

Can a Meeting be a Game Changer?



Why is it that so many of us don't like meetings? I personally like the feeling of getting a bunch of innovative people together generating better and smarter ideas than any one of us could come up with on our own. Most people have a hard time seeing a meeting as a game changer. Would you think a meeting could speed up change or push you ahead of the competition

to become the global leader in the industry?

Well that is exactly what happened with [Wal-Mart](#). Their Saturday morning meetings created a lead time in the industry and catapulted Wal-Mart up to one of the highest grossing companies in the world. You might say, "Excuse me, a meeting did that?" Well, in Verne Harnish's book "[The Greatest Business Decisions of All Time](#)," Hank Gilman makes that case.

It began back in the beginning when [Sam Walton](#) started this Saturday morning meetings in his first store in Bentonville, AR. He held these meetings to gather all of his people in one place to figure out what was selling and what was not. He would look at different metrics and determine what needed to be changed based on what had happened over the previous week. Then, with the managers brainstorming, they would make changes, put items on sale that needed to go, and move things around to get noticed. After this, they immediately went out and implemented these ideas to take advantage of the strong weekend activity.

Stay ahead of the competition. This was key. By simply staying days ahead, they eventually zoomed past the industry leaders, such as Sears and Kmart. When interviewed, Walton's friend and successor David Glass explained that a big accomplishment of the Saturday meetings was to collect and distribute information to all of those in the company, so it could be shared. Sam felt that everyone should work together as partners and should know what was going on.

This meeting allowed Wal-Mart's people to gather and discuss ideas, and they could have all the corrections in place by noon on Saturday. This would put Wal-Mart ten days ahead of the likes of Kmart and Sears. How did the meetings work? The employees would share their best ideas and concepts. The idea of a Wal-Mart greeter came from this. Some executives would show best practices videos. To top it off, if the meetings were getting stale, they would bring in guest speakers like [Bill Clinton](#), [Adam Sandler](#), and [Oprah Winfrey](#).

What are you doing in your meetings to stay just ahead of the competition and share information with your employees? How are you making them feel like partners? And yes, even the best of us can have stale meetings, so what are you doing to make sure they are interesting?

Meetings That Motivate

How many times have you heard "I spend so much time in meetings, I don't have time to do all the things I say I'm going to do in those meetings"? It's a constant battle I face, trying to improve our meetings so that they are as productive as possible in the least amount of time, and

ultimately beneficial to our business. After all, business is about bringing a group of people together to accomplish something, together. So you could say that these gatherings are one of the most crucial parts of business. It's difficult to align people without that infamous word "meeting".

Imagine a US football team in a huddle. Before each play, the offense and defense take a few seconds to analyze where they are, what down it is, what they think the opposing team will do and their own next play options. Next the coach or quarterback will call out a play that takes everything into consideration. In the same way, when people are brought into a meeting they discuss what they are trying to achieve, what is in the way of achieving that and any progress they have made.

We work diligently to make our meetings productive so that they keep us moving forward, but I find that we still manage to drift a little along the way. Last week after our usual Monday morning meeting with our Team leads in India via video conference, I kept the team together and asked one question. What is standing in the way of us becoming a better company? I set the timer and everyone had 3 minutes to write down their thoughts.

At the end of 3 minutes, one at a time we went around the room, each team member and team lead providing one idea. As we gathered ideas I started a list of them all, and then went back around and each person ranked their top 3. For their first choice, I put 3 marks, second I put 2 marks, and third I put 1 mark. At the end, the ideas with the most points are the most pressing issues, and therefore are the ones that we will begin discussing. As a group we brainstorm possible solutions to the barriers, then finalize what our next step is towards making our company better in that area.



In my experience, meetings provide the best opportunity for true collective intelligence...where ideas feed other ideas, and new ideas grow. Taking the time to talk about pains, stucks, competition or even opportunities, you are supporting the work of your team and making meetings productive. Research shows that one of the biggest motivators for employees is progress. When you have a productive meeting, your team feels that accomplishment and thereby leaves the meeting more motivated.

How Do You Get Great Ideas?

Many of us out there hold a strong aversion and distaste for meetings. You have heard it before, or possibly even said it yourself: "We do nothing but have meetings around here, so how am I to get any work done?" Why do we have such negative feelings in regards to getting a group of people together to discuss issues and create solutions to move forward?



I believe strongly in the power of the group and think it is vital to bring people together to create the best ideas. If you have read this blog for any amount of time, you have seen me discuss my belief in collective intelligence, an ideal I trust in so much that I even started a mutual fund managed around the philosophy.

When you imagine a good idea occurring, what do you envision? Do you see Einstein with his crazy hair looking up into the sky with a light bulb going off? Do you visualize the lonely scientist looking into a microscope, and then Eureka . . . It happens?

I read about a study in [Steve Johnson's](#) book "[Where Good Ideas Come From / The Natural History of Innovation](#)" and was not surprised to find it shows that good ideas happen not in these moments of individual discovery but when a group of people are sitting around a table sharing ideas. I said to myself, "Holy moly Batman! Now I have real evidence to support my gut!"

Psychologist [Kevin Dunbar](#) actually set up cameras to watch a research group of scientists work in the early 1990s. His team transcribed all the interactions and tracked the flow of information. Dunbar discovered the physical location where the most important breakthroughs occurred – the MEETING ROOM!

They found the group interactions helped reconceptualize the problem. In his book, Johnson explains, “questions from colleagues forced researchers to think about their experiments on a different scale or level.” Group interactions allowed the more surprising finds to be questioned rather than dismissed, and this led to better ideas and breakthroughs.

So there we have it! Those all day quarterly meetings we have in order to focus, strategize, and plan along with our two day off-site annual meeting have purpose! This can also be said for any other meeting where you need important decisions made or great ideas from your team. If for some reason the team has doubts, get the book! It is a great piece of evidence.