

Meaningful meetings: how can meetings be made better?

Geoff Mulgan

Introduction

Many of us spend much of our time in meetings and at conferences. But too often these feel like a waste of time, or fail to make the most of the knowledge and experience of the people present.

Meetings have changed - with much more use of online tools, and a growing range of different meeting formats. But our sense is that meetings could be much better run and achieve better results.

This paper¹ tries to help. It:

- summarises some of what's known about how meetings work well or badly;
- makes recommendations about how to make meetings better; and
- showcases some interesting recent innovations.

It forms part of a larger research programme at Nesta on [collective intelligence](#) which is investigating how groups and organisations can make the most of their brains, and of the technologies they use.²

We hope the paper will be helpful to anyone designing or running meetings of any kind, and that readers will contribute good examples, ideas and evidence which can be added into future versions.

Old formats and new tools

Most of the formats used for meetings are very old:

- The board or committee, usually made up of between 5 and 20 people – which remains the supreme decision-making body in most organisations, from General Electric to the Politburo, Greenpeace to Google (with 12 sometimes treated as the ideal number).
- The parliament and assembly, usually made up of a few hundred individuals, representing a population.
- The committee or workplace meeting, with anything from 5-20 people trying to make decisions or coordinate actions.
- The conference and seminar, with anything from a few dozen to a few thousand participants, sometimes sharing knowledge and sometimes seeking to agree a treaty.

We depend greatly on these old forms of face-to-face deliberation and sharing, and the advance of technologies for communication across space and time has done relatively little to displace them.

There are also many innovative variants:

- Boardrooms like the one at Procter and Gamble which is surrounded by screens with data, and where the entire global leadership team meets weekly (physically and virtually) to review and click down on data on sales, margins, customer preferences &c.
- Cabinet rooms like the one used by the Estonian government, using screens instead of paper.
- Companies (like Yahoo) setting 10 or 15 minutes as the default for meetings.
- Meetings held standing up.
- Strategic use of silence, eg. Amazon requiring six page memos prepared before any meeting, to be read in 30 minutes of silence before a discussion.
- Online tools ranging from MOOCs, and online jams often involving many thousands of people.
- Smaller webinars and hangouts, and meeting tools like Slack which allow teams to meet and work in a single online location.
- Unconferences, Open Space, World Cafes, Flipped Conferences and other tools for democratising larger gatherings.
- Workplace meetings that deliberately avoid hierarchy and fixed roles (like Buurtzorg in the Netherlands).

Many of these have been designed to overturn the stiff formality of the traditional meeting. Later on we look at how these work, and address their strengths and weaknesses.

Why so many meetings?

A recent study found that on average 15 per cent of an organisation's collective time was spent in meetings, with senior executives spending two days a week in them with three or more co-workers.³ Another found 49 per cent of UK workers spend time in unproductive and inefficient meetings every week.⁴

This spread and growth of meetings can be seen as a horrible creep of unproductive time. But it may be better understood as a very logical and human response to the growing complexity and subtlety of today's decision-making needs. When power relationships are ambiguous, problems are complex, and the environment within which decisions are being made is itself changing rapidly, participants benefit from regularly coming together to realign their goals, interests and attitudes.⁵ This happens most easily through conversation, and is harder when decision-makers can't see each others' social cues. This is why misunderstandings are more common over email than phone, and over the phone than with video messaging and so on. Even the most banal procedural meetings help participants to gauge one another's interests, attitudes and relationships. That helps them negotiate more easily and develop a shared intelligence and culture. A higher proportion of activities also now involve many organisations - working in formal partnerships, alliances, supply chains, networks and joint ventures. These require meetings (as well as a mushrooming quantity of emails, conversations &c) to coordinate their actions - only a small proportion of issues can be handled through formal contracts.

HOW TO EVOLVE BETTER MEETINGS

Linking the meeting formats and purposes

To the man with a hammer every problem looks like a nail, and in the same spirit most organisations get stuck into habits, using the same meeting formats regardless of what they're trying to achieve. But there are usually many other options worth considering. Obvious starting points for anyone designing a meeting include clarity:

- On its purpose, and whether it's achievable (which, as we show later, will depend on its breadth, the time available, the nature of the participants).
- On who needs to be there to bring the necessary knowledge, experience, power and resources or imagination.
- On time and place - how to attract the right people.

Then there are basic choices to be made about the fit between meeting formats and purposes. The forms of meetings should reflect their purposes – are they aiming to make fast decisions or is there time for slow deliberation? Are they for sharing knowledge? Or are they for generating new options?

- If the goal of the meeting is to generate options and promote creativity its structure needs to allow for imagination, deviation and combination, with plenty of stimulation, as well time and space to explore different ideas. Fortunately there are many well-established frameworks for making meetings more creative.
- If the goal is to make quick decisions then the structure needs to allow key facts, issues and options to be aired fast. There needs to be scope for intensive discussion, and interrogation, and strong facilitation to bring the group to a decision and keep things. It's usually vital to have someone in the room with a strong sense of how the decision will work in practice (this is surprisingly rare in big governments and businesses). It may also be important to ensure that the whole group is willing to support the decision, even if they don't agree with it (and all meetings involve some role for emotions and commitment as well as reasoning).⁶
- If the goal is to spread knowledge there are even more options, ranging from using online videos, monologues and papers to debates and discussion. There is a well-established science of learning (synthesised well by figures like John Hattie). Yet, oddly, most academic conferences ignore most of what is known about what contributes to learning. For example, we know that if you have to demonstrate that you've understood something you've heard or read you're much more likely to remember it. Similarly, quickly having to summarise messages to someone else helps with digestion and comprehension.

The design of good meetings draws on what's been learnt from research that carefully observes what happens in practice. There is a vast literature⁷ which analyses the various subtle strategies of interaction we use when talking to others, and the role played by supporting activities: providing agendas, documents, minutes, presentations, preparatory emails and exchanges.

Meetings are usually part of much longer sequences of joint talk, writing and action, which over time create shared meanings. They're usually governed by explicit rules and roles (partly to ensure that a few people don't dominate).

Good meetings also encourage argument. There is abundant literature showing that groups reason better than individuals. Psychologists have shown that people have a very strong 'confirmation bias'. This means that when they reason they try to find arguments that support their own idea. At an individual level this leads to bad decisions. But from a collective point of view it is extremely effective, since it encourages people to develop the best versions of their arguments. Confirmation biases cancel each other out, and then push the group to a better solution.⁸ To solve problems, how a problem is expressed can influence biases, an effect that however can be countered by time as the longer a group thinks about a problem the less automatic biases emerge.

The principles for designing better meetings

This literature points to some of the keys to making meetings better:

- Modifying and making explicit the rules for turn taking reduces the work done at the level of micro interactions.
- Encouraging everyone to speak - eg starting meetings by asking people to discuss with their neighbour key ideas or questions - increases attention and energy.
- Providing written material, multimodal supports and multiplatform environments supports sense-making and common understanding.
- Other supports can extend in time the effort of constructing meanings. Minutes, images, networks, shared documents, digitally shared information all contribute to extend the process of information construction and exchange.
- Many innovations in the organisational and physical setting of meetings address the biases involved in decision making.
- By modifying the order of contributions, by forcing participants to take certain perspectives or by forcibly redefining the social roles, formats attempt to control anchoring biases emerging from the primacy of certain voices and views.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER MEETINGS

Here we suggest some crucial lessons for organising good meetings that draw on this analysis.

1. The ends and means of meetings need to be visible - and preparation pays off

Good meetings are well prepared, and their purposes, structures and content are well understood by all participants. Depending on the meeting structure, agendas which are easily accessible beforehand can ensure valuable time is not wasted and everyone is up to speed the minute they walk in. Sharing background papers and materials ensures a shared understanding of the purpose of the meeting, and how its structure and content contribute to that purpose. These lessons echo those of all kinds of learning that are helped by visibility.

This doesn't mean that all meetings should be instrumental. Some kinds of meeting should be open-ended and exploratory. The point is that this should be clear to participants.

There are many apps now available that support preparation and communication before meetings. Some include features that collaboratively build the agenda beforehand and send out automatic meeting notes (Do⁹). Others are specific to one challenge such as scheduling. Pick¹⁰ will find mutual availability between participants and then automatically book a convenient time for a meeting.

2. Meetings need active facilitation and orchestration

Even the most motivated groups don't self-organise very well. That's why the role of the chair or facilitator is key to getting good results. The role doesn't have to be filled by the most powerful person in the room; the role may be better played by someone junior but given the temporary authority to ensure the meeting achieves its purposes, sticks to time etc.

To do their job well they need to keep the meeting focused on its goals. Other roles include: avoiding the risks of anchoring (the first person to speak sets the agenda and frames); avoiding the risks of unequal contribution (with higher status counting for more than greater knowledge and experience); and coping with the cognitive challenges for any group of keeping more than 2-3 ideas in mind simultaneously. Along with this, leaving periods of silence for groups to reflect and digest can improve the quality of discussion.

Related ideas for improving meetings include – participants writing key thoughts before the meeting; the most junior speaking first (as in the past in the US Supreme Court); interweaving different scales of conversation (plenary, smaller groups down to discussions in pairs).

3. The best meetings are often multi-platform, and use visualisations as well as talk and paper

The best meetings make use of multiple tools in parallel: talk, visualisation, small talk as well as larger formats. A consistent finding of much research is that people learn and think better when supported by more than one type of communication. Information presented in different forms can aid learning and understanding.¹¹

A written five page report; a presentation; a selection of images; a verbal discussion will have differing effects but can add up to a better understanding of the issues.

Technological tools can help visualise complex ideas at meetings, making it easier to make decisions, for example allowing ideas to be visually collated by multiple people in real time (Google docs projected onto a big screen), creating linked networks of ideas collaboratively (Popplet¹²) or presenting complex data in more accessible ways (Parmenides Eidos¹³). Other promising tools show the participants how their ideas are evolving (such as Futurescaper).

4. Good meetings make the most of their participants - and rein in the extroverts, and the most opinionated or powerful

Social psychologists using survey and observational techniques to measure group intelligence have shown that they correlate only partly with the average and maximum intelligence of individual group members. For example, one recent psychology study found that three factors were significantly correlated with the collective intelligence of a group: the average social perceptiveness of the group members (using a test also used to measure autism, that involves judging feelings from photographs of people's eyes); relatively equal turn taking in conversation; and the percentage of women in a group (which partly reflects their greater social perceptiveness).¹⁴

A more general point is that typical meetings are dominated by extroverts. As a result many participants may not feel comfortable contributing. Formats which make it easy for everyone to contribute, and which rein in the most vocal, and give people time to think before speaking, are likely to work better. This requires very active facilitation.

A remarkable proportion of meetings in many fields - from political parties to corporate AGMs and academic conferences - ignore these points.

5. Good meetings benefit from a conducive physical environment that heightens attention

Our forthcoming research on the relationship between physical environments and innovation confirms that on their own, attractive spaces don't necessarily make people more creative. But meetings do benefit from environmental conditions that make it easier to pay attention to the meeting itself, and to other participants. That includes: sufficient natural light, quiet and space¹⁵ and giving people chances to move around (and not staying sitting for more than e.g. 70 minutes in anyone stretch).

Physical shape also influences the quality of meetings. For example, square or circular meeting spaces allow everyone eye contact with everyone else, and so encourage greater engagement. The classic boardroom table is a poor design from this perspective, as is the classic 'theatre-style' conference hall.

Finally, some organisations ban use of laptops or smartphones during meetings - partly to ensure full attention. US Cabinet meetings require participants to leave their phones at the door.

6. Good meetings begin and end with a deliberate division of labour

The best meetings take advantage of a division of labour, with distinct roles, including facilitation, record keeping, synthesis and catalysis. They then end with explicitly distributed tasks given to participants.

For the meeting itself, methods which distribute roles amongst participants include De Bono's Six Thinking Hats,¹⁶ where different coloured metaphorical 'hats' open up different perspectives to thinking. White addresses the facts and what is known; Black provides caution and critical thinking; Red emphasises feelings, including intuition and hunches; Blue manages the process ensuring it is followed by the group correctly; Green promotes creativity, new ideas and options; Yellow

encourages optimism, looking for value, benefits and advantages. The idea is that the interaction of these viewpoints should lead to better outcomes, particularly when participants try out different roles rather than becoming fixed in just one.

David Kantor's 'Four Player Model' has a similar approach. Groups are divided into four roles: movers who initiate ideas and offer direction; followers who complete what is said, help others clarify their thoughts, and support what is happening; opposers who challenge what is being said and question its validity; and bystanders who notice what is going on and provide perspective on what is happening, gives a set of actions people can take whilst in a conversation.¹⁷ In a healthy meeting, people will move between these roles.

Structure, visible purposes and a narrative flow to the meeting, so that there is a possibility of cumulative dialogue, ending up with conclusions and following an arc is a must. A common finding is that it's important to allow everyone to have some voice whilst preventing domination of just one, and ensuring input of real experience, as well as knowledge.

Finally, a common rule in many organisations distributes explicit tasks to named individuals at the end of the meeting, so that these can then be tracked. Knowing that this is going to happen makes it more likely that people will pay attention.

7. Good meetings apply 'Meeting Maths': balancing time, scale, knowledge and breadth

There is no perfect mathematics of meetings but experience suggests something close to a law that correlates the complexity of the task, the number of participants, the available knowledge and experience, time, and the degree of shared language or understanding. This is particularly true for meetings that aim to come to a conclusion or make a decision.

The most common reason meetings fail is that they don't conform with meeting maths: there are too many people or too little time; too little relevant knowledge and experience, too sprawling a topic, or insufficient common grounding.

A simple task, with few participants, and well understood common language and references may lead to quick results. Whereas a very complex task, with many participants, and not much shared frame of reference, may never reach a result. A complex, fuzzy issue, without shared definition or any shared purpose may take infinite time to resolve, and even if the time isn't infinite it may feel so.

In framing understanding of an issue, or mapping out options, diversity brings great advantages, as does tapping into many minds. But to translate that diversity into good decisions usually requires the added element of a common grounding or culture. So strong organisations try to bring in a diverse workforce, and tap the brainpower of their partners and customers, but then funnel decisions through a group that also has a strong common understanding and language, and a depth of relevant knowledge. On their own crowds aren't very wise.

Roughly speaking, the meeting maths formula runs as follows:

meeting quality ~ [time x common grounding x relevant knowledge and experience]/[numbers x topic breadth]

Getting the maths of meetings right is key not just to face-to-face meetings but also for online ones. In principle, online meetings can gather in much more intelligence - knowledge, ideas, observations and options. The most successful online collective intelligence projects tend to combine quite precise tasks and reasonable amounts of time, and are more about gathering and assembling, than judging. As a result they don't require so much common framing, or the subtle cues needed for ongoing collaborative projects.

8. Good meetings are cumulative - part of a longer process

Meetings rarely happen in isolation. Instead they can use tools to ensure cumulative improvement and learning. There are simple devices like feedback forms (though these are rarely shared widely), and regular reviews that link any meeting to previous ones on the same topic (through traditional means like minutes, or more modern ones like data dashboards and lessons learned exercises). Nesta has recently experimented with new technological tools to map how meetings influence relationships.¹⁸

Social media patterns can be analysed to show how people interact after meetings¹⁹ and social network analysis tools can be used to reveal underlying patterns of helpfulness²⁰ in organisations and across them (for example surveying who people rely on to get information or to get decisions made).²¹

Within workplaces evidence suggests that the quality of workplace relationships and attitudes, measured by the quality of small talk before meetings, matters more for meeting effectiveness than good procedures on their own.²² Participants' perceptions of meeting effectiveness has a "strong, direct relationship with job attitudes and wellbeing."²³ If attendees of a meeting are happy going in, they will be productive throughout and happier and more productive afterwards. Modest tools can influence this - like Nesta's 'randomised coffee trials' (which encourages people to meet people they don't know in the workplace, and has now been adopted by many big employers), or simple devices like encouraging everyone to take coffee or lunch breaks at the same time.

In everyday operational meetings, as much as strategic and creative events, meetings provide a place for participants to demonstrate their vision and mission²⁴ to one another, and to align their individual goals, expectations and attitudes.²⁵

9. Some of the best meetings don't happen (or why you shouldn't hold unnecessary meetings)

Newspapers and news shows have to fill up their space regardless of how much news has actually happened. The same is often true of meetings. Organisations schedule regular cycles of committee, board, group meetings and then feel impelled to fill up the available time. This is one of the sources of frustration and boredom in many organisations, because it means many meetings feel rather pointless. An alternative is to leave time slots in but more often:

- Cancel meetings when they're not needed.
- Radically shorten them to align with the number and seriousness of issues needing to be addressed.
- Consult participants on whether the meeting is needed and if so how long it should be.

Often people feel uncomfortable cancelling meetings, for fear that it implies that no work is being done. Similarly people feel uncomfortable in big bureaucracies not attending meetings - for fear that they may miss out on vital decisions, or be seen not to be a team player. The opposite would be a better approach - with cancelling or shortening meetings being taken as a sign of effective day to day communication and coordination that renders the meeting unnecessary.

Section 3 Innovation in meeting formats

Audit House, the building which Nesta will soon be occupying, but once housed the Auditor-General's staff, was originally designed without any conference room at all. This was in line with the British Civil Service's preference for minuted reports - sent from desk to desk - rather than meeting or debate.

Fortunately, people do now meet, and argue. And recently there's been lots of innovation in meeting formats, mainly in response to frustration. Examples of different ways of approaching meetings include World Café, Unconferences and Open Space Technology. Some organisations have developed very radical ways of running internal meetings - often doing away with rigid roles and hierarchy. Many of these methods aim to overturn excessively controlled authoritarian formats in favour of self-organisation and emergence, so that any participant can propose topics. Although they can be a refreshing alternative to the stultified, over-programmed conference formats of keynotes and panels, they can also be frustratingly vague, making the whole less than the sum of the parts. They can introduce high coordination costs, time spent on organising rather than on content, and are potentially arguably ill-suited to sustained problem solving.

There is relatively little evidence about when these work and when these don't, and an odd feature of innovation in this field is that new models quickly crystallise as highly prescriptive methods, with little feedback to help them improve, or create hybrids, and very little formal testing or evidence.

Collective intelligence about collective intelligence in the form of meetings is oddly rare. Few institutions compile and assess different models for meetings. Some examples can be found within toolkits such as the Share, Learn, Innovate! Toolkit from the UN²⁶ with sections on [Knowledge Cafés](#) and [Open Space](#) as well as our DIY Toolkit at Nesta²⁷, which includes formats such as [Thinking Hats](#) and [Creative Workshops](#) for generating new ideas. We hope that this paper will help to focus attention on what methods work best, and possible hybrids of different models are worth exploring.

Conclusions

Given how much time and money is spent on meetings it's surprising to discover just how little is known about meetings, and even more surprising to discover how little of what *is* known is ever used. The majority of meetings fail to make the most of the brainpower they've brought together.

It should be clear that this is far from being a science. But existing knowledge highlights some general points about how groups can become more intelligent, which always seems to involve some balance of grammar and rules on the one hand, and freedom on the other; some visibility and reflexivity of method; some rules to ensure focus and agreement about what to ignore. Crafting meeting formats that will balance all of the points discussed here is a challenge, requiring some experimentation to work out what works, and better retrospective assessment of which ones are most effective. But this is surely something worth doing if it can reduce the menace of meaningless meetings.

ANNEX A few examples of alternative meeting formats

Here we summarise a few recent meeting models.

Flipped conferences

The "Flipped Classroom" is a tried and (partly) tested alternative model for delivering learning. This educational innovation is now being used to evolve traditional conference organisation. "Flipped Conferences" represent an interesting hybrid between the UnConference model (e.g. GovCamp) where the meeting is run by its participants with the agenda worked out during the actual event and the more traditional Conference format. Flipped Conferences still focus on key people with interesting things to say, but instead of doing all their presenting at the conference itself speakers share it in advance with attendees through video. During the live conference sessions lectures are replaced with more interactive discussions.

World Café

Involves setting up a cafe ambience to hold conversations around a specific topic or question. Group sizes can vary from 12 up to over 500.

This method is designed to promote meaningful and exploratory conversation around specific questions, spreading ideas and expanding insights.



<http://informed-cities.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=8280>

How it works:

- Participants sit 4-5 to a table.
- The atmosphere is important and should be hospitable, to promote conversation. Tables should be dressed including paper and pens for participants to doodle on.
- Questions are used to base discussions which can link to the purpose of the event between participants (these are predetermined).
- Each table can nominate a host. Participants can choose if everyone but the host moves to a new table each time.

- Once a new group sits down, the host will discuss main points from previous group and invite the new group to link and connect this to their previous discussions.
- They can then move on, or return to the original table to synthesise discussions.
- This can continue for several rounds. At the end there is a whole group discussion, led by the facilitator that will reflect on the conversations that have taken place.

Challenge: this can be a good method for increasing participation, engagement and breaking down hierarchy, but less effective at catalysing action.

More information can be found [here](#).

Dynamic Facilitation

This method can be used to creatively address a difficult problem. The group will explore many different topics in their conversation, whilst working on various parts of a bigger picture. Group number should be kept low and no more than 30.

It is based on the assumption that everyone's contribution has value. Once all the thoughts in the group are out in the open and seen as valuable, people will begin to listen to other perspectives much more easily, recognising the complexity of a situation, encouraging more creative solutions to be suggested.



<http://www.wisedemocracy.org/page11/page11.html>

How it works:

- The facilitator sets up four lists, with the headings 'problems', 'solutions', 'concerns' and 'data' on the wall.
- Conversation begins about any of those topics, the facilitator does not direct this, they instead listen to everyone and write down what they are saying under each of the four categories.
- The facilitator's role is to create a reflective environment allowing participants to self-organise. Throughout they ensure everyone feels their viewpoint is being heard - they may need to ask for further clarification from some people, ensure one person is speaking at a time, and encourage opposing viewpoints.

- When the facilitator feels the group have aired all their thoughts, a fifth list is introduced to write down any 'outcomes', which will be concluded from the conversation.

Challenge: it's effective at increasing participation and consensus. However, organisers need to be willing to prioritise the bottom-up approach which may seem chaotic, over efficiency.

More information can be found [here](#).

Open Space Technology

This method can be used for a range of purposes; from promoting engagement; identifying key areas of interest; to allowing for informal learning. Group sizes can be from 10 -100+.



www.wlv.ac.uk/research/research-institutes-and-centres/cedare---centre-for-developmental-and-applied-research-in-education/enterprise/

How it works:

- Opening circle: all participants sit in a big circle, with the facilitator in the middle, who explains the process.
- People are encouraged to then announce themes/topics for breakout sessions.
- The facilitator encourages those who are passionate about a topic and wish to take responsibility for convening a meeting to discuss this to come to the centre.
- These participants write down an issue or opportunity, announce it to the group, with a time and place to meet, and return to their seat.
- When all have been announced, everyone moves to the papers detailing sessions and sign up to those they are interested in.
- Everyone then disperses and attends the sessions they have decided.
- People are actively encouraged to flow between sessions if they wish, moving from one to another if they feel they are not learning or participating. This is an important principle of the process.
- During the different meetings, the original participant who arranged it takes notes of key points.
- At the end there is a closing circle, where everyone returns to one big circle, to reflect and share experiences with the group as a whole.

There are several underlying principles key to this process. They are:

Version 1- Meaningful Meetings

- Whoever comes are the right people - participants will decide what they want to go to depending on their interest.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have - the whole process is driven by participants.
- Whenever it starts is the right time - there is no set schedule.
- Whenever it's over, it's over.

This can be scaled up to conference size and is the basis for an unconference.

Challenge: it can feel like losing control compared to traditional top-down style for organisers. This approach means topics emerge from the collective present at that point in time, and are not pre-planned. More information can be found [here](#)

The Revolutionary Thinking Method

This is a structured approach used to support groups to both consider new ideas and generate innovative ways forward. These are then underpinned by personal and group commitments made to act.

The method involves rapid energising discussion in small groups (small revolution) and the whole group (big revolution) interchangeably. Total group sizes are usually around 100 people.

How it works:

- Participants split into groups of eight with a convenor.
- To start there is series of rapid circles involving all the participants to map out the parameters of the issue and potential solutions. Specifically it includes:
 - An overall scene-setting statement of the context by the convenor of the meeting – the problem being addressed.
 - Then each circle runs through a series of quick starting exercises, going around the circle with each person speaking for a maximum of one minute on each of the following:
 - Small Revolution 1: Their understanding of the problem/the issue.
 - Small Revolution 2: The experience and knowledge they bring to it.
 - Small Revolution 3: The feelings they bring to it.
 - Big revolution 1: Then a circle of all the groups with very short descriptions of how each table sees the problem, written up in a visible way (either paper or screen) as a group mindmap.
- Then a series of rounds;
 - Small Revolution 4: Possible routes forward.
 - Small Revolution 5: Builds - comments that develop particular ideas.
 - Small Revolution 6: Barriers – potential negatives.
- The convenor needs to decide at what point to seek some decisions which can either be consensual or majority, or a group forming a sub-circle of a minimum of three people.
- Small Revolution 7: defining 2-3 specifics.
- Big Revolution 2: linking all the circles again to map specifics. The aim at this stage is to generate menus of:
 - Incremental option.
 - Radical revolutionary options.

- Proposals for shifts in method.
- At this point the process shifts to open space mode – including written boards with options.
 - Big Revolution 3: Discussion of mood.
 - Big Revolution 4: Appetites to act and support and commitments (captured in writing and circulated electronically to all participants after the meeting).

Challenge: the instructions of the method need to be very clear to participants to ensure smooth running, in order to maintain the quick pace required.

De Bono Six Thinking Hats:

This method is used to critically look at a problem or topic through multiple ways of thinking, which are represented by different coloured 'hats'. It is a structured thinking system, and good for problem solving.

By incorporating different ways of viewing a situation, it allows people to step out their comfort zone and start to think more laterally.

Hat colours and their meanings:

White-refers to the facts and what is known.

Black-refers to caution and critical thinking.

Red-refers to feelings, including intuition and hunches.

Blue-manages the process ensuring it is followed by the group correctly.

Green-refers to creativity, new ideas and options.

Yellow-refers to optimism, looking for the value, benefits and advantages.

How it works:

There are two main ways of using the method:

- Everyone wears the same 'hat' at the same time. This means everyone discusses the topic from the same perspective, one after another, using the colour of 'hat' as a prompt for the perspective they are contributing.
- Everyone wears a different 'hat' in the group and brings that viewpoint to the discussion, so every perspective around a certain issue is discussed at the same time.
- Other items can be substituted for the 'hats' if more appropriate.

Challenges: it's important participants fully understand what the different viewpoints mean, in order to maintain the approach. They may find stepping out their usual way of thinking difficult, but overcoming this challenge to think differently is an important aspect of the method.

More information can be found [here](#). Also see Nesta's [DIY Toolkit](#) for a version of the thinking hats method.

Syntegrity

Syntegrity²⁸ is a form of non-hierarchical problem solving. There is a set procedure used over several meetings which is referred to as Team Syntegrity²⁹. Its aim is to make communication between group members more effective through self-organisation, allowing for each individual's contributions to input to a final

solution. During the process a large number of ideas are distilled down (through several stages) allowing for final solutions to be found. Group sizes are around 30 people. The main steps of the method involve:

- A general question regarding the purpose of the meeting, and problem to be solved, is put to the whole group.
- Individual members then make statements related to the question.
- These statements are then aggregated together into groups. The participants self-organise, through individuals jostling to get the support of others towards statements they feel are the best. This leads to a large amount of statements being reduced to a smaller number.
- The resulting statements are then grouped by topic. There are usually no more than 12 of these.
- Participants then state a preference for the topics they would like to discuss further in small groups through voting.
- A computer based algorithm is then used (taking the voting into consideration) to give participants topics. Some will have the same one, hence small teams are formed. The process is designed so each individual is part of two teams discussing different topics, but also will act as 'critic' to two other teams as well.
- The discussion team meetings aim to derive final statements for their topic.
- The aim of the 'critic' role is to aid the discussion of the team by commenting on the content and process of it, in order to improve the quality of the outcome.
- Several meetings take place between the teams. Through this process the collective present can come to final conclusions, whilst facilitating the process for each other.

Organisational examples

Elsewhere excellent examples can be found from organisations which integrate certain practices into their DNA. Two such ones are Buurtzorg; a home care organisation using a new kind of care delivery model, and Holacracy; an innovation in organisational structure.

Buurtzorg method for team meetings

Buurtzorg³⁰ champions a self-organisation model across its structure. It provides care to many people, with difficult issues needing to be resolved and decisions to be made regularly. Their approach has proved successful in empowering teams of nurses with this decision making.

The structure and technique of how team meetings resolve issues³¹ is highlighted below:

- Teams are kept to 12 members at a maximum.
- First the group chooses a facilitator for the meeting.
- Then the agenda of topics to be discussed is put together depending on what the team members want to discuss at that point in time and is created on the spot.

- Following this, there are three separate rounds, with the role of the facilitator clearly defined; they ask questions to prompt discussion and don't make suggestions.
 - In the first round; all proposals made by the team are listed on a flipchart.
 - In the second round; proposals are reviewed, improved, and refined.
 - In the third round; proposals are put to a group decision.
- The final decision is not based on consensus, instead it will be taken forward if no one can think of a principled objection to it. The solution will then be adopted on the basis that it can be revisited at any time, as new information is available.
- Should the team get stuck and need help with a solution they can call upon different sources of external facilitation including; their regional coach; a facilitator from the institute they trained with; or another team in the organisation (access to which through the Buurtzorg social network platform).

Holacracy governance meetings

Holacracy³² and its open-source counterpart Sociocracy 3.0³³ have a structured approach to governance meetings. A set format along with a talented facilitator in play, allows participants to self organise around issues of roles and policies.

The meeting happens in the following way:

- Check in - everyone present states where they are at, how they are feeling.
- Administration issues - any issues regarding administration; for example how long the meeting will be, if there are refreshments etc. are mentioned.
- Agenda building - the agenda is built on the spot, with participants stating tensions they'd like to process.
- Agenda items - each specific item is then gone through, using the following format:
 - Present a proposal - the proposer states this and what the issue to be resolved is.
 - Clarifying questions - anybody can ask questions to clarify, and seek more information and understanding.
 - Reaction round - each person has an opportunity to react to the proposal. There is no responses, and people reacting are encouraged to speak freely.
 - Amend and clarify - the proposer can take time to amend their proposal or further clarify. They speak without interruption.
 - Objection round - the facilitator gives each person (one by one) a chance to object. They ask: 'Is there any reason that adopting this proposal would cause harm or move us backwards?' If there are no objections, it is implemented.
 - Integration - if any objections are raised, the facilitator moves to this step, where an open discussion is raised to amend the proposal so it does not cause objection. If more than one objection is made, they are dealt with one at a time, until they are all removed.
- Check out - everyone makes a closing few remarks about how they feel.

Agile

A famous and popular example of meeting and workflow structure adapting to suit new challenges is the development and spread of the Agile working methodology. Agile software development methodologies revolve around small teams undertaking short bursts of work (called 'sprints') to regularly deliver iteratively improved and regularly tested products. It is a response to the affordances of developing software and writing code - which relies on testing and improvement, and to the realities of the industry - where client requirements for software often change over time, often in response to seeing and trying the product.

The method uses rigidity in the structure of roles, workflow and meetings to produce flexibility in the overall development cycle. Team members are given specific roles with explicit responsibilities. Meetings are frequent and short with a set agenda. Time for reflection and iterative improvement of the process is built in to the meeting cycle. Team members are kept aware of their own responsibilities and goals, and other members' progress and requirements, avoiding ambiguity and offering frequent opportunities to negotiate work distribution, and so permit the team to function more effectively as a unit.

In Agile management members are split into small teams that come together regularly.

The scrum framework has three roles:

- Product Owner
 - Responsible for communicating between development team and clients and other stakeholders.
 - Must represent the client to the team, and the team to the client, empathising and negotiating with both groups.
- Scrum Master
 - Responsible for removing impediments to the team's work.
 - Not a manager, but a facilitator, who encourages adherence to the scrum format and works to remove problems and distractions that interfere with the team's work.
- Development Team Member
 - Responsible for delivering the work- they are self organising and negotiate the distribution of work between the 6-9 members.

The daily scrum meeting is strictly limited to 15 minutes

- Each team member answers three questions:
 - What did I do yesterday that helped the development team meet the sprint goal?
 - What will I do today to help the development team meet the sprint goal?
 - Do I see any impediment that prevents me or the development team from meeting the sprint goal?
- Impediments are captured by the member with the 'scrum master' role
- The scrum master writes the impediment on scrum board and gives responsibility to a team member to investigate and overcome it.

These daily meetings are supplemented by two meetings at the end of a Sprint, which typically lasts a fortnight:

Scrup review

- The Sprint's work is reviewed.
- Completed work is presented.
- Planned work that remains incomplete is discussed.

Scrum retrospective

- The team reflects on the past sprint.
- The team discuss processes and adherence to process. They reflect on potential improvements and put these in place for the next sprint.

Scrum meetings are inextricable from the system and culture they take place within. The system requires an acceptance non-hierarchical leadership, and a balance between adherence to procedure, and willingness analyse and improve that procedure.

Endnotes

¹This paper has been drafted by Geoff Mulgan, with help from Gemma Creed (who wrote all the case studies), and inputs from Stefana Broadbent, Adam Price, Stian Westlake and Lydia Nicholas.

²This research programme is being led by Stefana Broadbent with Lydia Nicholas. Some of the themes will also be covered in Geoff Mulgan's forthcoming book from Princeton University Press on collective intelligence.

³Mankins, M., Brahm, C., and Caimi, G. (2014) Your Scarcest Resource. 'Harvard Business Review.' 92(5): 74-80.

⁴Survey completed by YouGov and commissioned by arvato in August 2015. Accessed 21 September. See:

<https://www.arvato.com/uk/about/press-releases/2015/six-percent-of-uk-workers-take-naps-in-meetings.html>

⁵Van Vree (2011) calls this "ever-increasingly precise, more equal and more embracing regulation of impulses and short-lived affects." van Vree, W. (2011) Meetings: The Frontline of Civilization*. 'The Sociological Review.' 59: 241-62.

⁶Dialogic leadership methods based on dialogue rather than conversation. See: Isaacs, W. (1999) [Dialogic leadership](#). 'The Systems Thinker.' 10(1): 1-5.

⁷Garfinkel, H. (1984 edition) Studies in Ethnomethodology. Cambridge: Polity Press and Goffman, E. (1956) The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, Monograph no. 2.

⁸Mercier, H., Sperber, D. (2011) [Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory](#). 'Behavioral and Brain Sciences.' 34 (2):57-111

⁹Do is an app designed to make meetings more productive. See: <https://do.com/>

¹⁰Pick is designed to aid more effective scheduling of meetings. See: <https://www.pick.co/?ref=producthunt>

¹¹A large amount of literature looking at how learning styles and modalities influence the learning process is widely available.

¹²Popplet is an app which has been developed to allow mind mapping of different ideas, in a visual way. Available from: <http://www.popplet.com/>.

¹³Parmenides Eidos is a software programme that will visualise complex data in more succinct ways to aid better decision making. Available from: <https://www.parmenides-foundation.org/application/parmenides-eidos/>.

¹⁴Woolley, A. W., et al. (2010) Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups. 'Science.' 330(6004): 686-688.

¹⁵Leach, D., Rogelberg, A., Warr, P., Burnfield, J. (2009) Perceived Meeting Effectiveness: The Role of Design Characteristics. 'Journal of Business Psychology.' 24(1): 65-76.

¹⁶De Bono, E. (1985) Six Thinking Hats. USA: Little, Brown and Company

¹⁷David Kantor's Structural Dynamics including the Four Player Model. Accessed 14 August. See: <http://www.kantorinstitute.com/fullwidth.html>.

¹⁸<http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/net-effect-how-social-media-can-be-used-understand-events>

¹⁹Bakhshi, H., Davies, J. and Mateos-Garcia, J. (2015) The Net Effect, London: Nesta. Available from: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/net-effect-using-social-media-data-understand-impact-conference-social-networks>

²⁰For an example of social network analysis applied to roles in meetings see: Sauer, N. C., and Kauffeld, S. (2015) The Ties of Meeting Leaders: A Social Network Analysis. 'Psychology.' 6(4): 415-434.

²¹A previous Nesta project - Transformer - used social network analysis to assess the behaviour of the systems in a locality, including secondary schools in a town. See: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/transformers.pdf>

²²Allen, J., Lehmann-Willenbrock, N., and Landowski, N. (2014) Linking Pre-Meeting Communication to Meeting Effectiveness. 'Journal of Managerial Psychology.' 29(8): 1064-81.

²³Rogelberg, S.G., Allen, J.A., Shanock, J., Scott, C., and Shuffler, M. (2010) Employee Satisfaction with Meetings: A Contemporary Facet of Job Satisfaction. 'Human Resource Management.' 49(2):149-72.

²⁴Allen, J. A., Lehmann-Willenbrock, N., and Rogelberg, S. G. n.d.(2015) The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁵Duffy, M. F., and O'Rourke, B. K. (2015) A Systemic View of Meetings – Windows on Organization Collective Minding. In: Allen, J.A., Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. and Rogelberg, S.G. The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 223-46.

²⁶OHCHR (2011) Share, Learn, Innovate! Toolkit. Accessed 10 August. See: <http://slitoolkit.ohchr.org/>

²⁷Nesta (2014) Development Impact and You (DIY) Toolkit. Accessed 10 August. See: <http://diytoolkit.org/tools/>

²⁸<http://syntegritygroup.com/>

²⁹Beer, S. (1994) Beyond Dispute: The Invention of Team Syntegrity. Chichester: John Wiley and Schwaninger, M. (2003) A Cybernetic Model to Enhance Organizational Intelligence. 'Systems Analysis, Modelling and Simulation.' 43(1): 53-65.

³⁰<http://www.buurtzorgnederland.com/>

³¹Buurtzorg approach to meetings is discussed in: Laloux, F. (2014) Reinventing Organisations. Brussels: Nelson Parker.

³²Holacracy describes itself as a third way of organisational structure; between traditional hierarchy and flat structures. For a video of an example governance meeting, accessed 22 September, see: <http://www.holacracy.org/governance-meetings>.

³³More information on Sociocracy 3.0. Accessed 21 September. See: <http://sociocracy30.org/>

info@nesta.org.uk [@nesta_uk](https://twitter.com/nesta_uk) www.facebook.com/nesta.uk www.nesta.org.uk

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