Not another...meeting!

How to make meetings effective and enjoyable

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About the author

Having spent rather a long time at various universities including Cambridge, Oxford and the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, John was ordained to a curacy in the diocese of Liverpool in 1968. He spent a second curacy in an inner-city ex-slum parish in Birmingham and became rector in the same parish. After a five-year period at Church House, Westminster where he was Senior Selection Secretary, helping to select ordinands, he was made Canon Treasurer at Southwark Cathedral and Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Post-ordination training.

Following four years as Vicar of Roehampton he moved to become Archdeacon of Sudbury in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich in 1995. When he retired in 2006 he was asked to be the part-time Diocesan Director of Education, a job he did for nearly four and a half years before retiring for a second time. It has been during these retirement years that John has been writing for Kevin Mayhew, in between being chair of governors at a primary academy, playing golf and enjoying river cruises.

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Introduction

I hate meetings. Well, actually that is not quite true. It's certain kinds of meetings I dislike. Over the years I've been to more than my fair share of meetings of all sorts, and a good many have been fine. It's not a particular type of meeting that gets my goat; it's the way meetings are run and the way members of the meeting behave (or don't behave) that cause the problem. And that can happen any time, anywhere.

While I may be rapidly becoming a grumpy old man, I don't believe I'm unique in having this view about meetings. You've probably experienced it yourself. The meeting began late and went on far too long. No one seemed to be clear about the purpose of the meeting. By the end people were agreeing to things just so they could get home or to the pub. Papers were tabled instead of being distributed before the meeting and a lot of time was wasted while people attempted to make sense of 12 pages of legal gobbledygook or financial statements with no one around the table having the knowledge or expertise to explain them. Most of the decisions seemed to have already been made, contributions were kept to a minimum while the chair rabbited on, and voting felt like applying a rubber stamp. When there was discussion, it was ill-tempered and resulted in decisions that simply preserved the status quo and the power of the 'inner' group. At some point it wasn't even clear whether or not a decision had been made. There was more animated discussion in the loo afterwards than there had been at the meeting. Two of the silent members made it known that they hadn't agreed with one of the decisions and they didn't mind who knew they had voted against it.

To summarise it in that way, of course, is an exaggeration. I don't suppose even a really bad meeting would have all those elements. But they are a fair representation of what makes for bad meetings and what makes people dislike meetings. And if the members are volunteers, too many meetings like that will make them leave – if they have any sense.

The majority of the meetings I have attended over the years have involved the church both at local, parish level and at diocesan level. As an archdeacon, meetings came with the territory. Not all of those meetings were particularly pleasant experiences. It would be nice to think that Christian people know both how to lead meetings and how to behave in meetings. It's not necessarily so.

My experience has been in the Church of England, so I have spoken to members of other denominations about how their meetings go. As you might expect, it's a mixed picture. But some are certainly better than others. None is perfect – not simply because all human activity is less than perfect, but also because the structures that establish and sustain meetings are themselves not perfect, at least not for every activity that meetings seek to achieve.

Meetings come in all sorts and sizes and have different purposes in mind. They will vary from a few people gathered around in a sitting room to a full church hall. Some meetings are called to conduct the everyday running of the organisation, others to plan a protest, some to organise a fundraising campaign, others to plan the Christmas Fayre. In general it's the committee type meeting I shall be concerned with, although there are occasional glances at others. Some points are general enough to apply to most types of meetings; some will necessarily be more specific.

Whatever the purpose, whatever the size, whatever the membership, if you are going to hold a meeting it needs to be effective. If it's not, people have every reason to grumble. To make a meeting effective everyone needs to be playing their part – in a positive way. So this isn't just a book for chairpersons; it is for anyone who attends meetings.

In this book I have set out to help both those who are responsible for meetings – chairs and officers – and those who attend meetings. I want to encourage them to think about what they are doing and seeking to achieve, and to help them find ways to improve. It's not rocket science, and I don't kid myself that I have discovered some novel guaranteed solution. But given the number of meetings a lot of people do attend, it would be good if more were effective and fewer people ended up saying, 'Not another . . . meeting.'

Frank   If we have another meeting like that, I'm resigning. Do you see the time? The pub'll be shut if we don't hurry. It's ridiculous. Sid arrived late and then Peggy had to leave halfway through.

Charles   I know. But the date did get changed at the last minute. And why did we spend all that time on the colour of the notepaper? You'd have thought last year's deficit was a lot more important, but that got rushed through.

Frank   Have you seen the accounts? I didn't get my copy till yesterday. I ask you. What's the good of that! The way they set them out it takes me ages to work out what's what.

Charles   You were lucky. Most papers seem to get tabled. That really annoys me. How are we supposed to deal with them properly like that? I've told the chair but he seems to take no notice. Just blames it on the secretary.

Frank   He just does what he wants anyhow. The way he shut Jane up you'd think he didn't want us there. Well, if it goes on like this I won't be. Want a drink?

Membership

Most organisations have meetings to conduct some aspect of business. It is not usual for the whole membership of the organisation to be present, and therefore they are not 'members' of that meeting.

However, this is not universally true, and the meetings held by Quakers are a case in point. For Quakers, business meetings are actually meetings for worship where there is a prearranged agenda for discussion and decision. This is based on the concept that all meetings should be an act of worship and that all business decisions should be made in the context of discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit within worship. All members have the right to be at the meeting and to speak, as led by the Spirit.

Attendance at a meeting may also be extended beyond members. For example, a local authority council meeting may be open to the public, but the public do not have members' rights in that they may not speak or vote.

Whatever the arrangement, it is clear that the membership of a meeting is a key element in the meeting's effectiveness.

People will sometimes be willing to complain in public about the way meetings are run: the length or lack of the agenda, the way minutes have been written, the failure to keep to time. Complaints about the people involved tend to be made more privately, away from the meeting itself.

Yet it is the members present at the meeting who have most influence upon what happens, for good or ill. How people behave in meetings depends on a range of complex and interacting factors, including:

- their personal agenda;

- their personality;

- their knowledge, experience and expertise;

- their relationships;

- their roles and responsibilities and how well they understand these;

- the number of members in the group;

- how the members came to be included in the meeting;

- whether they are volunteers or attending in a paid capacity.

Let's work back through these.

Members
a. Volunteers
The majority of local church meetings involve volunteers. Apart from the minister, there may be no one who is paid by the church. The same will be true of school governors where all are volunteers apart from the head teacher and possibly the clerk to the governors. Contrast this with a meeting of local authority officials, senior managers in a factory or members of a legal practice where all are present because they are paid to be. Even that is not always true, of course. All may be paid by the organisation, but for particular meetings, such as a work's council, they may be present because they volunteered to attend.

- Commitment could be high or low:
  - low if they feel they have been forced to become a member of the group because no one else would do it;

– high if they have a particular interest or a strong sense of 'vocation' to serve in this way, or see it as an opportunity to influence how they are treated or how the organisation is run.

• Volunteers are giving of their own time and one would think they would want to use the time most effectively. This is not always the case. They may well be less focused on the business in hand because they might view the meeting as partially a social event and not just a matter of getting business carried out as effectively as possible.

• There are no real sanctions to ensure delegated tasks are carried out.

• Volunteers may be very well informed of the topic in view but sometimes they may have little or no knowledge – for example, when accounts or legal matters are being discussed.

• Their role may be seen in personal rather than 'professional' terms and there may well be uncertainty about the role itself.

• There is no guarantee that the committee is made up of the 'right' mix of people.

• The regular attendance of volunteers can be an issue.

b. Paid members

Since such meeting are part of their work, their attitude to meetings will in part be shaped by their attitude to their work and to the company/organisation.

In the end the company/organisation has sanctions – members are paid to undertake tasks allocated to them and to do so on time.

It is up to those calling the meeting to ensure that the right mix of people is present to achieve its purpose. This should be easier to achieve in a group of paid members compared to a purely volunteer group.

The social element will be less obvious – though not entirely absent. Some members may see each other infrequently and view the meeting as an opportunity to catch up with others.

c. Mixed

This presents its own strengths and weaknesses and requires sensitivity on the part of all. Paid officials can either be felt to dominate or be subservient to the volunteers.

> **Amy** June, have you ever thought of joining the Committee? I'm sure you'd be very welcome and there's been a vacancy for ages since Bert moved away. It's only four meetings a year really – well, if you don't get put on a sub-committee. But that won't happen to start with. We sort of organise things.
>
> **June** Well, I don't know. I don't know much about running things. And I'm no good with accounts and that. But I could always help with the teas. I'll think about it.
>
> **Amy** I'll let Sid know you're interested then, shall I? There's a meeting sometime next month.

Becoming a member

a. By election

The most obvious body to have elected members is the House of Commons, but its size and complexity takes it outside the scope of this book. It is usually the 'management' committees of organisations that have elected members, and such organisations vary, from golf clubs to trade unions, from Parish Church Councils (PCCs) to residents' associations. Elections are expected to be democratic, open and transparent. The people elected will need to have given their agreement to be elected, although that may have been after a bit of arm twisting and lobbying.

There is normally, although not always, an agreed period of service. This can be helpful to both the person elected and the organisation.

For the individual it means there is a time limit to their commitment and they will not get 'stuck' because no one else is willing to stand. For an organisation it means there is a healthy turnover of members without the embarrassment of trying to get rid of a member whose effectiveness disappeared some time ago. Continuity can be very useful, of course, and the constitution of the organisation may well make room for re-election.

The constitution or terms of reference of the body should also make it clear whether the elected person is a **delegate** or a **representative.** The terms loosely mean the same, but their difference is most apparent when it comes to exercising the right to vote. Delegates should vote according to the will of those who elected them, while representatives use their own expertise and power to decide how to vote.

So, for example, while the majority of the electorate might want to have capital punishment, MPs may still vote against it. They are, in this sense, representatives of the people, not their delegates. Most elected members of committees, etc. are representatives, although they will be conscious of and will not ignore the views of those they represent, who in turn may wish to hold them answerable for the decisions they make. In general, however, representatives have a greater freedom to exercise their own opinions.

In order to deal with the most serious issues within the workings of the committee, most bodies have a recognised way of dismissing an elected member, including reference back to the electors and agreed reasons for a dismissal.

b. By invitation

At best this will happen when a group recognises it has need of a particular skill or expertise and seeks out someone who has this and who is willing to join the group. This is a kind of 'head hunting' and could be undertaken even where there is a subsequent election involved, helping to ensure a suitable person is nominated. Such a person may be very pleased to have been invited and brings both commitment and effectiveness.

More often, however, this is a quite informal matter and is the way a group seeks to ensure there are no vacancies. It's a matter of people knowing people and getting them to 'come along'. The informality has its strengths but can be a disadvantage if the person approached proves to be unsuitable or ineffective, especially if there are no formally agreed terms of service.

c. Ex-officio or by role

Whether the majority of members are elected or not, a group may well have members who are present purely because of the role or office they hold, such as the vicar on a PCC, the head teacher on a board of governors, the treasurer on a finance committee. Such people are usually key to the working of the group or organisation. In some situations, however, such as where a clergyperson has an ex-officio position on a trust or a board of governors, they may have no interest in the work of the particular group or simply not enough time to fulfil their membership effectively. In these circumstances, there are normally ways in which they can nominate an alternate person to take their place. This is less likely to occur where a member is present by their role within the organisation – such as secretary or safety officer – rather than because of a role outside it – for example, local parish councillor.

d. By default

No organisation or group seeks to gain members by default but the reality is, especially in voluntary organisations and groups, that there may be some members who feel that they are present merely because no one else would take it on. Metaphorically, when volunteers were asked for, everyone else took a step back, and this left them with little choice. Some such members actually prove to be very effective, but this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. Some just fill a seat at a meeting and contribute little, not really knowing why they are there and probably wishing they weren't.

Numbers

Recent government thinking on school governing bodies has led them to require such bodies to look again at their articles of management and to ensure that there are not too many people on the governing board. The principle is clear: don't just fill bodies with numbers. Make sure the number of people ensures that the work of the meeting is carried out effectively. A dozen is probably a lot better than 25.

As we will see later, effectiveness depends in part on everyone feeling they have a part to play and a contribution to make. Of course, there will be some meetings where the topic under discussion is not in a member's specific area of expertise or interest, and contributions may be more difficult on that occasion. But over a series of meetings everyone should feel they have something to contribute and be able to present their point of view. In large meetings this is less easy to do. It is also easier to 'hide' in a big meeting and to dodge any jobs that emerge from it. Committees are not at their best when they carry passengers.

It is not always possible for the chair or other officers to determine the number of members. That may be set down in the constitution, and where members are elected it may be a matter of the fair representation of a number of interested parties. But if it is felt the numbers are too large, it is always worth the committee itself looking at its constitution and seeing if there are ways to reduce the number so that the committee can be more effective.

Roles and responsibilities

An ad hoc group meeting will normally have been set up for a single purpose, and it should be reasonably clear to all attending what the purpose is.

More permanent groups will usually have a wider remit and it is important that members know not only what the terms of reference of the group are but also what the responsibilities of the members are, both corporately and individually. It is particularly important that new members are made aware of these things.

- Does the body have statutory responsibilities and powers?

- Who is the body answerable to?

- What powers does it have to appoint sub-committees or working groups?

- Are individuals financially liable for the work of the group?

- Is there any legal liability?

So, for example, a sub-committee of a main governing or management group will need to know what precisely is the purpose of the sub-committee and what powers and responsibilities it has. A trust's grant-making body will need to have a clear understanding of the terms of the trust and the criteria it operates in making grants, in order to ensure consistency and fairness as well as legal probity. Other questions a group will need to keep in mind are:

- Does the group have the power to make decisions or is it simply advisory, with only the power to make recommendations?

- If the group has the power to make decisions, are there any limits to the kind of decision it can make?

- Does the group have control over any aspects of a budget? If so, to what level?

- Do any of the members have a pecuniary or other conflict of interest in the matters under discussion by the group? If so, they should be declared.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities also gives clarity to appropriate **boundaries**, and this can help to ensure that a group does not tread on sensitive areas beyond its remit. For example, a school governing body does not have responsibility for the everyday management of the school – that is the head teacher's and senior leadership team's responsibility. It

can cause unnecessary difficulties if a body whose role is strategic and monitoring begins to micro-manage.

In a meeting which involves an enquiry or a disciplinary matter, some members may be present as 'support' for the person under investigation. It is very important that the role of the supporter is well understood, especially with regard to what and how any contribution can be made.

It is also important that roles among members of a meeting are understood – a committee's secretary is not responsible for chairing the meeting, and it is not the PCC treasurer's role to decide what money shall be spent on, although of course they may very appropriately advise on the financial implications of any expenditure. In many groups, the 'officers' are there to offer advice, not to make the final decisions. This can be seen very clearly in meetings of a council where the elected members are there to make decisions but the officers are present to offer advice.

> **Angie** If that Harry has another go at me in the meeting I'll just pack it in. Who does he think he is? It doesn't matter what I say, he always has a go at me. And what does he know about running raffles anyhow? We only sold 37 tickets the time he tried. He's so negative. Thinks he always knows best. I'm sure it's because my Jim beat him in the single's final last year. As though that's got anything to do with it.

Relationships

Personal relationships between members of the group should not affect the work of a meeting, but inevitably they do. They can make for effective meetings or for meetings that are difficult or even unpleasant. Meetings, after all, are between people, not robots.

There are relationships that only exist in the context of the meetings themselves, but most often members know at least some of the group outside the setting of the meetings, either in a social or a work context or both. Admiration, trust and friendship beyond the meeting will have a

positive impact, and mistrust, dislike and grievance a negative impact. It is easy to say that the only things that matter are the purpose of the meeting, the quality of the contributions made, whoever from, and the decisions made. But in practice it is easier said than done. A good chair will be conscious of such relationships and their potential impacts and seek to take them into account while managing the meeting.

Knowledge, experience and expertise

It will be clear from what has already been said that a meeting is not effective when it is made up of people who are simply filling seats. Effectiveness comes from what the members bring to the table and the use they make of it.

The **knowledge** looked for in a member is related to the overall purpose of the group or a specific aspect of its responsibilities. So, for example, the general purpose of a PCC is the oversight of the life of the local church, its congregation and its mission, and within that it will be important that there are members who have financial knowledge, knowledge about buildings, knowledge about the needs of the local community, etc. Similarly, a school governing body that has overall strategic and monitoring responsibilities will need members who have knowledge of educational data, finances, buildings, safeguarding, admission appeals, etc.

A particular meeting may not call upon that specific knowledge, but at some point it certainly will. Any one member of the group cannot be expected to be knowledgeable at any depth on all possible matters, but within the total membership all major aspects should be covered. Total absence of such knowledge will seriously inhibit the effectiveness of the group to carry out its function.

The same is true for **experience** and **expertise**. At the most general level it is important that at least some members at a meeting have experience of the type of meeting being held and the topics being discussed. While it is helpful if new members have some relevant experience, this cannot always be guaranteed. It does, however, raise issues about the way new members are inducted into the life of the group and its meetings.

In some instances, a meeting is held where the group does not possess the expertise needed to make informed decisions on the topic under discussion. An **outside expert** or **consultant** may be brought into the meeting to fill this gap. But the group should have within it sufficient general knowledge to be able to respond to the information and to make sensible decisions as a result. A good dose of common sense will often be sufficient – but not always.

When a group is seeking to fill a vacancy, it can be very important to consider:

- the balance of knowledge and expertise within the group;

- likely future topics to be discussed and the decisions that will need to be made;

- therefore what knowledge and expertise is needed.

Ideally, a new member will be found who fills a major gap.

What this clearly indicates is the importance for both long-standing and ad hoc meetings to have a membership that holds between them the relevant skills, knowledge, experience and expertise if effective work is to be carried out. It is the membership as a whole that needs the range of knowledge and expertise. It does not all have to reside in just one individual. Indeed, the group will be less effective if it is assumed that one member does have all the knowledge – especially if this is the chair.

Personality and role

There is a tendency for us to assume that other people work in the same way we do – or if they don't, they should! Actually, it is a great blessing that people are different, work differently, learn differently, behave differently. The world would be a far less interesting place if they didn't, and most probably the clone-like humans would still be sitting in caves wondering why so little progress seemed to be made.

Various bodies have researched the subtle, complex and fascinating differences that make people who they are. Psychologists study individuals; sociologists investigate the differences in communities and societies. Work has also been done on the different kinds of people that can be found among the membership of a meeting or organisational group and the different ways they have of behaving within the group.

a. The Myers-Briggs® personality inventory

Through the use of a detailed questionnaire, a preferred choice is offered in four different areas. The choice made indicates the personality type in that aspect:

1. Do you prefer to focus on the 'world out there' or on your own inner world? This indicates 'extraversion' (E) or 'introversion' (I).

2. Do you prefer to focus on the basic information you acquire or do you prefer to add meaning and interpretation? This indicates 'sensing' (S) or 'intuition' (N).

3. When you make a decision, do you first consider the logic and consistency or first look at the people and the special circumstances involved? This indicates 'thinking' (T) or 'feeling' (F).

4. When you deal with the outside world, do you prefer to get things decided or prefer to leave things open for new information and options? This is called 'judging' (J) or 'perceiving' (P).

The choices made then give an overall four-letter 'type' – such as ESTJ. There is no 'correct' personality type, and individuals may be strongly one aspect, such as a T (thinker) as against F (feeler), or may actually be a close mix with just a preference for one aspect over another. The preferred 'type' indicates the way individuals most consistently behave and the best kind of contribution they can make. Because there is no 'right' way, it is important that differences are valued and are not a reason for conflict.