

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”

(Western Union internal memo, 1876)

I know that we all have 20:20 vision in hindsight but the content of that internal memorandum, presumably from someone high up the corporate ladder in Western Union at that time, is on a par with the comment attributed to the IBM Chief Executive who apparently suggested that they did not see a need for the mass production of computers because it was felt there was a need for only about half a dozen or so. I guess we all make mistakes but how times, through the pursuit of technology, change! And, I wonder how those same gentlemen would react and what they might say about the rapid rise in the use of the Internet and the plethora of unwanted, mostly electronic, information that is beginning to block our systems to the point that people, individuals, are becoming increasingly overloaded and stressed? Nonetheless, I tend to subscribe to Arthur C Clarke’s observation in 1970 that,

“A hundred years ago the electric telegraph made possible, even inevitable, the United States of America. The communication satellite will make equally inevitable a United Nations of Earth; let us hope that the transition period will not be equally bloody.”

(Arthur C Clarke (1915 -), English astrophysicist and science fiction author, (1970)

One of the greatest sources of frustration for all workers is the amount of time and effort that it takes to not only travel to and from their place of work but the increasingly crowded and inefficient systems available for such purposes. Quite apart from the fact that many local and national public transport systems have degenerated rather than improved more and more companies are locating, or re-locating, themselves either in major towns and cities or they are joining in business park areas to form business clusters. In the latter case it tends to lead to an increase in road traffic as people commute across, through or round towns or cities and causes bottlenecks at least twice a day. In the former case it has led to an increase in rail passengers spending longer and longer hours getting to and from work and this has an impact on efficiency, productivity and competitiveness.

I digress but it is relevant. The last two decades of the 20th century saw a very rapid growth in all things electronic including desktop and laptop computers, palmtops and personal organizers and telecommunication connectivity to the internet through Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and onto any organization with an electronic website. But, facsimile machines still churn out paper and telephone systems still ring regularly. In addition, there has been enormous growth in the use of electronic mail (e-mail) systems and some use of electronic or video conferencing and the introduction of electronic banking and facilities to purchase direct electronically from company websites.

The use of mobile telephones, including the latest systems using Wireless Application Protocols (WAP) to the Internet, has exploded to the extent that they have almost achieved a nuisance value to those travelling on public transport systems that is local bus and tramway networks, tube and rail services. And, in order to cater for the ‘discerning’ business traveler some airlines are now offering the use of mobile phones and laptops in the air, so you can happily ‘ping’ your way across the pond, Atlantic or Pacific and irritate other travelling passengers around the globe.

Despite the fact that we all, mostly, complain about balancing our life-to-work ratio and tend to be vociferous about never having enough time for partners, children, family and friends we all feverishly scurry from one means of electronic communications to another and become quite frustrated when one system or another does not work when we want it to. Indeed, human beings have never been so electronically connectable and contactable and yet we still feel the urge to remain in contact.

What electronic systems, databases and connections are trying to do is to save time, which is time travelling, time in meetings and discussions, time in searching for products and time in purchasing products or services. Perhaps we have all become far too incredibly busy, perhaps even important, and so the less we actually interact and communicate with one another; or is it that instead of dealing face-to-face with other human beings we now rely on electronic systems to communicate because people cannot read our faces and real thoughts? That is a sad indictment of progress.

But, has all this electronic communication made us more effective, productive competitive and efficient or, as the saying goes, work has expanded to fill the time available? The answer to the first part of the question must be an emphatic no because many companies and organizations have tended to become increasingly bureaucratic and have formed committees to report to committees and so on 'ad infinitum' up to the board who only appear to want statistics and advice to enable them to determine new sets of targets or change procedures. It seems the more complex the means and methods of communication the less we appear able to understand one another.

I believe that what many people, especially those at the higher levels of organizations is that management, of any kind, now and in the foreseeable future is about human beings and human interaction and without that interaction structures will, eventually, break down. The danger is, perhaps, with total electronic interaction, production, editing, printing and distribution of information that people will, gradually, lose the ability to communicate with one another and that will lead, inexorably, to an increasing lack of understanding.

However, sanity almost came to the world of work when, in the early 1990's, it was suggested that we would all have more time for leisure because we would all be connected to work at home through the latest electronic gizmos. The need to commute to and from the office would disappear and this was one way that people would have more personal and quality time with their family. Indeed, through all the latest channels of communication, not just telephone but mobile phones, WAP phones, facsimile machines, satellite video equipment and the Internet, would there be any need to travel to work or attend meetings. Indeed there would be no need for all those business trips, no need for increased levels of frustration at airports, brought on by fog-bound or snow-bound limitations, and our health would improve because stress would decrease as would pressure on our planet from dangerous emissions from all forms of transport.

But has that really happened and are we all, companies and individuals, leaner, meaner, fitter and more effective and efficient and have our companies all become more productive and competitive through better, or even best, business practice? Or is it the fact that downsizing, delaying and re-engineering, management programmes associated with reducing overheads, directly employed personnel and the introduction of new technology, has reduced the head count such that people's workloads are still increasing?

The answer to the first question is, again, an emphatic no because they have tended to become more bureaucratic; and the answer to the second question is yes because operating with the minimum number of employees leaves no room to deal with rapidly changing circumstances and has increased pressure on those remaining in companies.

Indeed, and even despite the plethora of electronic 'gizmos' to support the exchange of information, much 'real' business, and very importantly the management of people, is and should be conducted through face-to-face meetings. The notion that you can hire, promote and even fire people through electronic mail message systems must be anathema to any good manager who employs best business practice and I suspect it is only 'cowboy' organizations that resort to such devious and disgraceful methods of man-management.

And, when decision-making involves large sums of money it is even more important to sit across from, next to or around a table with other human beings to conduct business because the process of negotiation is based on trust and you cannot see people's eyes on a video screen.

"Electric communication will never be a substitute for the face of someone who with their soul encourages another person to be brave and true."

(Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), English novelist)

The reason is, I suspect, that at the end of the day we all, from the top of a company to the bottom, prefer to deal with another human being when it comes to making arrangements, agreeing on the quality, quantity and negotiating the price of products or services and making final decisions. As Peter F Drucker suggested,

"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."

(Peter F Drucker (1909 – 2005), Austrian-born US management thinker and writer)

That is because human communication is not just verbal, indeed it is mostly non-verbal and covers facial expressions, hand signals and gestures, eye-to-eye contact and the way in which language is used to convey an opinion, a question or a response. Even silence, in some parts of the global economy, is important during the negotiating process, something that cannot be conveyed electronically. In other words the way that we communicate with one another is an important indicator of how we conduct ourselves; it is why face-to-face discussions are more important and more productive than any other means of electronic communications and that is why meetings are still necessary to reach genuine discussion and a degree of consensus.

It would be amusing if it was not sad but some companies have resorted to banning the use of e-mails, on 1 or 2 days a week, in an effort to encourage face-to-face discussions among their staff and with customers. And yet others, mainly in the IT, Public Relations and Marketing areas, are openly encouraging staff to deliberately talk to one another rather than use electronic methods of communication. Is this a fault of our education systems from which some leave unable to read, write and carry out a conversation in their own language without grunting? Since when have human beings needed to be told to actively talk to another human being? As Homer Simpson might say 'Doh'!

Nonetheless, meetings are generally unpopular because:

- They can be inconvenient especially if arranged at short notice or if there is no previously distributed agenda. If this happens regularly such gatherings tend to lose any importance and deteriorate in perceived value.
- They can, as the management guru Peter Drucker pointed out, be indicative of an inefficient organization, poor communications and a poor management structure. This is particularly applicable when a meeting goes on too long and too few people dominate the discussion such that others feel 'left out'.
- They can run on too long and in so doing degenerate into repetitious discussion leading to disagreement and perhaps even argument. This point re-enforces the importance of a Chairman retaining control over meetings and ensuring that attendees stick to the items being discussed.
- People sometimes feel that their time has been wasted and they could have been employed more effectively, perhaps, to their own satisfaction. That is why participation is paramount.
- As a consequent to the above, if those same people do not feel part of the discussions or if they do not contribute, to their own or the forum's satisfaction, they will leave convinced that their time was wasted. This can lead to resentment and probably to future non-attendance. That is why all meetings must be participatory events and attendees should be encouraged to comment if they have something relevant to say.
- People are not in their normal work position and therefore are not available to others, internally or externally, to deal with questions or queries relating to the business of the organization. This can increase frustration especially when answers are required. Without back-up support or an alternative source of information this could lead to lost business.

Conversely, meetings are considered to be useful because:

- They encourage communication which I believe is of paramount importance to any organization, no matter the size and the level of discussion. Even the lowliest voice is important because they may have something important to say or reveal.
- They allow for the free exchange, within limitations, of ideas and information and in so doing may raise one or more points or items/issues that may have been overlooked.
- They help to break down barriers between people in the same section or group and from different companies or organizations. Interaction, when discussing areas of consequence or contention, is paramount in resolving issues and the best way of avoiding mis-understanding leading to argument.
- Scheduled events also help to focus thought on major upcoming issues or major planning milestones in project management work.
- They encourage collective decision-making rather than autocracy. The Japanese are seen as good examples of worker participation and active involvement in producing ideas and they have the most effective and efficient manufacturing organizations. Nonetheless, whilst decision-making appears to be shared ultimate decisions are taken by the most senior management.
- In a 'start-up' situation they are the best means of defining the way ahead; they encourage teamwork and the concept of all of one company; and, they assist with the process of growth.

- They allow for the dissemination of results, successes and information and help to clarify possible courses of action; allow for areas of responsibility to be refined; and, can help to define accountability.
- The production of minutes, provided they are given a wide distribution, encourages others to comment and add their ten-pennyworth to future discussions, perhaps even attendance.
- And, provided that senior members do not manipulate discussions they encourage involvement and participation in the decision-making process.

So, the next time you are invited to 'justify' travel expenditure for yourself or a member of your staff, to attend a meeting with a customer, another organization, an exhibition or even a series of presentations in another part of the country or even abroad, think about the circumstances or the reasons for the meeting. Think about the wider issues and not just the cost or the fact that someone may be away from their desk for 3, 5 or even 7 days but whether there is an element of 'goodwill' associated with attendance and think about the following questions.

- What are the objectives of the exercise and what are you hoping to achieve?
- How important is the meeting and what is the value of your or your employees' presence and what might be the likely return on investment?
- Will you or your company lose business by not being there?
- Is the company likely to fail to respond to legislation or take necessary action by not having a presence at and taking part in the discussions or negotiations?
- Could information gleaned at the meeting, conference or seminar be important to making changes or improvements to procedures and processes?
- Will the company's absence, yours or your staff, be noted and might that raise additional questions?

If non-attendance is being dictated simply as a means of reducing costs and saving money then it might be better to say so rather than hedge around the issue. And, of course there is a morale issue. Is the conference, the seminar or the meeting something that your staff or members of the company have always attended and will a refusal to invest in their continued attendance have any kind of 'knock-on' effect on their future performance?

Do not make the fundamental mistake of not approving expenditure on such an event simply because in your mind it is not value for money. It is all about balancing time, effort and cost and we are back to the business equation yet again of trying to ensure that expenditure, manpower as well as financial costs, is less than income or agreed budget level whilst maintaining close contact and communication with our customers and suppliers.

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