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Training People, Inspiring Growth

Stopping the 'Meeting After the Meeting'

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Ryan is project manager for a high-profile software development team. There are obvious challenges and hurdles to overcome to keep the program on schedule and under budget. Unfortunately, his greatest frustration is the lack of open communication occurring during the

team meetings. Lately, his office has become a revolving door with different team members bringing up issues, concerns, ideas and opinions that should have been discussed in the meeting. He is perplexed as to why his group continues to engage in this behavior. It is not healthy and prevents the group from making decisions that everyone understands and owns.

Ryan is not alone. Maybe you have a team that suffers from the same group dynamics. The "meeting after the meeting" is a symptom of three potential deeper issues in teams: low trust, a lack of group emotional intelligence and poor meeting dynamics. Patrick Lencioni, in his book *"The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,"* refers to it as artificial harmony. People go along to get along in the meeting, and then after, express their true feelings and beliefs. For some reason, they are unwilling to engage in robust, healthy dialogue and conflict.

Trust in teams is centered on ability, benevolence and integrity. Do you believe your colleagues are competent and capable of doing the job in the way it needs to be done? Do you care for your team members as human beings? Do you treat one another with mutual respect —not taking advantage of one another, being loyal, speaking the truth and keeping your commitments?

Vulnerability-based trust, however, is key to eliminating the meeting after the meeting. When team members feel they can speak openly and honestly with no fear of repercussion, it is amazing what can happen in a conference room. First, the team leader must demonstrate vulnerability by role modeling behaviors that require risks such as saying, *"I was wrong"* or *"I believe Eric has a better idea"* or *"I don't know."* Team members should not be evaluated negatively for being real and genuine. Showing your weaknesses is actually a sign of strength, confidence and courage.

Another way to build vulnerability-based trust is to get to know one another as people. Engaging in team building exercises where team members get to know about one another's strengths, weaknesses, communication styles, preferences and beliefs helps everyone to engage with more empathy and understanding.

Team members must also agree not to talk about one another behind each other's backs. If there is an issue or concern, each will address one another directly without spreading rumors or

engaging in negative gossip. In teams, every person has an equal voice. The most senior or experienced team member's opinion does not weigh more heavily than the rookie in the group. Everyone must feel that their opinion, concern or idea was heard, considered and understood. This requires building the emotional intelligence of the group.

Differences can lead to misunderstandings which can escalate, if not addressed, to negative relationship conflict in a team. The very diversity we seek in teams can become a thorn in its side if team members do not learn how to listen to understand, show empathy for people's feelings and seek everyone's perspective.

Listening to understand means being curious about the other person's perspective and showing empathy for how the person feels. *"I can see how this roadblock has become burdensome for you. Help me to understand more about its impact and what you need so you can move forward."* This is listening to understand. Listening to respond would sound like, *"Get over it. We all have issues. Find a solution and get moving!"*

Seeking everyone's perspective means being attentive to who is participating, who is not and how people are responding, verbally and non-verbally, to the discussion at hand. It is important to support and protect team members. Show appreciation for those who speak up, even if you disagree with the message. Use the word *"and"* not *"but"* when commenting on someone's opinion. *"I see what you are saying. It is important to get the specifications finished this week and they also need to be high quality."*

Good meeting dynamics structure discussion so everyone is prepared and allowed to engage in healthy dialogue and robust conversation. An agenda, published in advance with clear objectives and defined outcomes for each agenda item, makes a world of difference. Some people do not speak out because they feel the decision has already been made. Do not ask for people's opinions unless you truly believe their input will have influence in the outcome. If the decision has been made, don't ask. Be clear in defining decision-making boundaries — who has the final decision, who has input and who will implement the solution.

Most groups do not do a good job of "calling the question." This means that after robust discussion, someone needs to ask *"What did we just agree to here?"* or *"So what is our decision?"* or *"What is the necessary action?"* Then, it is necessary to ensure that there is complete consensus or buy-in on any decisions where team members will be held accountable for outcomes.

Ryan decided his next meeting will be about setting a foundation for the team to be successful in how it communicates with one another. They will focus on developing trust, building EQ and setting expectations for gaining commitment. Nothing else matters if the team cannot be real, open and engage in healthy conflict so that everyone's ideas and perspectives contribute to an effective decision. Weigh-in = Buy-in!

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