Leadership Skills Series: 4 Controlling Meetings

By Nick Anderson

This is the fourth in our series to help Leaders assess their behavioral skills. This series is based on research of common commercial interactions that has led to many useful insights into how to create and manage effective meetings and deal with those who are most difficult to persuade – Low Reactors. This week I am focusing on those behaviors Leaders use when controlling meetings. (Research conducted by Warr, Bird, Honey & Rackham ATTITB and Huthwaite Research Group).

IT'S NOT WHAT THEY SAY. IT'S THE CONTEXT IN WHICH YOU MISINTERPRET IT.

The first Group of Behaviors is **Clarifying Behaviors** used for the exchange of information, facts and opinions and, of course clarification. For this Blog, we will consider, the four main behaviors which when used in meetings go to the heart of meeting effectiveness.

Testing Understanding seeks to establish whether or not an earlier contribution has been understood by the individual. It differs from seeking information in that it is an attempt to ensure agreement or consensus of some kind, and refers to a prior question or issue (i.e. "Can I take it that we all now agree on our tasks assignments for this week?"). This behavior is similar to Summarizing, but takes the form of a question.

Summarizing restates the content of previous discussions or events in a compact form. This behavior can be useful to make sure that the entire group is up to date with events that have transpired (e.g. "So far we have agreed that John will finish module A, while Maria and I begin module B."). This will ensure that you and the rest of the group have a clear understanding.

Seeking Information seeks facts, opinions, or clarification from another person pertaining to a proposal (e.g. "What sample size do you think will be needed for statistical reliability?" and "Which tests will you use?").

Giving Information makes statements that offer facts, opinions or clarification to a proposal (e.g. "The new system is easier to operate." and "I'm worried about missing the deadline.").

Now, we will focus on the above behaviors Chair People (Chairs) use during meetings to attain successful outcomes. These findings help leaders diagnose their meetings and how too much, too little or the wrong balance of these four behaviors can waste time and often make meetings very frustrating and ineffective.

Does this apply to all meetings, like in Not for Profits??

Essentially, the commonality is problem solving and decision making, **not** just exchanging information. As long as you have desired outcomes like:

- Deciding how we are going to cope with rising demand and falling donations, OR
- Problem solving why attendance is falling,

Then you have a meeting.

Why do you say "not just exchanging information?

Good point! There are now so many better ways of reporting progress or a lack thereof, including email, SharePoint etc. that you should not encourage people to have weekly meetings where they have to wait their turn to report back. This *"hub and spoke"* type of meeting is boring, as participants have to wait for their colleagues report to the "boss" and hear them being questioned. Also, participants' post meeting ratings change negatively when a meeting has a high level of Giving Information and is seen as *Time Wasting*. It happens when everyone in the meeting wants to add yet another reason, anecdote or opinion as to why an initiative should or should not be pursued; all of which tend to encumber the decision making process.

The Chairing vs. Managing Meeting Dilemma

In most situations the person running the meeting has two competing roles:

- *Chairing* – The ideal Chair is an important role, concerned solely with the efficient and fair conduct of the meeting. The perfect Chair is not interested in the **content**, but in the meeting **process.**
- *Managing* – In the real world though, the Chair is either the most senior manager present or the person who has called the meeting (a

Leader). In either case he or she has considerable interest in the content and is rarely, if ever, neutral.

These two roles are not easily compatible. For example, many chairs have a continuous incentive to manipulate the process of the meeting in order to influence the content and therefore its outcome.

How often have you been in meetings with the feeling that you are not being really engaged for your input but merely your support for the Chair's pet project?

So, are you saying that if we are chairing a meeting we should be neutral?

Well, in most situations the Chair's preferences, views or pet projects are known beforehand. So, even if they strive for neutrality and focus on process, their attempts can be counter- productive by creating suspicion.

So, I am sure you have a research finding or two on how skilled chairs perform this balancing act?

Indeed...and an important distinction to draw at this stage is differentiating the wider skills of managing meetings from the narrower skills of chairing. As a starting point, the basic behaviors of chairing are worth focusing on.

Sample: 31 Chairs selected on the following criteria:

1. People rated their meetings as fair and efficient

2. They had at least five years experience of chairing

3. They were chosen from 47 who met the first two criteria.

The researchers found that skilled Chairs' behavior differed significantly from participants; for example, the type of Proposing (putting forward new & actionable ideas, suggestions etc.).

Both Chairs and Participants had the same volume of Proposals but they were very different types:

Behavior	Chairs	Participants
Content Proposals	1.8%	11.1%
Procedural Proposals	9.6%	2.4%
Totals	11.5%	13.5%

Procedural Proposal Examples:

"I suggest we only spend 10 minutes on this item"

"I propose that we take item 6 next"

Content Proposal Examples:

"I think we should put the IT Cabinet next to Shaft 2"

"We need to ensure that employees are kept in the loop"

OK, so that's Proposing— where to next?

There is an important distinction to make between the two initiating behaviors: **Proposing** and **Building**.

Proposing is a new suggestion, proposal, or course of action (e.g. "I suggest that we organize the project into five modules." or "The File Menu should contain an option to print").

Building on the other hand takes the form of a proposal, but actually extends or develops someone else's proposal (e.g. "...and your design would be even better if we added a scroll bar at the edge of the window." or "A pizza sounds great, and some sodas would be good too."). Since the initial proposal is not the final solution, building is effective in producing an alternative or revised plan.

Chairs tend to use Building as a way of integrating different people's ideas.

For Example:

"John has suggested we reduce the workload in Accounts. Bob says he has spare capacity. Are there some people who could be used at high work load times like month and year end?"

In contrast, Chairs used only about 1/3rd of Participants Supporting or Disagreeing Behavior i.e.:

Supporting makes a conscious and direct declaration of agreement with or support for another person or his/her concepts and opinions (i.e. "Sounds okay to me" or "Fine"). Positive feedback is always good.

Disagreeing is the direct objection to another person's opinions. Disagreeing is an issue-oriented behavior (e.g. "Your third point just isn't true." or "What you're suggesting just won't work."). This behavior is normal in a discussion, but don't let it evolve into a Defending or Attacking behavior.

It's hardly surprising that Chairs support people, not issues. For example:

"Louise is right to bring this up."

Instead of directly disagreeing, Chairs will bring in other participants who may disagree in the same way.

I would have thought skilled Chairs use a lot of Testing Understanding and Summarizing in meetings....is that right?

Another good point! The research showed that there was a correlation with the number of misunderstandings and misinterpretations after meetings with the amount of Testing Understanding and Summarizing occurring during meetings. In all 49 Meetings were so observed, and in those, 297 participants.

Those meetings that were low in Testing Understanding and Summarizing had significantly more errors and omissions in people's accounts of the principle decisions agreed to. (Note: As meetings differed in length the researchers took Testing Understanding and Summarizing as a percentage total meeting behavior).

The findings were rather disturbing:

- <2.5% – Testing Understanding and Summarizing Participants averaged 4.3 errors or omissions on what was decided.
- >10% - Testing Understanding and Summarizing averaged only 1.2 errors or omissions

Good Chairs had Testing Understanding 15.2% vs. less effective Chairs 3.1% and similarly, Summarizing 11.5% vs. 0.7%

- Seeking Information – 29.3% vs. 16.3%
- Giving Information – 21.7% vs. 39.4%

So, how can people use this Chairperson Profile?

Training other leaders as well as for your own use…

How do Chairs betray their bias?

Using Content Proposals: Other ways they show bias? Using a lot of Disagreeing, Defend/Attack and Giving Information, all of which control content *not* process.

How do biased Chairs use directional control to influence a meeting's direction?

Procedural Proposals combined with Shutting-out or Bringing-in by either excluding or involving participants including facilitating the exchange of ideas and asking people to share their opinions. It is interesting to note that Chairs who control participation and involvement are often seen as unbiased and fair whereas this can be a more subtle approach to controlling both the direction and decisions made.

So what questions would you ask yourself to be more effective when running meetings?

My questions to leaders would be:

- What is the level of participants understanding and commitment to taking their part in following the issues outlined above?
- How well are your expectations understood regarding what attendees need to prepare for your meetings? For example:
    - "Come prepared to analyze the missed delivery windows on second shift" or
    - "Ensure you come with three ideas about how we are going to overcome the conveyor problem on Line 3
- How well do meeting participants know what behavior reduces meeting effectiveness? For example:

- o Giving long reports as to what happened versus focusing on conclusions that identify problems and offer options for their resolution
- o Offering many reasons to support a proposal versus giving just two strong reasons in support
- How well do people understand your expectations when reviewing each meeting's effectiveness? For example:
  - o Delta reviews of pluses and minuses
  - o How well did participants' preparation help or hinder the meeting's effectiveness
  - o How well were ideas considered before deciding or passing judgment
- How appropriate is it for you to chair every meeting, even when everyone knows that you have a vested interest in certain solutions?
  - o Why not hand the Chair over to one of your people?
- How well do you understand what your participants' expectations are? For example:
  - o Does everyone have to attend all meetings rather than just meetings about issues that concern them.