

managing meetings

by Susan Hay

Meetings under threat

More and more organisations are looking to maximise the time that can be spent 'in front of the customer.' Although this used to be the preserve of those with a sales role — including managers of early years child care centres — everyone's part in customer service is now frequently quoted as the most competitive aspect of what the organisation does — how it offers its service. This extends both to custom-



The focus of Susan's career has been the development of employer-sponsored work life and child care solutions in the UK. Having started a research and consultancy practice, and built

a network of nurseries in London in partnership with blue-chip employers, Susan successfully merged her own business with Bright Horizons Family Solutions. Susan has been centrally involved in influencing public policy and practice in child care, having acted as an advisor to successive Government, academic and campaigning working parties on the economics of child care provision, and the quality of services. Susan's increasing interest in family wellbeing, and the importance of embracing the UK Government's policy of Every Child Matters across health, as well as education, its impact on the life chances of children and centrality to reducing child poverty, has taken her into a new phase of working life largely in the voluntary and state sectors, holding a number of Trustee and Governorship roles, notably, as a Director of Bright Horizons Foundation for Children in Europe, and founding the charity, Adam's Hats. She maintains links with the work life sector as a freelance consultant.

ers in the traditional, external sense, as well as those in the back room that serve colleagues on the front line. A saying that rings in my memory from the Head of HR at Chic-Fil-A® many years ago: "If you ain't servin' chicken, you're servin' someone who is."

On the face of it, for early years centres, this makes perfect sense: It improves parent and client relations and undoubtedly leads to increased enrolment. However, whilst this may make economic sense, unless carefully managed, it can lead to these individuals becoming customer-facing to an extent that leaves them disconnected from the knowledge held within the organisation, instead becoming islands of information.

E-mail, Blackberries®, and other mobile devices can connect people for brief, transactional exchanges, but the central information pool, which should be shared, discussed, reviewed, and analysed for the benefit of the whole organisation, is at risk of being left to stagnate. We know that most disasters happen because knowledge was not shared between the right people in an organisation; planes don't just drop out of the air and ships don't sink for no reason. Many of the human tragedies we hear about in the press every day, when

investigated, frequently return a verdict of "someone could have done something to prevent this had they had the right information at the right time." This type of knowledge is the result of being able to communicate complex information, of gathering fresh thinking, of challenging the organisation's current ways of working, of gaining consensus and commitment.

So how do we make this happen when employing technology effectively for this purpose is beyond the means of most early years organisations? The answer must be to meet: To bring all those 'customer-facing' people together. The challenge is to do this without having the effort and time involved outweigh the advantage of bringing them together.

What are meetings for?

Meetings are a means of giving people a chance to contribute. Ben Zander, in *The Art of Possibility* (2000), argues that this is the greatest gift you can give to a colleague. Meetings are also the *nursery* where our skills of listening, speaking, and building good working relationships are honed. They are where we practice being courteously challenging and confident, and they are where we

are fascinated and fascinating. I can't remember many fascinating Blackberry® messages! Malcolm Gladwell, in *Outliers* (2008) quotes American psychologist Robert Sternberg who refers to 'practical intelligence' (PI) as knowing what to say, to whom, and when to say it for maximum effect. On the other hand, 'analytical intelligence' is what we know as IQ and is in our genes. PI has to be learned. Meetings are where you can raise the level of your practical PI as you learn to gather the knowledge that helps you read situations correctly, setting aside personal preoccupations to be attentive to another.

Meetings should be a *creative* forum, where ideas are exchanged, current practices are challenged, fresh thinking is evaluated, and consensus is reached. Almost everything else can be done on our cellular devices.

Meetings can be seen as adding value (e.g., thinking of ways of enhancing your service) or they can be reduced to adding cost (e.g., bickering about how to offer it — that can be done more cheaply by e-mail).

Why do we find meetings challenging?

This is often the case because we are not clear about the objectives the meeting seeks to achieve. Nothing is more de-motivating than not understanding why you are in the room or what is expected of you. It is unnerving at best and threatening at worst, and draws out defensive and competitive behaviour. Too many papers tabled at a meeting prohibit proper thinking and reflection and lead to spontaneous, rather than considered responses that are often regretted later. Being asked to respond 'live' to an idea you have not had the opportunity to think about is scary. The result can be that participants feel denied the opportunity to really contribute, or don't speak up at all, and ultimately that a decision has been imposed on them, rather than

the meeting seeking and reaching a genuine consensus. If this is the case, then it is likely that translating the decision into practice will be difficult.

Meetings offer a break from what British philosopher, Raymond Tallis (Bunting, 2010) calls 'e-ttenuation': How faced with a multitude of communication choices, we are reluctant to commit in favour of keeping our options open. A meeting tries to resolve things, participants are motivated to commit and move on, whereas electronic communication provides an opt-out to offer a holding response — at least for awhile. Meetings also offer a break from the power of the written or spoken word alone. Watching something or someone adds value to the experience of the connection being made.

We know this because it matters so much that we look into each other's eyes. It matters so much that we are able to *tune-in* to young children when speech is not yet their main form of communication. Being able to watch can have more, or as much significance, as why or how whatever it was, happened. Watching wildlife programmes on television provides a vivid example of how we read body language and facial expressions to interpret what has been said, and how that expresses relations between the participants.

According to educational psychologist Jean Gross, one in six children has difficulty learning to speak and listen (cited in *The Guardian*, Monday, 11 January 2010 in "Increasingly, the rarest experience in family life is undivided attention," Madeleine Bunting). We are their role models, so it could be argued that it is our responsibility to continue to meet with each other, in order to practise listening with our eyes and with our ears: Firstly how we learn to understand each other better from non-speech, and then from speech

itself. And whilst video-conferencing can achieve some of the benefits of watching, as well as speaking and listening, it does not present a real option for most early years providers.

How can we make meetings more effective?

By their very nature, early years professionals are team players. They thrive in those environments where trust, empowerment, and meritocracy extend from their work with children to the staff room. Early years work relies on good communication, on encouragement, on harmony, on a good sense of humour, on respect for coordination and cohesion in the team. And just as children need attention from us, we need respect as professionals, appraisal, recognition, and praise. Much of this comes from being given appropriate undivided attention, and being able to give and receive attention is a skill that needs to be learned. Much of this learning can be transmitted in meetings.

The role of a chairman or convenor is crucial to meetings' effectiveness, both on the day and in being prepared. Here are some pointers:

- Select the right participants and get their agreement to commit to the whole or the right part of the meeting.
- Provide an agenda that allows participants to rally around a common purpose or goal.
- Guarantee full attention to speakers by reducing the interruption of cell phones and Blackberries®. They're not allowed in theatres and we are all mortified for the actor if someone in the audience forgets to switch off!
- Make positive noises to encourage contributions: "Can anybody add to that?"; "Where do we all stand on that? You start."

- Close down over-talkatives with a 'closed' question: "Are you saying that . . . ?" (which asks for "yes" or "no" — an opportunity to move on).
- Determine the real point of what someone is trying to say.
- Remember that others want to see the chairman in control: Leaning forward to the speaker, or saying "We are straying from the point, aren't we?" or "You are making a point that deserves special attention at another meeting or in another forum."
- Remind participants of significant progress points along the way.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to say their piece.
- Summarise salient points when it is time to move to a decision.
- Avoid taking sides or apportioning blame for lack of progress.
- Check assumptions: "You mean, if we do X, we will achieve Y."
- Clarify actions, their timing, who is responsible, and how decisions will be evaluated.
- Provide a summary of actions without comment, rather than full minutes.
- Make sure decisions are implemented.

In praise of meetings

According to Andy Law, *Open Minds* (1998), "Telephones are always with us, television tells us more, computers have taken the toil away, all have fundamentally changed the way we communicate, but not the way we work. We now just have to be more deliberate about communication in the face of these advances." Law regrets that companies often reduce communication to "setting up

customer relations departments in order to re-create a personal style and promote the brand." Meetings allow that style to flow naturally.

Offering early years services is highly regulated, and being good or better than others is continuously measured. However, it is the human interactions which make or break the service agreement chain. Andy Law (1998) offers his thoughts here: "Creative thinking is a positive generative force that uses imagination to power the business. How do we get all our creative cells to work together for greater advantage?" His organisation, St. Luke's, is a hugely successful advertising agency based in London. Every Monday morning St. Luke's has a 15-minute *Start the Week* meeting to check the pressure points and priorities in the week ahead. It also holds *Flag Meetings* once a month to celebrate and review what has transpired and arranges a *St. Luke's Day* once a year to strategise for the year ahead. All add rhythm and pace, security, and excitement for its staff.

In closing, bringing people together in meetings can be one important tool in your program improvement efforts, particularly when relationships need development. Dedicate the effort and time needed to use meetings sparingly, and to their full advantage, when other forms of communication are not enough.

References

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