

A MEETING TOO MANY

"Sorry, [he or she] is in a meeting" commonly frustrates attempts to talk to people in academia, hospitals or bureaucracy. It appears these organisations are afflicted with the modern epidemic of ever-increasing growth of committees, conferences, retreats and workshops and institutional meetings.

The purpose of a meeting is simple: to deliberate, debate and decide. Anything else is superfluous. But, inevitably, this purpose is hijacked. Some see meetings as an opportunity to communicate, obfuscate or obstruct. Others use meetings to create the illusion of participatory decision-making, when decisions have already been made elsewhere. Power seekers dominate, and ineffective chairpersons tend to tolerate their behaviour — all the while the meeting time ticks on.

What to do?

Abraham Bergman, a US physician, recommends all-out war — a 31-day moratorium on all meetings involving more than three people, conference rooms to be locked and the chairs thrown out! After this period of enforced "cold turkey", there should be a careful and structured return of meetings, provided their stated purpose is decision-making.

Further suggestions range from a reduction in meeting time from the maximum 50 to 15 minutes, to meetings held without chairs, or even convened in corridors. Chairpersons should ensure full participation, quashing repetitive rambling, and should close the meeting on time. Ineffective chairpersons should seek remedial therapy for their failings. Finally, participants in meetings should continually ask themselves whether this is optimal use of their time.

Perhaps we would be better served by reflecting on a comment by renowned US columnist Dave Barry — "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'."



Martin B Van Der Weyden

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