings provide and drain resources to and from organisations, their employees and managers (Allen et al, 2012). Romano and Nunamaker (2001) estimated meeting expenses ranged from costs of \$30 million to over \$100 million per year to losses between \$54 million and \$3.7 billion annually), that leads to negative impact on productivity and competitiveness (3M and Drew, 1994; Rogelberg et al, 2010; Cohen et al, 2011; López-Fresno and Portocarrero, 2009; López-Fresno 2010, 2011; Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). But also, according to the affective events theory, unproductive meetings are enduring sources of frustration and dissatisfaction, and in turn influence overall job attitudes (Basch and Fisher, 2000; Fisher, 2002), affecting trust and organizational culture. Research on job-satisfaction determinants further substantiate the connection between meeting satisfaction and job satisfaction (Basch and Fisher, 2002; Rogelberg, 2006; Rogelberg et al, 2010).

Tracy and Dimock (2004) observed that through meetings groups solve and create problems, give information and misinformation, develop and rework policies, make retooled decisions, and while doing these focal activities they build or fracture sense of community and solidify or cause tension among participants. Sense of community and group cohesion that are needed for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation.

So, unless properly managed, meetings can be a waste of valuable financial and emotional resources, with negative impact on organizational trust, vitality, innovativeness and competitiveness. Good meeting planning, preparation, conduction, assessment and follow-up are needed to achieve meeting effectiveness (Rogelberg et al, 2007; López-Fresno, 2009, 2010, 2011). Meeting facilitators, as “leaders”, play a critical role, as they are responsible for creating an adequate trustworthy climate for collaboration, information sharing and knowledge creation, and for successfully conducting the working meetings to achieve their objectives.

## **2. Understanding working meetings**

### **2.1 Definition**

Different definitions have been provided in academic literature for meetings. Auger (1964) focused meetings as “bring together a group of people that share a definite purpose and value stems from that definite purpose”. Schwartzman (1986) defined them as “pre-arranged gatherings of two or more individuals for the purpose of work-related interaction”. For Rogelberg (2006), they are “purposeful work-related interactions occurring between at least two individuals, that have more structure than a simple chat, but less than a lecture, and can be conducted face to face, in distributed settings (eg., conference calls) or a combination”. In Webster dictionary (1998), meeting is as an “act or process of coming together that may be a chance or a planned encounter.” To Goffman (1961), a meeting is that which “occurs when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention.” Hildreth (1990) added the concept of a shared goal, and defined meeting as a “communication encounter between persons for a common purpose.” Nunamaker et al. (1996) incorporated the concept of physical and temporal dispersion, considering meeting as “any activity where people come together, whether at the same place at the same time or in different places at different times”. Romano and Nunamaker (2001) combined several elements found in the literature and defined meeting as “a focused interaction of cognitive attention, planned or chance, where people agree to come together for a common purpose, whether at the same time and the same place or at different times in different places.” To López-Fresno and Grandes (2010), two perspectives should be considered when defining a meeting: functional and structural. From a functional perspective, “a meeting is the activity or process of joining two or more people, at a time and given environment, to achieve a common purpose”. From a structural perspective, “a meeting is a group of people interacting in order to achieve a common purpose”. Combined both perspectives, meeting was defined as “a group of people whose activity is intended to build trust and responsibility on the objectives and consequences for which it was convened” (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010).

These definitions include several important dimensions of meetings, such as focused interactions; joint process; group of people; common objectives; level of formality; responsibility; temporal and physical dispersion. Each of these dimensions may affect the working meetings effectiveness and orientates on the support required to improve group cohesion and productivity and overall organizational culture, where trust is an important dimension.

## 2.2 Working meetings design

Working meetings are processes that develop in “focused” interactions between people, subjected to social dynamics before, during and after the meeting itself (Cooren, 2007; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). They play an important role in employee socialization, cooperation and culture shaping.

As processes, no two meetings are alike. They differ in many ways, based on the purpose and objectives to be covered, people involved, size of the group, tools used, leadership and management styles, and overall design of the meeting (Cohen et al, 2011; Tracy and Dimock, 2003; Schwartzman, 1986). A good structure, preparation and conduction of the process along its several phases (meeting planning and design (eg. a clear and realistic agenda), preparation, conduction, assessment and follow up) reduce general meeting dread and relate to meeting effectiveness (Barker, 2011; Cohen et al, 2011, HBR, 2011; López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010; Nixon and Littlepage, 1992; Rogelberg, 2007). The agenda gives structure to the meeting and if properly and ethically prepared (there is no hidden agenda, topics or objectives) and distributed in advance, it clarifies which are the real objectives of the meeting, what is expected from each participant and which information is important to each specific person or group of people (Barker, 2011; López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010; López-Fresno, 2011). Lack of agenda suggests inadequate planning (3M Meeting Management Team and Drew, 1994; Monge et al, 1989; Mosvick & Nelson, 1987). But although agendas are considered important and even essential to the success of meetings, research shows that they are often not used or not communicated prior to meetings (3M Meeting Management Team and Drew, 1994; Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). No goals or agenda was the second most commonly reported meeting problem in Mosvick and Nelson’s survey(1987). Monge et al (1989) found that 32% of respondents reported that their meetings had no stated agenda; they also found that even when a written agenda is distributed before a meeting, there may still be underlying issues not stated on it (hidden agenda). A hidden agenda, topics or objectives undermine trust, cooperation and group cohesion, with negative impact on organizational culture (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010; Nixon and Littlepage, 1992).

Additional to a clear structure, preparation and conduction of the meeting process, organizational culture and the behaviour and competence of the meeting facilitator will play a crucial role in meeting effectiveness. Meeting facilitators or coordinators facilitate or hindrance sense of belonging, group cohesion, collaboration and cooperation, information and knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. In positive and trustworthy environments, explicit and tacit knowledge is shared and collaboration and group cohesion enhanced, in a way that may not be done otherwise.

A meeting is an exercise of leadership, a relational process with technical and social implications. The person who leads or coordinates the meeting has the opportunity to get decisions made and to contribute to enhance organizational culture. Meeting facilitator or coordinator conducts the group along the different phases of the process, to make possible to achieve the set objectives, going through all topics considered in the agenda, within the planned time frame and in a positive environment that reinforce group identity, cooperation and cohesion (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010). In summary, as “leader” of the meeting, he or she should provide vision (perspective of what is intended to achieve), direction (pointing out where to go) and security (developing and enhancing confidence on what is being achieved to meet the objectives). Through the coordination of the meeting, his or her knowledge, values, results orientation, abilities and competencies to lead and conduct the group, to manage time, to synthesize, etc., will be continuously observed, assessed and taken as a good or bad reference, acting as a role model. So, to lead or coordinate meetings is one of the leadership abilities that all managers should have, but also an exercise of social individual responsibility (López Fresno, 2012, 2013; Cortina, 2013). As professionals, managers should act ethically and do their best to make meetings productive and contribute to create positive environment and culture, where trust is a critical pillar (trustworthy environment). If they promote or allow inappropriate behaviours, they will lose authority and will negatively influence the results of the meeting and the organizational culture. If this is very relevant in presence meetings, it gains even more importance in virtual meetings, as they are more susceptible to manipulation (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010).

## 3. Trust as intangible, relational and intellectual asset in meetings

Trust is a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary issue that has been widely studied in different fields of science over the last years (Burke et al., 2007; Ebert, 2009). It is combined of several rational, cognitive and affective components (McAllister, 1995) and has been defined in many ways, yet the concept remains without a generally accepted definition (McEvily et al, 2003). Rotter (1967), one of the earliest trust theorists, defined interpersonal trust as “expectancy by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement, of another individual or group can be relied upon”. Mayer et al (1995: 712) focused the formation of trust between actors in a relational context, and defined trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the

expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party". This means that trust is created, built and sustained by and between people; it evolves over time based on repeated interactions and information available and shared between parties. Trust results from collaborative interaction between organizational actors in processes such as communication, cooperation and information sharing (Burke et al, 2007). Processes that normally take part in working meetings.

Trust is an intangible, relational asset for collaboration and cooperation between people, and a managerial resource and skill for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation, and for developing human intellectual capital. The elements that underlie trusting relationships involve the individual's feeling of being competent, safety and caring, a sense of autonomy, consistency and fairness in social relations (Gillespie and Mann, 2004; Savolainen, 2011). In the workplace context, intellectual resources such as trust are used and "owned" by the organization, in principle. Trust is multi-level and reciprocal in nature. This means that the effects, means and consequences of trust concern both the individual and organizational level (Savolainen, 2011, 2013a). The individual builds and breaks trust, but the benefits and unfavourable effects spread to groups and the whole organization. More broadly, the effects are seen in different structures and processes in the organizational and societal level. This especially applies to ethical activities. An individual's unethical actions propagate detrimental consequences to the organizational level and even the entire society. Subsequently, in cooperation one party can trust the other that he or she will not act deceptively trying to gain short term advantage.

As to meetings, they involve opportunities and risks, as well as interdependence. Interpersonal interaction is dependent on others' behavior (Ferrin et al, 2011). Trust involves accepting vulnerability, which is based on positive expectations of the intentions of other people, and is therefore an integral element in meetings. It is thus important to understand trust building in meetings. In leadership, individual leaders pursue improving the outcomes of meetings. Meeting facilitators or coordinators act as "leaders". Through their doing and performance at the meetings they may facilitate or hindrance sense of belonging, group cohesion, collaboration and cooperation, wisdom to garner collective intelligence and bring it to solve a problem or achieve a goal together, antecedents for information and knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. They conduct the group along the different phases of the process to make possible to achieve the set objectives in a positive environment (López-Fresno and Grandes, 2010). How meetings are conducted and their result are indicators of organizational culture, a reflection of organizational "health", as they express "ways of doing and managing" when it comes to leadership and people management, time management and results orientation. Of leaders, trustworthiness and commitment is expected; this means competence, integrity and predictability.

Meeting effectiveness has impact on each individual, in the group to which they belong, and in the organization as a whole. So they contribute to create or destroy trustworthy environments, as well as they are affected by them.

Considering these implications, leading and participating in a meeting is an exercise of individual social responsibility (López-Fresno, 2012, 2013; Cortina, 2013). Trust "belongs" to each member of the work community, and everyone is responsible to build and maintain it (Ikonen and Savolainen, 2011). Trust is manifested in commitment, open communication, ethical behaviour, predictability and doing the best in any activity, that are among the main responsibilities of professionals. Leaders may promote them and, hence, build trust. Trustful leadership enables interaction, communication and cooperation. Leadership by trust may be a powerful intangible asset which reinforces good workplace climate, makes knowledge sharing more effective (Savolainen, 2011) and creates vitality and energy that enables growth of human capital and profitable performance (Savolainen, 2013b).

In short, intrinsically trust is a fragile intangible asset. It can be built or broken by an individual, but he or she alone cannot utilize it or carry its unfavourable consequences. Trust influences relationships and structures, socially and collectively. At the individual level, trust can be invisible, even "tacit" and easily breakable (Savolainen, 2011, 2013a), while at the organizational level it is usually more tangible. Trust can be sensed for example in the culture and atmosphere as well as in various relationships. In meetings, the benefits and consequences of trust are multifaceted and become visible both within and between organizations and actors. Meetings play an important role in trust building or trust destroying and are affected by it.

#### **4. Knowledge creation and sharing in meetings**

Conceptualized by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), knowledge basically adopts the forms of explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is in written forms such as books, reports, etc, and it is easy to identify, articulate, detain and share. Tacit knowledge is defined as consisting of intuition, feelings, perceptions and beliefs deeply embedded in the ways of thinking, talking and working, and in relationships. Tacit knowledge is difficult to understand, observe, acquire and

share, and is diffused in the organization. Thus it is complicated to articulate, which makes it difficult to convert, transfer and share between people.

People need tools, motives and supporting atmosphere for sharing. Group dynamics and workplace climate are the most critical factors in sharing of tacit knowledge (Savolainen and López-Fresno, 2012). Sharing appears as a chain of events starting from the identification of key knowledge needed and the individuals in need of knowledge. The process proceeds to choosing methods and tools of sharing. Sharing and receiving knowledge occur in personal interaction. Meetings are an important tool, whether they are formal or informal, specific (eg. training meetings) or general (eg. working meeting).

Unless shared, tacit knowledge cannot be converted to explicit knowledge and be utilized for human intellectual capital development. Trust plays an important role in tacit knowledge sharing, as sharing and cooperation require trust and also a willingness to cooperate (Savolainen, 2008). Trustful workplace climate is characterized by open communication at the individual and group level, functioning relationships between group members and commitment to common goals. Trust creates openness and freedom (Savolainen, 2011). Thus, sharing knowledge calls for trust, which requires positive attitude to co-operation. Internalizing of knowledge takes place if willingness and motive for knowledge storing on the individual's personal knowledge base exists. Motivation requires trustful leadership, which enables willingness to grow and learn. Essential to leadership by trust is enabling environments that nurture knowledge sharing and knowledge creation, and, hence, innovativeness. At meetings, meeting facilitators or coordinators, as leaders, play an important role to conduct and manage the meetings with effectiveness, with the aim to achieve the meeting objectives, covering all issues of the agenda, within the time frame planned, and in a positive-trustworthy atmosphere that contributes to reinforce group cohesion and disseminate and enhance organizational values.

In summary, sharing and creation of knowledge occurs as an interactive process between actors and trust facilitates it. Meetings are a vehicle for knowledge sharing and creation, and meeting facilitators should act as leaders to create trustworthy environments and ensure meeting effectiveness.

## **5. Conclusions, implications and further research**

Working meetings are necessary and one of the basic tools in organizations for information and knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, coordination, decision making, problem solving and strengthening of group relationships, both inside and outside the organization in the relations with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. Meetings may induce action and reinforce or hindrance group cohesion and cooperation, antecedents for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. But although necessary, working meetings are often unproductive, being a waste of valuable financial and emotional resources, with negative impact on organizational performance, culture, innovativeness and overall competitiveness. So there is a need and responsibility to increase meeting effectiveness. Unless shared, tacit knowledge cannot be converted to explicit knowledge and be utilized for human intellectual capital development. Sharing knowledge occurs in personal interaction, and people need a supporting atmosphere. Trust is manifested in commitment, open communication, ethical behaviour, predictability and doing the best in any activity. It creates openness and freedom at the individual and group level, based on positive expectations of the intentions of other people, and plays an important role in tacit knowledge sharing. Thus, sharing knowledge calls for trust, which requires positive attitude to cooperation and is an integral part of meetings. Meetings contribute to create or destroy trust, as well as they are affected by it.

At meetings, meeting facilitators or coordinators, as "leaders", play an important role to create a positive-trustworthy atmosphere and to conduct and manage the meetings with effectiveness. Through their doing and performance they may facilitate or hindrance sense of belonging, group cohesion, collaboration and cooperation, antecedents for information and knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. A hidden agenda, topics or objectives undermine trust, with negative impact on meeting effectiveness and organizational culture. The main implication for managers is that trust among group members is needed for stimulating knowledge sharing and knowledge creation (Savolainen, 2008, 2011; Savolainen and López-Fresno, 2013), and for organizational vitality and competitiveness. Meetings should be productive for the benefit of all attendees, the group they belong to and the organization as a whole. Trust may make meetings more effective and meetings may contribute to reinforce trust. Trust "belongs" to each member and everyone is responsible to build and maintain trust, although leaders play an important role in promoting it. All participants, whether they coordinate or participate with other functions, should facilitate cooperation and contribute to meeting effectiveness. Considering these implications, leading and participating in a meeting is an exercise of individual social responsibility. Unethical actions and lack of professionalism propagate detrimental consequences to the individual and organizational level.

Furthermore, the paper suggests the main areas and actions to increase working meetings effectiveness as follows:

- To promote positive, trustworthy, working environments.
- To establish clear ground rules to ensure ethical behaviours and effectiveness.
- To plan meetings in advance with a realistic and clear agenda.
- To conduct meetings with responsibility, as a leadership exercise
- To ensure decisions are made accordingly to the set objectives, and responsibilities and deadlines identified and agreed.
- To assess the meetings and implement the necessary improvement actions.
- To follow up decisions and actions agreed.

To implement programs to develop competencies in meeting management. Successful organizations do not regard meetings as a necessary evil, rather they view them as a strategic resource and seek ways to get the most of them. Meetings could be seen like games of “negative sum”, “zero sum” and “positive sum” (cooperative games). In the latter, everybody win, because whatever the outcome, social interaction generates trust, harmony, empathy and mutual credit. In summary, it is “social capital”. Collaborative meetings are efficient and create tight bonds for cooperation. Trustful leadership forms powerful ties for cooperation and effectiveness in meetings. This is a discussion paper on interrelation between working meetings and trust in knowledge creation and sharing. Building and maintaining trust are of utmost importance to develop human capital for sustaining innovativeness and vitality in organizations, and overall competitiveness. Meetings play an important role in this. As an exploration to the topic with theoretical discussion, the paper suggests ideas and issues for further research. The main questions in further research are how meeting management is performing in organizations, considering different sectors, sized organizations and their culture, how trust is built to support meeting management, and what impact training has on meeting effectiveness. Research in progress, based on preliminary case study findings that supported this discussion paper, is being focused on the impact of meeting management training, at top and middle management levels, on meeting effectiveness, considering organizational variables such as leadership style, communication, trust and innovativeness. At this stage, the research has employed a qualitative research approach and case study method, and based on the qualitative findings, a quantitative methodology is also being used by combining the findings from two approaches and methods as mixed (Morse, 2003).

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