Meetings at Work: Advancing the Theory and Practice of Meetings

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Abstract
Although advances in communication technology were once expected to diminish the need for synchronous work meetings, meeting activity in organizations continues to rise. Regrettably, the time and energy employees spend in work meetings is not matched by the amount of direct attention group and organizational scholars have paid to meeting phenomena. This special issue of Small Group Research helps to address this gap by presenting empirical studies of work meetings that explore the theory and practice of work meetings.

Keywords
meetings, communication, time resources

At one point in time, advances in communication technology were expected to diminish the need for the synchronous workplace meetings; however, meeting activity in organizations continues to rise. In 1999, Van Vree reported that in organizations with fewer than 10 people, employees spent at least 10% of their time preparing and executing meetings (Van Vree, 1999). At the other end of the scale, in firms with 500 or more people, employees spent around 75% of their time on these activities. More recently, senior managers

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reported spending an average of nearly 23 hr a week in meetings (Rogelberg, Scott, & Kello, 2007) with 72% spending more time in meetings than they did 5 years ago; 49% expected to be spending even more time in meetings in the future.

Regrettably, the time and energy employees spend in work meetings is not matched by the amount of direct attention group and organizational scholars have paid to meeting phenomena. It is often assumed that mainstream small group research generalizes to the workplace meeting context. However, as others have argued convincingly (Schwartzmann, 1989; Tracy & Dimock, 2004), small group meetings are most commonly analyzed merely as a context for the exploration of other variables (e.g., decision making). Such research has generated important findings and conclusions about general group processes, but very little of this work was intended to expand what is known about the conduct of meetings themselves and the role meetings play in the lives of individuals, groups, and organizations. Consequently, few discrete streams or programs of research on meetings have developed for the specific purpose of improving the theory and practice of meetings.

This special issue of Small Group Research helps to address this gap by presenting empirical studies of work meetings that explore the theory and practice of work meetings for their own sake. Four articles were competitively selected for this special issue by the guest editors because they make meaningful theoretical and practical contributions to our understanding of meetings in organizational life. Kauffeld, Lehmann, and Willenbrock find that functional and constructive interactions in meetings (such as action planning and positive communication processes) relate to satisfaction with the meeting and team productivity as well as organizational success years later. Kohler, Cramton, and Hinds report on a cross-cultural analysis of meetings in the United States and Germany and find that there are different expectations and practices concerning the purpose, content, structure, and timing of meetings, and the roles of participants. O’Neill and Allen present the development of the team meeting attitudes (TMA) construct. They demonstrate that TMA, aggregated to the team level, is tied to time spent in meetings, perceptions of team meeting effectiveness, and team potency. Beck, Littlefield, and Weber examine the planning and content of public meetings and their associated private premeetings to develop a naïve theory of crisis meeting interaction that helps to explain how these exchanges operate at both micro and macro levels. The issue concludes with a commentary by the guest editors that examines the organizational costs of work meetings, outlines best work meeting practices, and proposes a system for assessing the return on investment in meetings. We hope this special issue will stimulate further research on
how the theory and practice of work meetings can be improved given the practical issues related to meetings presented in the concluding commentary as well as the future research questions presented in the discussion section of each article.

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References

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