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A Different Perspective on Meetings

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A few weeks ago I was a resource specialist for a coach certification training that drew people from around the globe. One of the other presenters was a brilliant leadership development specialist from Latin America.

He spoke freely about his diligent efforts to become fluent in English, and for the most part his syntax was absolutely flawless. But there was one notable expression that struck native speakers of English as somewhat odd – especially those with no background in Spanish.

Every time he would speak about meeting with those he coaches, he would refer to his "reunion with the client." It's a natural and understandable breakdown in syntax. The word "reunión" in Spanish carries the connotation of what English-speaking people call a "meeting" or an "assembly."

Meetings as Reunions

As I listened to him I began to play with the idea of how it would change our concept of "meetings" if, as English-speakers, we began thinking of them in the literal sense of what the word "reunion" means in our language. Looking at that term you realize that it suggests a "reuniting." It implies that we have been going separate ways and that unity has suffered, even if ever so slightly, as a result. Now we are gathering for the explicit purpose of uniting once again.

Most leaders and managers have come to see meetings as a necessary evil. Necessary, yes. But an evil nonetheless. We know that meetings are essential. We know we must have them for planning, for communication, for making decisions. But how many times have you groused lately about all the meetings on your schedule?

A Natural Tendency Toward Disunity

Until I listened to my friend make his presentation, I'm not sure I had given enough thought to meetings as being the way we keep ourselves united. Yet, I've seen firsthand the damage to unity when meetings are not regular or even possible.

I've worked extensively in recent years with clients who manage work groups scattered far and wide. One element of the team is on the East Coast. Another in the Southwest. Still another, perhaps, in Canada. Leaders of these teams talk candidly about how easily distrust develops in these situations where members of the team have so few opportunities to interact personally with one another. Without meetings, unity suffers.

In less dispersed work settings, where we see colleagues weekly or even daily, meetings are often so frequent that we may not sense a peril to our unity. Yet the peril is ever present. I consult frequently with teams whose members all work in close proximity to each other, but whose unity is becoming frayed.

So I've been thinking the last few days about how I'm going to approach meetings differently in the future. I'm pretty good when preplanning a meeting to think through what the goals of the meeting should be. I usually spell out the goals in terms of specific decisions or agreements we should reach before we consider the meeting concluded.

But now I'm adding another dimension. I'm going to ask myself, "Where do I want us more united as we leave this meeting — this 'reunión' — than we were when we started it?" Will it be a clearer unity around our sense of mission? Will it be greater unity around our near-term priorities? Will it be deeper unity around our values and ideals? Where will unity be in greater repair at the end of our meeting than at the outset?

A basic principle in thermodynamics is that order continually tends toward dissolution and disarray. Something similar occurs in organizations. We never purposefully set out to lose sight of our purpose, our vision, our mandate. But all of us get buried under the onslaught of our day-to-day demands. Our focus narrows to the alligators that are snapping at us this week. We lose sight of the greater aims, the bigger pictures.

Meetings are our most frequent opportunity to get refocused on what is genuinely important and to find creative ways to deal with the myriad of distractors that are trying to pull us off course. Apart from meetings devoted to strategic planning, rarely do meetings devote time to the question, "What are the things that are interfering with our whole-hearted pursuit of our mission? And how can we do things differently to minimize that interference?"

Instead, reflecting back on my experience in leadership, many meetings have actually concluded with less unity in the room than we had when we convened. In the course of the meeting, unity took it on the chin from angry outbursts, personal attacks, and innuendos. Often we left having reached agreement, having made a decision, but having butchered unity and trust in the process.

Purposeful "Reunion" Building

The task of using meetings to promote unity, rather than serving to undermine it, is the responsibility of every participant. But the duty is particularly incumbent on the person presiding. As a rule, in the give and take of decision-making, unity and trust don't "just happen." They usually result from purposeful focus on these kinds of outcomes.

Moreover, when a moderator or chairperson is attuned to opportunities for building trust and unity, he or she is more likely to take quick note of actions or attitudes that are potentially injurious to those outcomes and can move purposefully to counteract them.

We often hear laments about "not being on the same page." Tapping the "re-uniting" potential of meetings, even those called for routine decision-making, is one way to help us get to that same page. I've certainly pledged myself to be more alert in the future to opportunities to make meetings a literal "re-union."