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MINDFUL meetings

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Performance

Most managers don't like meetings. They say they are boring, go on too long and often end without important decisions being made.

However, this needn't be the case. We recently carried out a study of meetings which found that they can actually be one of the most powerful tools managers have.

There is a catch though - it relies on people getting into a frame of mind that closely resembles the state of mindfulness so they can see things clearly and therefore make better decisions.

Mindfulness techniques enable people to be aware of the present moment without reacting too quickly to information. This allows new perspectives and innovative ways of doing things to be explored before making a decision.

At its core, mindfulness is 'engaged awareness'. Our research found that when the chair of a meeting leads everyone into a 'mindful space', people engage in a more effective way. Everyone's minds may still be busy but in an effective meeting, their attention is focused on specific priorities rather than on everything inside their head. By the chair taking responsibility for structuring and leading the meeting, everyone has the energy needed to focus and be aware of all that is going on throughout the meeting, observing the present moment in a non-judgmental and purposeful way.

Our study identified ten steps that a chairperson should follow to increase the likelihood of everyone in their meeting entering a 'mindful space' and engaging in an effective way.

1. Encourage openness

Those at the meeting need to feel they can speak openly without worrying about the repercussions of what

they say. A safe environment can be established by banning personal criticism and encouraging people to speak up.

2. Establish trust

An open atmosphere will also evolve if everyone at the meeting knows and trusts each other, as individuals will then share information and views more freely. This would not be the case if someone turns up at the meeting who has not been invited or is not expected to be there, which is why it is important to ask them to leave if that happens.

3. Ensure physical comfort

Research shows that all thoughts and emotions arise first as physical sensations which are interpreted by people as feelings which in turn influence their thoughts and decisions. It is therefore critical that those present are physically comfortable.

4. Ensure diversity of views

Inadequate diversity creates the danger of 'groupthink' - the belief among the group who are meeting that they and their decisions are invincible. To avoid this, ensure that those attending the meeting cover a range of backgrounds, perspectives and functions.

5. Allow expression of emotions

Emotions are an integral part of people's decision making, and mindfulness cannot emerge when emotions are explicitly or implicitly banned. It must be agreed upfront that reasonable 'venting' is okay and emotions are allowed.

6. Meet face-to-face

Personal contact is a powerful anchor which fosters commitment and a sense of ownership. Try to avoid teleconferencing and encourage people to speak directly to each other in person.

7. Respect people's limited attention span

Attention is a key resource for mindful decision making and it is limited. People are more likely to stay focused and fully engaged in meetings when they are kept brief and varied in format, with breaks and refreshments when needed.

8. Maintain personal focus

As the chairperson, you are the focus of everyone else's attention. What you say or do has an enormous impact on the attention and mindfulness of those around you. Therefore, you need to maintain personal presence, stay for the full length of the meeting and clarify the structure of the meeting when needed.

9. Allow new ideas and priorities to emerge

Mindfulness thrives on the present moment. Sticking rigidly to how the company has viewed business issues in the past takes attention away from what emerges 'there and then' in the meeting. You must stay involved in discussions as they unfold and avoid resisting the emergence of new priorities. When focused on what is required 'right here, right now', the relevant information is prompted and incorporated and the most effective and actionable decisions are made.

10. Shape the structure of the meeting

It is important for the person leading the meeting to shape the structure and purpose of the meeting as it unfolds; and stay alert throughout the meeting to keep it on track. This enables everyone else to focus on the present moment.

Although these ten points may seem obvious, you would be surprised at how few meeting chairs actually take them into account. Incorporating even a few of these suggestions will lead to more effective meetings. However, when implemented as a complete set, these actions will help everyone at the meeting to enter the 'mindful space' where old habits give way to new and effective decisions being made. **MF**