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Meeting efficiency- a key issue in Corporate Governance

In the Jun 21-27 07 BRW, Leo D'Angelo Fisher wrote an article on "**The madness of meetings**". It is an important topic as if meetings are done right throughout the business, it enhances both the corporate governance and hence the business value, by utilising human resources efficiently and achieving outputs that are accountable. With flatter organisations and more democratic decision making in organisations, there is a tendency for meetings to lack leadership and focus as the meetings are a more a "talk feast" - those that run the meetings don't want to be seen as "bureaucratic" by directing the meetings. Executives are confusing what leadership is about and they don't want appear to be a "manager" as against being "enlightened"; at times leadership needs to shift gears to manage meetings and follow process.

The article by Leo D'Angelo Fisher on **The madness of meetings** canvasses these issues and Palliser was invited to provide its views on meeting Leadership and the importance Board meeting practice to set the meeting culture of the business.

LEADERSHIP

The madness of meetings

Meetings with no real purpose can lead to wasted time on a grand scale for some organisations. By Leo D'Angelo Fisher.

MOST EMPLOYEES HAVE attended them and wondered why. Most have endured them, thinking about more pressing tasks left unattended. They are, of course, meetings – a seemingly permanent feature of modern corporate life – and more often than not they don't need to happen.

Meetings probably have more to do with entrenched habits and cultures than a reasonable expectation of achieving a useful outcome, organisational psychologist and principal of Brisbane corporate performance consultant NovumAVI, Dr Robert Lake, says.

Some managers are "meeting happy" and often oblivious to the capacity of meetings to waste time and eat into productivity, while others genuinely try to make meetings more effective. "A more useful consideration might be: do we need to have this meeting?"

Lake says.

Given the prevailing meetings culture, he believes meetings have become a sanctuary for "people who don't have enough work to do".

"I have sat in meetings where memberships have grown like topsy," he says. "There will be a number of people listening at these meetings, but not really contributing. It might be a way for these people to be involved, or it might be a way of wasting time, but either way I think it does become a cultural thing. There are useful meetings, and at the other end of the continuum there are useless meetings. What happens in between that diminishes the value of a meeting?"

Inevitably, the problem is that too many meetings are being held, which exacerbates the perception that meetings don't achieve anything. Many of these meetings take place, Lake suspects, because there remains status associated with the meeting – or more to the point, calling meetings. “That’s what I’d call the status meeting, where you have someone saying, ‘I’m calling a meeting because I can; I am an important person.’ But if that person is not focused on outputs, the meeting will wander. A meeting has got to be linked to outcomes.”

Lake says another factor that has contributed to ineffective meetings has been a tendency in some organisations to democratise meetings: companies are still wedded to holding meetings, but they seek to make them less formal. Meetings are led by managers who are either deliberately informal, or lack the skills to chair a meeting. Either way, the result can be that the person heading the meeting is not in control.

“One of the side effects of flattened organisational structures and more democratic ways is that people have a reluctance to lead. There is a cultural groundswell of dealing with things through consultation and collaboration in organisations, which ends up meaning no one’s in charge.

The best meetings occur when there is a firm structure. More formal is better than less formal. Chairing a meeting is a leadership role.”

Geoff Widmer, chief executive of Melbourne consultant Palliser Strategic Management, agrees. “Leadership of meetings is crucial. Some of the disciplines [of running a meeting] have gone out of the meeting structure because people don’t want to appear bureaucratic,” says Widmer, who is also a professional company secretary specialising in small company boards.

The most common reason for ineffective meetings, he says, is the lack of direction from the chair. He recommends that companies look to boards for best practice. “Good boards are well structured, they have agendas, minutes are taken, and action items are recorded and summarised at the end of the meeting. Middle managers who have the opportunity to do so would do well to follow what happens at that level. At the end of the meeting, the chairman should summarise the action points, who’s going to follow through on those action points, and the date by which they must do so.”

A meeting also needs to be “targeted and focused”. Attendance should be strictly limited to people who are involved in the decisions being made. One way of ensuring that meeting skills are passed on within an organisation is to ensure that executives with operational responsibilities have the opportunity to make presentations at board meetings. They in turn take the discipline and structure of these meetings to their own staff meetings.

“Boards should represent best practice. They set the meetings culture of the business, which is why I encourage boards to include relevant executives to present on their specialty areas,” Widmer says.

The managing director of Melbourne information technology services company ExpressApps, Dr Mark Harrigan, says it is important that companies are prepared to not have meetings. While the company does have regularly scheduled meetings, the meetings don't go ahead unless there is an agenda.

“We do not have a written policy but we do have a practice that says formal regular meetings should be kept to a minimum. Scheduled meetings don’t go ahead if there’s nothing to discuss. Basically, nobody is allowed to have a scheduled meeting without a purpose. It’s good to have meetings in the calendar, but people need to have the discipline to say ‘let’s not meet’ even if they’ve got a meeting scheduled.”

ExpressApps has three regularly scheduled meetings: a monthly “all-company” meeting (the business employs 25 people) and fortnightly meetings for the sales and engineering teams.

The monthly meetings take place as scheduled – even without Harrigan – because it is an opportunity for staff to get together to discuss business and personal issues affecting them.

“The sole purpose of the company meetings is to have a get-together,” Harrigan says. “It’s an opportunity to catch up. Everyone needs to know where everyone fits in the organisation, so that kind of gathering is important.” •

Some practical tips for meetings

Get down to business

- Schedule the meeting off the hour (for example, 10.10) and declare its length beforehand. This encourages punctuality and erodes the “a meeting lasts for an hour” mentality. There is no reason, other than habit, why a meeting should start at 10.00 rather than 10.05.
- At the meeting starting time, create the expectation of discussion times and decisions to be taken, start talking about the first agenda item – don’t stop for latecomers, don’t backtrack for them, and don’t acknowledge their lateness. After one or two of these meetings they will learn to turn up on time.
- As the meeting closes, summarise the key points discussed and resolutions made. It is critical to allocate action items, who is responsible and agree the time for resolution of outstanding matters. Remember after the meeting follow-up as accountability is critical for improving meeting culture!
- At the end of the meeting, declare it closed and stand up – this signals both that the meeting has finished and that it is time to leave.

Source of Tips: BRW Leadership article including NovumAVI and Palliser Strategic Management Pty Ltd.