



In the trenches: Making your work meetings a success

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KEYWORDS

Effective meetings;
Meeting
interdependence;
Participant learning
and development;
Common
understanding

Abstract Managing meetings effectively is vital in the fast-paced, complex environment of the modern workplace. However, direct scholarly attention to work meetings is still limited, making an understanding of what makes meetings successful elusive. In this article, we examine the particulars of successful and unsuccessful meetings from a participant's perspective. Employing a conceptual mapping approach, we analyze open-ended statements collected from meeting participants to identify three broad themes associated with meeting success: (1) participant learning and development; (2) the coordination of performance, including the creation of links between meeting episodes; (3) and the development of common understanding and alignment among attendees. By more fully taking these themes into account, managers can be better equipped to design, organize, and manage their work meetings successfully.

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1. What drives a meeting's success?

In the daily routines of employees and managers, meetings abound: annual review meetings, budget

meetings, customer service meetings, planning meetings, training meetings, and the list goes on. Meetings have been defined as “communicative event[s] involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group” (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 7). Not only are meetings ubiquitous in the modern workplace but the amount of time employees and managers spend in work meetings has risen continually over the

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past 50 years (Rogelberg, Scott, & Kello, 2007). One estimate indicates that managers spend around 23 hours per week attending meetings and that number rises for supervisors and employees of large organizations (Rogelberg et al., 2007). As meetings increasingly become a significant aspect of organizational life, the nature of work meetings has also become more diverse. In this context, understanding how participants experience meetings and how to effectively manage them is of immense importance in people's work lives.

While there is no clear consensus about what meeting elements are necessary for meeting success, research has shown that structural elements, relational elements, information acquisition, and time management are all important contributors to a successful meeting (Rogelberg et al., 2007). Yet, all too often, participants' actual experiences are far from ideal. Complaints about meetings are quite common and even the most engaged employees often experience reduced motivation and morale because of negative experiences related to meetings. We endeavored to understand the critical dimensions participants consider by exploring how they recall successful and unsuccessful meetings. Using this information, we provide guidance for managers on the effective planning and implementation of work meetings.

More specifically, we seek to answer the following question: How do participants perceive meeting success? We approach this task inductively, drawing upon the experiences of meeting participants in both successful and unsuccessful meetings. Through our inductive analysis, we identify several facets of meetings that managers can leverage to increase the effectiveness of the meetings they run. We found that participants value meetings that facilitate (1) participant learning and development; (2) coordination of performance, including the creation of links between meeting episodes; and (3) the development of common understanding and alignment among meeting attendees. We integrate these findings with the extant literature to describe how a participant-centered conceptualization of meeting success can broaden our practical and theoretical understanding of work meetings.

2. Meetings as an organizational phenomenon

A body of scholarly research concerning work meetings has emerged over the last 30 years. Spawned largely by Schwartzman's (1986, p. 233) work that argued that the meeting is "a neglected social form

in organizational studies," various researchers have started to rigorously examine work meetings. This research is typically approached from one of three perspectives:

1. Scholars have examined how the various traits and characteristics of people affect their behavior in meetings (e.g., Niederman & Volkema, 1999; Sonnentag, 2001; Sonnentag & Volmer, 2009);
2. A number of scholars have explored the role of meetings in affecting important individual, group, and organizational outcomes (e.g., Kilduff, Funk, & Mehra, 1997; Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004; Luong & Rogelberg, 2005; Rogelberg, Allen, Shancok, Scott, & Shuffler, 2010; Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006); and
3. A number of studies examine how meeting effectiveness is influenced by specific characteristics of the meeting, such as leadership and facilitation (e.g., Clawson, Bostrom, & Anson, 1993; Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997; Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 2003), meeting format (e.g., Anson & Minkvold, 2004; Bluedorn, Turban, & Love, 1999; Volkema & Niederman, 1995), and meeting design and processes (e.g., Leach, Rogelberg, Warr, & Burnfield, 2009; McComas, Tuite, Waks, & Sherman, 2007; Volkema & Niederman, 1996).

In short, scholarly research on meetings has demonstrated how participants influence meetings, how meetings influence people and organizations, and how the characteristics of a meeting influence meeting effectiveness.

A critical yet unanswered question in scholarly research remains: What constitutes meeting effectiveness—particularly from a meeting participant's perspective? At times, researchers define meeting effectiveness through the theoretical interests driving the research. Nixon and Littlepage (1992) conceptualized and directly measured meeting effectiveness as goal attainment and decision satisfaction. Other researchers examined meeting effectiveness indirectly, using specific conceptual lenses related to meeting processes and outcomes, such as group cohesion (e.g., Anson, Bostrom, & Wynne, 1995; Wong & Aiken, 2003), decision-making performance (e.g., Guzzo & Waters, 1982), virtual team performance (Kirkman et al., 2004), individual participation (e.g., Sonnentag, 2001), and outcome and process satisfaction (e.g., Bluedorn et al., 1999; Briggs, Reinig, & de Vreede, 2006; McComas et al., 2007; Mejias, 2007; Rogelberg et al., 2010). In

addition, researchers have measured individuals' general perceptions of meeting effectiveness as primarily a function of group performance. Wong and Aiken (2003) measured perceived meeting effectiveness with a 5-item scale: the effectiveness of group idea generation, idea evaluation, group members' skill utilization, the pace of task accomplishment, and overall effectiveness. Rogelberg et al. (2006) developed a six-item scale of perceived meeting effectiveness in terms of individual goal achievement, colleague goal achievement, department-section-unit goal achievement, information acquisition, opportunities for interaction/networking, and commitment elicitation.

In the practitioner literature, conceptualizations of meeting success are just as diverse. For example, Haynes (1998, p. 2) suggested that a meeting is effective "when it achieves its objectives in a minimum amount of time to the satisfaction of the participants." Tropman (1996) described effective meetings as those with good decision-making outcomes in which participants feel that time is well spent. Streibel (2007) viewed an effective meeting as one in which employees work together efficiently and with coordination to improve performance. This review highlights that, in both the practitioner and scholarly literature, the dimensions that comprise meeting effectiveness are not completely clear and agreement is elusive. The variety of conceptions and measures currently used may be an artifact of the way in which the prior literature was developed with a strong emphasis on managerial perspectives on meetings. We believe that a more robust understanding of the underpinnings of success is essential to enable managers to improve the experience of meeting participants.

3. A qualitative approach to meeting success

To better understand what makes a meeting successful in the eyes of participants, our study examined the open-ended responses of participants who described both successful and unsuccessful meeting experiences. In selecting a sample population for our study, we wanted individuals with significant experience attending work meetings of different types. Because of their tenure in the workforce and their experience, we determined that executive MBA students would be an ideal sample for our study's objective. We sent an email message to 32 executive MBA students of a large university in the Western U.S. and asked them to complete a survey. We achieved a 96.6% response rate; the

respondents (26 male, 5 female) averaged 37.6 years of age ($SD = 5.2$), 15.6 years of work experience ($SD = 5.6$), and 14.1 direct reports ($SD = 19.7$).

We asked participants to recall and describe both a recent successful and unsuccessful meeting. They described meetings that, on average, were held 7.3 days prior to completing the survey ($SD = 8.6$), and the mean number of attendees at these meetings was 6.8 ($SD = 3.7$). A majority (75%) of respondents described regular (or standing) meetings such as staff meetings, senior leadership meetings, and project update meetings and the remaining 25% described ad-hoc or one-time meetings, including cross-departmental coordination meetings, brainstorming sessions, and problem-solving meetings. We first asked respondents to recall and briefly describe a successful meeting and provide statements indicating what made the meeting successful via a sentence-completion exercise (i.e., "I describe this meeting as successful because . . ."). Next, we asked them to recall and describe an unsuccessful meeting and provide statements about what made it unsuccessful (i.e., "I describe this meeting as unsuccessful because . . ."). They provided 138 statements about successful meetings and 148 statements about unsuccessful meetings. The mean number of statements provided per respondent for each meeting was 5 ($SD = 2.5$). In our analysis of the data, we utilized a concept-mapping approach, which has been used previously for analyzing open-ended responses (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). This approach allowed us to combine both participant-determined categorizations and exploratory statistical analysis to produce a final cluster analysis solution (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix & Trochim, 2008).

We carried out our approach in four general phases. Phase one involved capturing meeting participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions about their meeting experiences, which we just described. During phase two, the respondents sorted their successful and unsuccessful statements into categories that were then used to create a dissimilarity matrix that reflected the conceptual relationships among statements for both successful and unsuccessful meetings. These dissimilarity matrices were used as an input to create a cluster analysis, resulting in categorization of the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful meetings. In phase three, we integrated similar successful and unsuccessful clusters to create an overall categorization of meeting success, identifying 8 categories of meeting success: (1) engagement, (2) preparation, (3) organization, (4) outcomes, (5) cooperation, (6) communication, (7) timing,

and (8) attendance. In the fourth phase of our empirical approach, we engaged in an inductive and iterative analysis to identify themes that cut across the 8 categories. From this analysis, our three themes of meeting success emerged (see Table 1):

1. Successful meetings reflect participants' own learning and development;
2. Successful meetings help participants coordinate performance and create linkages between meeting episodes—preparation and follow-through enable coordination between and across work meetings; and
3. Meetings are successful when they help develop common understanding and alignment among participants.

These three themes reveal a participant-centered view of work meeting success.

3.1. Participant learning and development

Our data suggest that an important aspect of participant-determined meeting success involves attendee learning and development, which incorporates two dimensions. The first dimension, for which we have considerable evidence, incorporates learning as an outcome. Items from our cluster analysis solution show how individuals use themselves as one focal point from which to evaluate the meeting. For example, participants describing a meeting as successful noted: "I learned a lot," "I enjoyed the time spent reviewing new concepts," "I improved my knowledge base," "It helped me grasp accounting problem sets better," and "The meeting provided an opportunity to set expectations and gather feedback." These items contain a consistent focus upon participants' own personal learning and development. Moreover, we also have evidence of participants using a focus on attendee learning and development when describing unsuccessful meetings. Items included: "I did not learn anything new," "Several of the topics I had wanted to discuss were not addressed," and "There is a lot of time spent on things that do not pertain to my responsibilities." Again, these responses show a focus on attendee learning and development or, more specifically, the lack thereof.

The second dimension in participants' learning and development incorporates learning as a process. We found considerable evidence showing that attendees evaluate meetings based on whether or

Table 1. Strength of evidence of emergent themes across categories

		Categories of Successful Meeting Criteria							
		Engagement	Preparation	Organization	Outcomes	Cooperation	Communication	Timing	Attendance
Emergent Themes	1. Participant Learning and Development	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	---
	2. Coordination of Performance	---	Strong	Strong	Medium	Strong	Strong	Medium	Medium
	3. Common Understanding & Alignment	Medium	Medium	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	---	---

not the meeting is characterized by processes that foster learning. When describing the agendas, focus, communication, and collaboration of unsuccessful meetings, we found evidence of this evaluative perspective. Respondents wrote things like: "There is a fear to try something new/different," "No collaboration—one person's opinion/view was expressed and no other opinions/ideas were discussed/considered," "No useful data," and "It is the same information shared each week." In describing a successful meeting, attendees wrote: "Input from all participants," "Additional ideas were voiced," "Ideas flowed between parties," "Members of the executive team are able to ask questions and provide direction to me and the marketing team," and "There is no fear of change." In each of these items, we see participants describing processes that either enable or inhibit participant learning. Learning and development, therefore, plays a key role in participants' recollections of successful work meetings. Table 2 includes items representative of this theme.

3.2. Coordinating performance

The second underlying theme we derived from participants' descriptions was the importance of successful meetings in helping to coordinate performance not only within the meeting but between meetings as well. This theme captured the interdependence between meeting episodes and describes the way attendees coordinate the execution of longer-term work. Here, work meetings appear to be viewed as momentary in nature and as smaller portions of a larger whole. The interdependent nature of meeting tasks requires attendees to depend on each other to coordinate task execution. In our data, coordinating performance was characterized in three different ways: interpersonal interdependence, meeting preparation, and task follow-through. Table 3 contains representative items of this theme.

Our data show that participants coordinate performance through the pursuit of codependent outcomes. This interdependence is apparent both in attendees' completion or execution of joint tasks and in the antecedents to that execution. When considering the completion of joint tasks, respondents made statements like, "We are all affected as to our outcome and decision," "We all had an interest in achieving this goal," and "Necessary decision makers were in the meeting." Each of these statements illustrates that meeting attendees were dependent upon one another during the meeting to act in a coordinated way to achieve desired outcomes. Conversely, when describing unsuccessful meetings, attendees also noted this

interpersonal interdependence; these statements refer less to the execution of joint tasks and more to the antecedents of their execution. One attendee noted the negative impact of not trusting other attendees: "No confidence in each other." Other attendees suggested this dimension of interdependence with these statements: "Participants hadn't met before so we were unaware of each other's strengths/weaknesses," "About half of the people did not prepare for the meeting so time was spent catching up," "Assignments for some members present had not been completed," and "Only about half of the people necessary to make a decision on how we moved forward were there." In each of these statements, the attendees highlight the codependency that exists among attendees and the coordination necessary to achieve meeting outcomes. When attendees act in accordance with this interdependence, they perceive meetings as successful. When this interdependence is lacking, they are not satisfied with their meeting experience.

Moving to the second dimension—meeting preparation—we identified statements describing the coordination that attendees engage in between preparation for meetings and the actual work that happens in the meetings themselves. Several attendees noted meetings as successful because "The participants were prepared with reporting information," "Everyone was prepared," and "Everyone came prepared and ready to work." In contrast, other attendees, when explaining why a meeting was unsuccessful, stated: "Assignments for some members present had not been completed," "Participants were unprepared for tasks being asked of the group," and "The agenda and reminder for the meeting was sent out the day of the meeting, not providing the proper notification so people can plan to attend or to come prepared." Each of these items shows how participants needed to coordinate their behavior and in-meeting tasks with their preparation, or what had already been accomplished prior to the current meeting. Therefore, for coordination to occur, the interdependence between meeting preparation and current meeting endeavors had to be taken into account. In another instance, the necessity for coordination was demonstrated when the negative emotions from a previous meeting were carried over to the current meeting. As one attendee noted, "Meeting participants are somewhat bitter because of the inequities in workload from past meetings, which prevents members from actively participating in the current meeting." Cumulatively, all of these items demonstrate how the premeeting preparation (or lack thereof) affected the efforts and tasks that attendees could coordinate in the current meeting.

Table 2. Items across categories demonstrating participant learning and development

		Categories of Successful Meeting Criteria						
		<i>Engagement</i>	<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Cooperation</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Timing</i>
Emergent Theme #1	<i>Participant Learning and Development</i>	<p>“There is an incredible lack of desire to tackle things or bring about change”</p> <p>“Some people don’t participate sufficiently”</p> <p>“Appears the task is not important to members”</p> <p>“Most of the staff were active participants”</p> <p>“Teammates have since volunteered shared responsibilities”</p>	<p>“The participants were prepared with reporting information”</p> <p>“Participants were unprepared for tasks being asked of the group”</p> <p>“Everyone came prepared and ready to work”</p> <p>“We had all of the information needed to review”</p> <p>“Unprepared”</p>	<p>“Common goals were not specified up front”</p> <p>“Meeting not focused”</p> <p>“Lack of specific focus with measurable progress”</p> <p>“It was the very first meeting with a broad definition”</p> <p>“Loose agenda”</p> <p>“Too much focus on the cons and not enough on the pros”</p> <p>“Leadership not giving the proper direction”</p> <p>“Leadership appears to be weak”</p>	<p>“I improved my knowledge base”</p> <p>“I enjoyed the time spent reviewing new concepts”</p> <p>“It helped me grasp accounting problem sets better”</p> <p>“I learned a lot”</p> <p>“New development might be done based on the feedback”</p> <p>“Attendees were brought up to speed on the new capabilities”</p>	<p>“Because I seemed to be very liked by my teammates”</p> <p>“I believe I might have a place in the gang”</p> <p>“We all like one another”</p> <p>“Respected teammates have been seen confiding and working with me”</p> <p>“I have since bonded with a lot of members of the team”</p> <p>“I seem to have earned a lot of respect”</p>	<p>“I’ve been asked opinions”</p> <p>“I broke the ice”</p> <p>“The meeting went 30 minutes over time; Usually this would not be a sign of success but on this day it was because *I* was the one who had to cut it short”</p> <p>“Tangents were productive; (I believe in letting the conversation drift off topic if it provides productive context)”</p> <p>“Too much banter”</p> <p>“Ideas flowed between parties”</p>	<p>“Meeting started and ended on time”</p> <p>“30 minutes of strong focus”</p> <p>“Not sufficient time is given to accomplish a task”</p> <p>“Duration – too long”</p> <p>“It wasted time”</p> <p>“It is the same information shared each week”</p> <p>“We had other things we could have been doing”</p>

Table 3. Sample items across categories demonstrating coordination of performance

		Categories of Successful Meeting Criteria						
		<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Cooperation</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Timing</i>	<i>Attendance</i>
Emergent Theme #2	<i>Coordination of Performance</i>	<p>“Advanced notice to prepare (about 1 week)”</p> <p>“The participants did not come prepared for the meeting”</p> <p>“About 1/2 of the people did not prepare for the meeting so time was spent catching up”</p> <p>“The overall group had prepared prior to the meeting”</p> <p>“I came unprepared, maybe a little too full of myself”</p>	<p>“Tasks were assigned and goals created”</p> <p>“Rules of engagement in place”</p> <p>“Clear goals were written on top of the whiteboard at the beginning of the meeting”</p> <p>“The objective was clearly stated and everyone had a vested interest”</p> <p>“There was an agenda and we stayed on task”</p> <p>“Assignments for some member’s present had not been completed”</p> <p>“He hadn’t done anything”</p> <p>“No follow up”</p>	<p>“The task was addressed”</p> <p>“There were specific actions”</p> <p>“Clear details about the market”</p> <p>“We all had an interest in achieving this goal”</p> <p>“Follow-on meeting scheduled”</p> <p>“We knew what we needed to do after the meeting”</p> <p>“A follow-up meeting was scheduled to meet with all partners”</p> <p>“Our team came away with deliverables for future meetings”</p>	<p>“The group members had the same level of concern for the project”</p> <p>“Both attendees were prepared and did advance preparation”</p> <p>“One person in the meeting is resistant to change”</p> <p>“Three of the five were more interested in protecting personal stakes than working to solve the problem”</p> <p>“Several lively discussions ensued on a couple of the issues, producing ideas to solve them from the group”</p>	<p>“The meeting provided an opportunity to set expectations and gather feedback”</p> <p>“Issues were discussed and resources allocated for those specific needs”</p> <p>“Decisions were made before the meeting”</p> <p>“People on the phone could not hear that well and kept speaking over others”</p> <p>“A major issue was presented, but without any background information for the board members to discuss it, causing it to be put on the next month’s agenda”</p> <p>“Participants hadn’t met before so we were unaware of each other’s strengths/weaknesses”</p>	<p>“The meeting stayed within the allotted time, and time was used effectively”</p> <p>“Everyone was respectful of the time constraints”</p> <p>“Not everyone arrived on time”</p> <p>“We started late”</p> <p>“Many came late and left early which gave the ‘not important’ feel to the meeting”</p> <p>“People arrive late, causing other members to either have to review items or prolong the meeting to catch everyone up”</p> <p>“Not enough time set aside, hurried”</p> <p>“The meeting was not at an optimal time”</p> <p>“Wrong time of day, people focusing on other things”</p>	<p>“The attendance was very good and all key participants in the most challenging issues were present”</p> <p>“All required attendees were present on time”</p> <p>“Everyone who needed to be there was there”</p> <p>“Necessary decision makers were in the meeting”</p> <p>“Only about half of the people necessary to make a decision on how we moved forward were there”</p> <p>“Several board members were not in attendance and so decisions can’t be made without a majority”</p> <p>“The agenda and reminder for the meeting was sent out the day of the meeting, not providing the proper notification so people can plan to attend or to come prepared”</p>

The last dimension of coordinating performance in work meetings is task follow-through between meetings. When considering the additional work attendees needed to complete after a meeting, they made statements like, "We knew what we needed to do after the meeting," and "Our team came away with deliverables for future meetings." These statements point out that following through on outcomes of a current meeting enabled coordination between current meetings and future meetings. Other attendees described negative cases that exhibit how coordination was minimized because of a lack of follow-through. For example, when commenting on why particular meetings had failed, attendees wrote: "No clear direction or next steps," and "No task or deliverable taken from the meeting." Moreover, another attendee implied this dimension when he described a meeting as unsuccessful: "A major issue was presented, but without any background information, causing it to be put on next months' agenda." Our data suggest that attendees construe the activities and progress achieved in future meetings as dependent on following through on the tasks of the present meeting. In other words, attendees coordinated what was or was not accomplished in the present meeting with the work they would yet pursue in future meetings.

In sum, interpersonal interdependence, meeting preparation, and task follow-through combine to comprise the second emergent theme that describes the meeting experience from a participant perspective. It is evident from this theme that rather than being isolated events, participants perceive work meetings not as individual episodes but as a series of episodes that must be coordinated and linked together.

3.3. Developing common understanding and alignment

The third and final underlying theme of work meetings participants described is developing common understanding and alignment. Our data demonstrate this aspect of participants' meeting experiences in three different dimensions: common knowledge, shared motivation, and joint action. First, across categories, participants described the presence or absence of common or aligned knowledge among attendees. One attendee's statement demonstrates this well as he described a meeting as successful simply because "there was understanding at [the] conclusion of [the] meeting." For most participants, this sense of common knowledge was tied to particular features of the meeting and, most often, to its purpose. One attendee wrote about the objectives of a meeting and

noted: "All parties were under [the] same understanding of objectives." Another considered a meeting a success as "all attendees confirmed they understood what was expected, and outstanding issues or concerns were able to be addressed." In other instances, participants noted the absence of common knowledge about the goals of a meeting. Attendees considered meetings unsuccessful when "there was a lack of [a] common objective." While it is not clear from our data how attendees came to conclude that a common knowledge existed, it is apparent that attendees perceived that the presence or absence of it contributes to perceptions of overall meeting success.

The second dimension is a shared motivation among attendees. One meeting attendee wrote: "Everyone was motivated to make some big changes." Other attendees shared similar sentiments about successful meetings: "Shared goal of giving the best care possible," and "We believe we can make a difference." In each of these statements, attendees perceived an inclusive motivation between all meeting participants. In contrast, attendees describing unsuccessful meetings noted just the opposite dynamic: "Common goals were not specified up front," and "There is no clear unified goal." In these cases, attendees' motivations are different or in conflict. Other attendees made similar statements: "Individual interests are getting in the way," "Pride in the way," and "Clear that people cared about their department area and a common tie would have been much better." In this way, attendees seemed to identify a shared motivation among their coparticipants as a contributor to a meeting's overall success or lack thereof.

The third dimension of common understanding and alignment identified in our data is joint action. Across multiple statements, attendees used inclusive language to underscore that all meeting participants jointly engaged in the performance of some action or task. When describing the use of agendas, attendees stated: "There was an agenda and we stayed on task," and "We accomplished our agenda." Attendees also illustrated this dimension when considering the outcomes of meetings. When reflecting about a particularly successful meeting, one respondent wrote: "We successfully completed the SWOT analysis." Other attendees considered a meeting a success because, as they wrote: "We are opening a new market," and "At the end of the meeting we had accomplished our task." Each of these statements illustrates that participants worked collectively in the performance and accomplishment of meeting actions and tasks. Our data also includes descriptions of meetings in which joint action was not achieved and thus participants

negatively perceived their meeting experience. Attendees noted that they often had to act independently from others. One attendee wrote: “I ended up having to implement a process without the buy-in of another department manager,” while another stated: “The other party was defensive and unwilling to approach the issue pragmatically.” These, as well as other statements we received, suggest that a lack of joint action or alignment between attendees was negatively perceived by meeting participants. Joint action thus comprises the third and final dimension of common understanding that participants actively seek in meetings.

Common understanding in work meetings—composed of common knowledge, shared motivation, and joint action—shows that participants were focused on developing a sense of ‘we-ness’ with other attendees. From a participant perspective, then, a critical aspect of the success of a meeting experience is whether or not common understanding and alignment are created among attendees. Furthermore, these three dimensions show that attendees actively sought out this common understanding. Table 4 contains items that comprise this theme.

4. A participant view of meeting success

Our study elaborates the dimensions of meeting success by providing a participant perspective. Specifically, we found that participants’ recollections of meeting success are based on (1) participant learning and development, (2) the coordination of performance, and (3) common understanding and alignment. By inductively exploring the subjective experiences of individuals, our research makes some important theoretical contributions and is positioned to provide managers with additional tools to help run successful meetings.

We contribute to the recent literature on work meetings that focuses on the factors that drive participants’ evaluations of meeting satisfaction (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). We know from previous research that when participants engage in surface acting, their evaluations of meetings are negatively affected, and, in turn, they are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion (Shanock et al., 2013). In addition, previous research demonstrated that meeting participants’ evaluations of meeting satisfaction influence their feelings of empowerment in their work (Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Sands, 2016). Our work extends this line of research by introducing participant learning and development as important elements of participants’ evaluations of meetings.

Participants recall meetings as successful based on whether or not the meeting contributes to their own learning and development. Learning was not only important to participants as an outcome, but the factors that enabled or inhibited participant learning also contributed to participants’ perspectives. Attendees recalled meetings as successful when they were characterized by a learning environment of psychological safety, input from all stakeholders, and leadership that promoted participant learning. On the other hand, participants recalled meetings as unsuccessful when they were characterized by fear, a lack of necessary data, and poor organization, all of which hinder participant learning.

Another way that our work extends previous research on meetings is by introducing the idea of meeting interdependence. Previous research assumed that meetings are largely isolated, independent events (Schwartzman, 1989). Our research pivots from this view of meetings as independent events toward a view of meetings as interdependent episodes. Our findings suggest that, for participants, meetings are not isolated from each other but they are connected and interdependent like links in a chain; what happened in a previous meeting can wield influence in both present and future meetings. Interdependence within teams has been examined thoroughly (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Mitchell & Silver, 1990; Van Der Vegt, Van De Vliert, & Oosterhof, 2003). However, to date, interdependence between meeting episodes has not been sufficiently explored.

Our findings also have implications for the role of purpose in meetings from a manager’s perspective. Previous research has examined the different purposes meetings can serve (Allen, Beck, Scott, & Rogelberg, 2014). While this work has found the purpose of a meeting to be an important characteristic, much of this work has overlooked the role meetings can play in connecting participants to the overall purpose of the group or organization. In this way, meetings can generate meaning for individuals, groups, and entire organizations. Furthermore, our work also suggests that two attendees of the same meeting may see the purpose of the meeting quite differently. While a leader of a meeting may see the purpose of the meeting as disseminating information, a participant of the same meeting may see the purpose as an opportunity to improve morale among coworkers and to interact with colleagues they may not see frequently.

In sum, our findings contribute to the literature on successful work meetings by highlighting the importance of participant learning and development, the interdependence between meeting

Table 4. Sample items across categories demonstrating common understanding & alignment

		Categories of Successful Meeting Criteria					
		<i>Engagement</i>	<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Cooperation</i>	<i>Communication</i>
Emergent Theme #3	<i>Common Understanding and Alignment</i>	“We believe we can make a difference” “All of the participants are driven people who want to succeed” “We are all passionate about what we do” “Positive energy that tied all members together around common goals” “High energy, specific updates, and a collective understanding about what, why, and who”	“Had too many attendees” “Three of the five of us were conferencing. This was a problem that demanded face-to-face interaction.” “We didn’t have a place to meet, so we met in a side office” “The seating of the people” “There was little preparation”	“Attendees were not afraid of change” “Everyone was motivated to make some big changes” “All parties were under same understanding of objectives” “Shared goal of giving the best care possible” “Unclear roles”	“We were able to communicate effectively and determine a course of action” “At the end of the meeting, we had accomplished our task” “We accomplished our agenda” “We successfully completed the SWOT analysis which gained approval from the Chair of our department”	“Everyone that attended was on the same page for what needed to be accomplished, there was an opportunity to brainstorm best ideas and complete final preparation checklist” “There was understanding at the conclusion of the meeting” “We are all affected as to our outcome/ decision”	“Everyone seemed to show respect by listening attentively when others took part” “Everyone was included in the process” “Everyone given an opportunity to speak” “Lack of clear communication” “Miscommunication”

episodes, and the unity and alignment that many meeting attendees seem to be seeking. However, this research not only extends theoretical understanding of work meetings, but it also has important managerial implications.

4.1. Leading meetings successfully

As most managers are already aware, some employee's persistently denigrate and sometimes have outright contempt for meetings—as they often view work meetings as ineffective and a waste of time. However, this state of affairs around work meetings is both unnecessary and avoidable. Our research suggests three practical suggestions for leaders to effectively plan, organize, and run meetings.

4.1.1. Foster participant learning and development

Leaders can enhance the experience of participants by focusing more intently on attendees' learning and development. Leaders should establish and identify key learning outcomes that participants will acquire from their participation in a meeting. These outcomes could even be specified at the beginning and conclusion of the meeting. And if participant learning is not likely to occur in a meeting, this can suggest a redesign of the meeting or a change in who should be required to attend. By viewing the planning and implementation of meetings through the lens of participant learning and development, leaders will be able to make their meetings more effective—or, at least, more valued by participants.

4.1.2. Encourage coordination of performance

Leaders can increase the effectiveness of their meetings by linking previous and future meeting episodes to the current meeting that participants are attending. For example, in creating agendas, leaders should consider highlighting the outcomes of the previous meeting and verbally link the previous meeting to the work of the current meeting. Furthermore, leaders can also identify key aspects of the current meeting that will lead to greater elaboration or time spent in future meetings. In this way, employees will see a greater sense of continuity and purpose in their meeting participation, as well as feeling a sense of progression in their meeting participation rather than feeling that their participation is unnecessary or a waste of time.

4.1.3. Facilitate common understanding

Our research suggests that managers should use meetings as a tool to facilitate a common

understanding between the daily work that employees are engaged in and the overall purposes of their organization. Very often, the work performed in organizations occurs in silos. In this context, employees do not have a broad understanding of how their daily work contributes to the bigger picture. Consequently, the meaning employees derive from their work suffers. Leaders should use meetings as a bridge to help employees connect the work they do on a daily basis or in a given project to the overall strategic objectives and purposes of their organization. Both verbally (e.g., as they facilitate and run meetings) and in writing (e.g., meeting minutes), leaders should address how the work of the meeting connects to the organization's mission and how it can help attendees connect with each other. By following these recommendations, managers can help make their meetings more meaningful and valuable for those who attend.

4.2. Study limitations

As with any research, our work is not without limitations. First, to develop a theory about work meetings from a participant perspective, we drew upon participants' retrospective accounts of their meeting experiences. In recalling their past meeting experiences, participants may have been biased in the ways that they remembered particular meetings. For example, it may be that participants' recollections are biased toward preserving their own self-image, and/or accentuating their own contributions; or it may be that participants simply have a faulty memory and cannot accurately recall previous meeting experiences. We tried to account for this limitation by asking respondents to recall recent meetings, both successful and unsuccessful ones. However, the potential bias in participants' retrospective accounts still remains.

Another limitation of our research is that we could not capture how meeting load—or the number of meetings a participant attends—might affect their recollection of meeting experiences. We know from previous research that the number of meetings an individual attends influences their perceptions of meetings (Yoerger, Crowe, & Allen, 2015). It may be that respondents from our sample were influenced in their evaluations by their individual meeting load.

Lastly, our sample drew upon participants only from the U.S. Our work, therefore, might not generalize to participants from different cultures. For example, one can imagine that attendees from a collectivistic culture might evaluate the collaboration of a meeting differently than attendees from more individualistic cultures. We know very little

about how culture affects participants' views of meeting experiences—an area ripe for future research.

4.3. A different perspective on meeting success

As meetings have taken on greater importance in people's work lives, questions about their nature and design have become increasingly relevant. However, as we noted at the beginning of this article, extant conceptions of work meeting success are primarily taken from the viewpoint of those running and planning meetings at the expense of a participant perspective. This trend has limited our ability to develop systematic approaches to improve understanding of how participants perceive work meeting success. In the research presented here, we used meeting participants' own perspectives on meeting success and failure to identify three criteria that drive participants' evaluations. Participants determine meeting success based on their personal learning and development, the coordination of performance, and the development of a common understanding and alignment. This view of meeting success provides a more complete and robust conceptualization of meetings and can help managers more effectively design and implement meetings in the workplace.

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