Team meetings that meet the objective: an in-class activity emphasizing active participation

Monica Law, Ph.D.
Marywood University

ABSTRACT

The author has written a class activity based on real life experience. After sitting through many years of unproductive and frustrating team meetings, the author decided to incorporate those experiences into a simulated exercise that could be incorporated during classes that include a chapter(s) on teams and /or teamwork. The goal of the activity is to: 1) help students understand the importance of active participation from all team members during meetings and 2) to help students learn how to effectively facilitate the meeting in order to help move the meeting along in an effective way and ultimately meet the objective(s).

An in-class chapter discussion about teams and teamwork would lay the groundwork for this in class application. This activity can be used in a variety of Management courses that address teams and teamwork in organizations. The author provides a brief literature review focused on the subject to provide background information regarding teams. Specifically, team meetings, which are the focus of this in class exercise. Then, the author provides the specific directions for implementation of the exercise. Finally, the author provides an instructor guide including discussion questions, points for discussion, and student handouts.

Keywords: meetings, teams, teamwork, team members

LITERATUR REVIEW

       Organizations form teams to generate and execute innovative ideas (Deichmann & Jensen, 2016.) The term "synergy" goes hand in hand with the purpose of a team. Dictonary.com defines synergy as "the interaction of elements that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual elements and contributions." Teams can be more effective while working together, as opposed to each individual working on his or her own. Synergy involves the actions of both the team leader and each individual team member.

       The team leader plays a critical role in his or her team achieving this synergistic threshold, where the collective contributions outweigh the individual contributions (Zaccaro, Heinen , & Shuffler, 2009.) Leaders must foster collaboration with individual members and approach teamwork with his or her own specific team in mind (Watkins, 2018.)   The team leader has the responsibility, along with team collaboration, to work to develop a team that is a "mature" team where the focus is on team goals and objectives being met.   In addition, each individual team member plays a crucial role in the functioning of a team. For a team to be effective, all members must be actively involved, using their specific role and attributes to contribute to the overall functioning of the team.

       For purposes of this paper, the aspect of the team that will be focused upon are team meetings. Meetings provide an opportunity to come together to discuss important issues, as meetings are one of the tasks of teamwork (Smith, 2018.) It is important that a team leader conduct effective meeting so that objectives can be met. To do so, the team leader must be aware that different team member types exist. Then, he or she needs to know how to "handle" each type so that the meeting won't get derailed. If not addressed in a functional way, certain team member types can easily derail meetings, making the experience frustrating for all.

BACKGROUND

       This in-class activity can be used in a variety of business-related courses, especially those that include a lesson on teams, teamwork, and/or team building. The activity includes the simulated role-play of two team meetings. After the second meeting is conducted, a class discussion will highlight both meetings and an in-depth discussion will take place. The objective of both the mock meetings and follow up discussions is to help the students understand 1) individual team member types, and 2) how the team leader can implement tactics for each individual team member type in order to conduct an effective team meeting with 100% participation from all members.
Time needed: 45-60 minutes

ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS

       Seven students will be chosen to participate in two "mock" team meetings. The seven chosen students will be asked to go in the hall so the instructor can explain the activity. The remaining students will observe these meetings and provide feedback, so it is important they don't hear what the roles are and what will happen during these mock meetings. Once in the hall, the instructor will assign the following roles: bored team member, wandering team member, the silent team member, the arguing team member, the talking team member, the effective team member, and the team leader. The instructor will give each student a brief overview of what his

or her role entails but explain that he or she should act out their role in their own unique way. Meaning, the meetings will not be scripted. The instructor will make sure the students understand their role, then will explain that the team must come up with an objective for this meeting. Once the team agrees on a meeting objective, the instructor will lead them back inside and have them sit in the front of the classroom. The instructor will then tell the non-participating students that they are going to observe a team meeting. The instructor will ask the non-participating students to take notes during the meeting so a discussion can take place after the meeting has been concluded. At this point, the audience thinks there will only be one meeting.

During this first meeting, it is the responsibility of each team member to act out their role, making it difficult for the team leader to keep the meeting on topic and meet the objective of the meeting. The bored member will typically doodle on his/her notepad, surf his or her phone, or look around the room aimlessly. The arguer will do just that, argue with whatever anyone says! The silent member will not say a word. The talker will go on and on, making it exceedingly difficult for anyone else to speak. The wanderer will not stay on topic and will bring up random issues that have nothing to do with the meeting. The effective member will attempt to bring up relevant and appropriate points, however it is difficult due to the other roles. The author developed this activity and has conducted it countless times, and the result is always the same.

The team leader gets extremely frustrated and finally gives up. Even though this is a "mock" meeting, the emotions, especially negative ones, get to the team leader. The instructor will be able to gauge when the members are too frustrated to move on, it will become apparent. In fact, most times, the team leader him/herself will turn to the instructor and say, "I'm done, I cannot control this meeting", or something of the like. Again, nothing is scripted, but it will happen. The team leader will become frustrated and it will be apparent when to end this first meeting if he/she does not end it first!

Once this first meeting concludes, the instructor will first ask the team to voice their thoughts on the meeting. Usually, the team leader will speak up and explain how frustrating it was trying to keep the meeting on track. The instructor will then ask the non-participating students what they noted during the meeting.

Once the discussion has taken place, the mock team members are asked to go back once again into the hall. The instructor will tell the team that they will conduct another meeting, with the same objective, having each person "act" as effective team members. There will be six effective members and one team leader. As one would imagine, this meeting goes very well, with each person providing thoughtful, relevant, and appropriate feedback. The team can meet the objective of the meeting and everyone leaves feeling that the meeting was a success, especially the team leader. Again, the instructor will ask the team for their thoughts on this meeting, then open the discussion to the non-participating students.

The instructor will then lead a discussion focusing on 1)Each team member type and, 2) Methods that team leaders can use to encourage participation from each team member, stop destructive behavior, and help meetings stay on track.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about the bored team member?
2. What can be done to bring the bored member back to the meeting objective?
3. What do you know about the team member that argues?
4. What can be done to bring the arguer back to the meeting objective?
5. What do you know about the silent team member?
6. What can be done to bring the silent member back to the meeting objective?
7. What do you know about the wandering team member?
8. What can be done to bring the wandering member back to the meeting objective?
9. What do you know about the talking team member?
10. What can be done to bring the talking member back to the meeting objective?
11. What do you know about the effective team member?
12. What is the role of the team leader?

INSTRUCTOR DISCUSSION POINTS

From an instruction point, the roles portrayed are those that students will see in the real world. Therefore, it is very important that students understand how to identify these types of team members, and then execute solutions that will help each person to become an effective team member. In order for team to be 100% effective, each team member needs to heard and given the opportunity to speak in a constructive manner. Meetings in the real world can easily go off track, making the meeting too long, frustrating, and not productive. This ultimately leads to the need for additional, and unnecessary, meetings. If team leaders are equipped with the resources they need to identify and address non-effective team members, they will be able to have more productive and effective meetings.

A discussion focused on how to engage each type of team member is important, as this is a skill that team leaders will have to use to become better at them. The more a team leader employs these types of suggestions, the better the meetings will become. The meetings will become more productive, less frustrating for everyone, and meet the objective(s) that have been set in the agenda.

The instructor will use the information below to discuss each team member type. Specifically, this information gives tips that can be used for each team member type, tips to help keep the member actively engaged during the meeting. This information will be used during the discussion portion of the activity.

The Bored Team Member- to keep this person motivated, try assigning a task to him/her during the meeting. It may also be beneficial to call upon this person at various points throughout the meeting, or implement the rotation method, where each person gives input at structured points during the meeting

The Arguing Team Member- it is important to resolve conflict, but not in an argumentative manner. To address the arguing team member, do not allow for the behavior. Ensure that the person doesn't insult other team members, and do not get into an argument yourself with this type of team member. Instead, make sure this type of member knows that arguing for the sake of arguing will not be tolerated because it is not productive. If someone does not argue back with this person, the argument cannot go any further, behavior can be cut off.

The Silent Team Member- The rotation method can work well with this type of team member. In addition, wait for something that you know he or she knows the answer to and then call upon him or her to respond.

The Wandering Team Member-The rotation method works well for the wandering team member. In addition, calling upon this person at random times may help. He or she may pay closer attention if he or she does not know when he/she may be called upon. This distracting behavior should be cut off as well. The leader should set ground rules, explaining what is and what is not acceptable meeting behavior.

The Talking Team Member-The rotation method works well with this type of team member. If the leader sets the tone, and explains the format of the meeting, this person will know that he or she will get the chance to speak. The team leader must set ground rules, letting the team know what is expected, behavior-wise, during the meeting.   If the talker still tends to interrupt, or talk too much, it is the responsibility of the team leader to stop the behavior and not allow that.

The Effective Team Member- This member is actively engaged. The effective member is the independent, critical thinker that provides insightful comments, and helps generate useful ideas that will meet the meeting objective(s). The team leader should encourage this behavior and praise this team member, as it is important to replicate this behavior in future meetings.

Team leader- it is especially important for the team leader to develop effective moderating skills. Keeping the meeting on track, timewise is crucial because if a meeting lasts one hour, and includes seven people, it can now be considered a seven-hour meeting. So, staying on agenda is important, as people's time is important. With moderating an effective meeting being a skill, practice is key for the team leader. He/she must practice the above noted methods for each team member type. In addition, the team leader needs to practice his/her own communication skills, including talking, when appropriate, listening, and watching for non-verbal ques. It would be suggested that team leaders engage in training(s) focused on effective moderating skills, then practice the skills learned at each meeting that is held. The more one engages in these best practice skills, the better the meetings will become. Team members deserve a productive meeting, as team meetings are known to be one of the most common team member complaints. Team members say that meetings are too long, there are too many, and the meetings aren't productive. The team leader can provide solutions to all three of these complaints by following guidelines explained here in this activity.

CONCLUSION

This in class activity is a hands-on approach to illustrating the positive and/or negative affects of team meetings. The purpose of a meeting is to meet an objective(s). To meet the objective(s) the team leader and each team member play key roles. The purpose of this activity is to showcase the specific team members, including the team leader. Specifically, how each person's behavior may either enhance or detract from meeting the objective(s). The activity engages the students, as they can "see" what is happening right before their eyes! In addition, this activity lends itself well to an in-class discussion following the simulated meetings, as all students have either participated or watched the meetings take place. In summary, this activity provides the instructor a beneficial way to teach topics about teams, teamwork, and team meetings.

STUDENT HAND OUT FOR ACTIVTIY ROLE PLAY

Each team member playing a role will get only his/her role description.   This handout can be cut into seven different pieces, one for each student playing a role. The audience members should write down the types of members that will be played, but not given the exact role descriptions during the mock meetings. It is important that the audience watch and listen, then make their own determination of who they think each player is. This will be a key part of the discussion by bringing the audience members into the conversation once the mock meetings are played out. Team Member Roles:

1. The Bored Team Member- this team member is preoccupied with other issues and does not pay attention or participate in the team meeting
2. The Arguing Team Member- this team member will argue with what is being said, sometimes just for the sake of arguing. The arguing typically is not done in a constructive manner.
3. The Silent Team Member- this is a non-participating team member. He or she will sit silently throughout the duration of the meeting.
4. The Wandering Team Member- this team member distracts the team from the meeting objective, bringing up issues that have nothing to do with the meeting topic(s). This team member will change the subject of discussion often and complain.
5. The Talking Team Member- this team member likes to dominate the conversation, whether the points are relevant or not. He or she will talk as much as given the opportunity.
6. The Effective Team Member- this is the member type that teams want to cultivate. The effective member actively participates, when appropriate. This team member will share relevant thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and will engage in constructive or functional conflict.
7. The Team Leader- it is the responsibility of the team leader to keep the meeting on topic, ensuring that objective(s) have been met in the time frame allotted.   The team leader will serve as the facilitator and will ensure that each member of the team shares thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Additional Tips for Team Leader may include: listening attentively, watching for non-verbal ques, modeling appropriate leadership behavior, and establishing a constructive climate where team members feel comfortable expressing feelings, thoughts, ideas.

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