

# The culture of meetings



(Fotos: Klaus Fußnegger)

**Meetings are an important tool for everyday work in a company**

**Imagine you could delete all meetings and conferences from your calendar over night...**

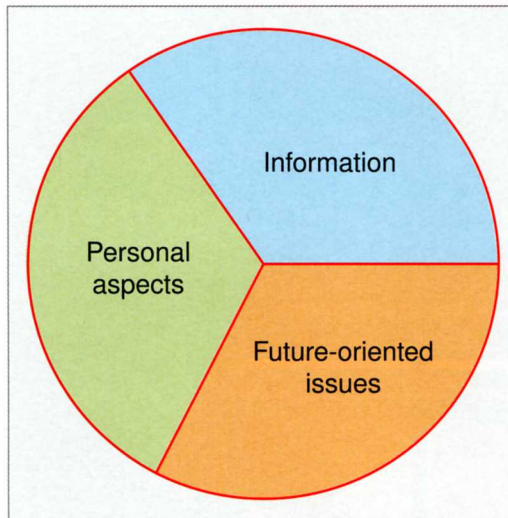
How much time would you gain for other activities? What could you finally deal with that you've had to postpone for months? Imagine nothing plays on your nerves, you don't have to be in two places at the same time and you don't have to patiently listen to speakers digressing or constantly repeating themselves? Imagine invitees need not be coordinated – in other words, no need to find a green bar in the Lotus Notes calendar, no need to resort to stressful fringe times, and meeting rooms are, amazingly, free.

Even if these thoughts are not very realistic, they do point out areas that could be improved. It's not without reason that meetings are considered "a showcase of corporate culture". That's why it wouldn't do any harm to take a critical look at our "meetings culture" now and again.

We are all aware of the fact that meetings are a very important framework to bring together and extend our employees' knowledge and experiences. In our complex and specialized working world it is meetings that make ever larger projects possible. Like in a large-scale network, meetings are the

nodal points where information is brought together. Job sequences are coordinated, and interdepartmental cooperation sometimes leads to completely new solutions.

In addition to the objective necessity of meetings, we frequently forget that meetings also have an important social function. Due to the advantages of online connections in modern working environments, dialog and personal contacts will be reduced if they are not deliberately nurtured. It cannot be denied that meetings provide a setting for important social exchange. That might not be the main reason for a meeting, but a



**Depending on the type of meeting these aspects should be weighted**

professional meetings culture that is aimed at producing results will also take this aspect into consideration.

At Blum we have tried to actively promote coordination sessions in platforms, working groups and project teams for many years. Although the few "rules" we have are known to participants, they should be checked now and again in terms of relevance, responsibilities and obligations.

**Meetings must be structured**

If a meeting is well organized, participants can concentrate on the subject at hand. All participants should know what kind of meeting to expect. A purely informative event is very different from a debate on future strategies. Are the topics of a more personal nature or do they deal with cooperation in general? All these factors influence the course of a meeting.

Normally, the various aspects are

intermingled, which makes it difficult to plan meetings. It is only human to concentrate on familiar, i.e. uncritical matters when dealing with unpleasant issues. As a result, participants frequently get bogged down in detail. Great improvements can be made by making good preparations and by concentrating on supplementary information during the meeting. This gives participants more time for important issues.

Small changes to the agenda can be a great help. If personal concerns are dealt with at the start of the meeting, we have experienced the following two surprising things:

Participants play an active role and are with it from the start. Questions such as "Which aspects are important to me in this project?" or "Which aspects annoy me or impede me and my work?" actively address participants' expectations and quickly show how to proceed.

In addition, the rest of the meeting will be far more efficient and participants will be full of energy right to the end. What's more, we have seen that such meetings take less long.

**Roles and tasks of participants**

Strictly speaking, no one should participate in a meeting if they don't know what their contribution should be and what is expected of

them. That means every participant should be fully aware of his role and responsibility. In keeping with the motto: "the right people, the right topic", the meeting should bring together the people who can make both a professional and personal contribution. At Blum, this has little to do with status and hierarchy. It would be the wrong attitude to say "it wouldn't do any harm to take part".

In contrast to widespread opinion and practice, the responsibility for various tasks can be divided among participants during a meeting. The person who has convened the meeting should say which topics have priority. The tasks that participants can assume are, for example: ensuring that everyone keeps to the time schedule, or recording decisions that have been made, decisions that are being worked on and ones that are still open.

When discussing future-oriented issues of strategic importance, a participant could deliberately play the role of the devil's advocate. This frequently guarantees the quality of the brainstorming process. The devil's advocate could ask the following questions: "Are we fooling ourselves?" or "What have we failed to take into account?"

Last but not least, every meeting should finish off with a clear statement of who is to inform whom of what.

**Conclusions**

Taking part in the right meetings is important, for a successful company depends on dialog between employees. Neverthe-



**A focused meeting organisation takes into consideration the different tasks and roles**

less, it is necessary to ask ourselves the following questions from time to time: "Which meetings do we need?" and "Which role do I play in the meeting" to

ensure that the right people discuss the right things. The objective is to create a dynamic, target-oriented mee-

tings culture in the spirit of "sit less – move more ..." Let's start by trying out these tips!



**Inviting employees depending on the topic of the meeting**