

The Meeting Doctor

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THE MEETING DOCTOR (MD) AIMS TO ADDRESS KEY ISSUES THAT OCCUR DURING MEETINGS EITHER FROM A RELATIONSHIP, MANAGEMENT, TASK AND/OR PROCESS PERSPECTIVE. IT'S PURPOSE IS TO PROVIDE PRESCRIPTIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE MEETING EFFECTIVENESS WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THERE ARE OTHER, EQUALLY GOOD PRESCRIPTIONS AVAILABLE.

DEAR MD,

Tell me I'm not going crazy! I've been attending so-called "team" meetings for the last two months and I don't think any decisions have been made where everyone has left feeling good. People argue back and forth while others have just shut down and rarely give their opinion. I blew up at everyone yesterday and they're telling me now that I'm the problem. Should I get out now (lord knows that may be impossible!), or should I stick with it?

Signed, Going Crazy

DEAR GOING CRAZY,

There really aren't any quick fixes here and there are probably lots of reasons for your team's "storming", but your desire to make your feelings known may be the first step in helping your team look at its effectiveness. However, how you make your feelings known can either present itself as another problem or an opportunity for the team to become more effective.

Lets talk about you first. Should the feeling "I'm going to kill someone" come up for you during a meeting because you feel the team is stuck, chill out because no one is going to listen to anyone who is emotionally volatile. In fact, for those quiet people, your intervening strategy may shut them down even more and for those domineering members, it may fire them up. So, take a few deep breaths and try to feel the weight of your body against the floor (seriously). Keep on doing this until you feel a sense of calm. Then ask the group "can I give some feedback about our group process?".

If people are willing to listen try using the following method:

State what you've observed

(i.e. "I noticed in the last 20 minutes that when John presented his idea, none of us acknowledged what he had to say. Rather, we just went into our own stuff.")

State what you imagine is going on

(i.e. "Imagine that we all have good intentions, but when push comes to shove our own agendas come.")

State how it impacted you

(i.e. "I'm feeling frustrated because I, and perhaps others, don't feel heard by the team.")

I'M A TEAM LEADER for a new product development group and I am completely frustrated with our progress.

State what you want

(i.e. "If we could listen first to what someone has to say, then repeat back what we think we heard, I think the speaker would feel more supported and that their ideas haven't been missed.")

Following this, be quiet. Let the team respond. If no one responds or people get sarcastic (i.e. we're not here to talk about your feelings!), ask other members if they feel the same way. You may have to repeat your feedback to ensure everyone has heard you—try not to get frustrated!



Lets talk about the team now. Once you feel all members have heard you, ask them if they would be willing to create a team norm or rule about listening to one another. In fact, while you're at it, see if there are any other "rules" or "norms" the team needs to live by in order to become more high-performing. Flip chart these ideas and suggest that these rules are brought to every meeting and posted. Whoever is chairing or facilitating the meeting could use these rules to ensure people are acting within the team's expectations. Once a month the team should review these rules to see which need to be modified, removed or added to.

In conclusion, it's important to realize here that your team is "storming" and this is a normal phase for teams to enter and fall back into during its development path. Understanding this and proactively taking time to talk about the team's process, ensures the team a healthy future.

DEAR MD,

I'm a team leader for a new product development group and I am completely frustrated with our progress. Yesterday we had our weekly meeting and action plan items weren't completed on time by some of the members. This frequently happens and occurs with the same people. I really question their commitment to our team (team, what a joke!) Anyway, when I confront these members, they always have the same excuse "I was just too overwhelmed". We're all adults, why can't they get their act together?

Signed, I'm Together

Dear I'm Together,

The bad news is that people are overwhelmed today in organizations and have good reason to feel this way. With restructuring, reengineering, redesigning and renewing, some "resistance" is inevitable. But, to know if your colleagues are overwhelmed is not as important as it is to understand what they perceive "they" need to do to overcome their "overwhelmed" feelings.

The good news is that there are processes to help your fellow teammates voice their difficulties, create solutions and, ultimately, enhance the team's productivity. Moreover, no matter what the plan is, it should always be directed to helping the under performer develop awareness of the negative impact of his or her actions and how he or she can change them. Remember, commitment to any action is always best when the person who must act on it has developed the plan.

Plan A

Troubleshoot the Action Plan

Before moving directly to implementation of actions, have the team troubleshoot the action plan by asking some of the following questions:

- What are the difficult, complex, or sensitive aspects of our action plan?
- What shifts in the environment, like a change of priorities, should we keep our eye on?
- What organizational blocks or barriers could we run into?



- What technical or materials-related problems could stop or delay us?
- What human resource issues should we be aware of at this point?
- In which ways might members of this team not fulfill their commitments

Once potential barriers have been identified, ask members to create respective strategies for overcoming each one. Always pick someone to monitor the follow-through of the strategies, especially in lieu of some of the member's past performance. Ensure that your next agenda has room for status updates.

Plan B

Coach the Individual(s)

It may be that troubleshooting does not produce the results required (time for Plan B) or that a team discussion on performance may be too embarrassing for the concerned individual(s). In any case, this individual's performance is an issue for the team and something must be done. In this plan, you therefore ask to meet him/her privately to offer some feedback. Your objective here is to help him or her come up with improvement suggestions and ensure that he or she take responsibility for making changes.

During the coaching process the following steps should be taken:

- Provide the person with detailed notes on the specifics of his or her performance problem. This means keeping track of what he or she does, how often it's done and the impact the poor performance has.

- Set a clear context for the session by thanking the person for coming and explain that your purpose is to offer feedback about his or her performance so that they and the team can improve. Explain your approach as being confidential, supportive, and in partnership with them.
- Share your feedback in a totally factual, specific manner. Don't attribute motives or label the other person. Keep it objective, saying for example: "For the last three weeks you have not completed these commitments (name them) on time." For each feedback point also let the person know about the impact of his or her actions on others.
- Ask the person to give you his or her performance perception. Listen actively to determine the level of self-awareness and openness to change. Paraphrase the key points.
- Objectively review the facts of the situation incorporating whatever information you obtained from hearing the team member's version of the situation. Then ask him or her to identify solutions. If, however, any suggestions aren't going to result in a significant improvement, describe the expected standard of performance in specific detail.
- Encourage the member to write down any action plans that have been discussed. Offer any training and mentoring that might be needed.

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