Making Project Meetings Work by Dr Penny Pullan

How many hours have you spent in project workshops which have dragged on and on?

How many times have you left a project meeting feeling that it wasn't the best use of your valuable time?

Too many?

Yes? Then you are in good company. I asked these questions to PMI members at a meeting in May. Several people nodded their heads vigorously and there was a murmur of agreement in the room. So I asked them what their top issues were with project meetings. They came back with one hundred and twenty four replies! There's a problem out there…

Let's step back for a moment. What is it about projects today that we have so many meetings and workshops? Dr Mark Winter, who spoke to the PMI in July, described twenty-first century project management as an ever changing flux of events, situations and complex issues. Getting the right people together to tackle these in a productive way is a key activity for all of us twenty-first century project managers. This means workshops and meetings, and, as we've heard, all too often these are missed opportunities.

So, what are the reasons that meetings don't always work as well as they could? According to PMI members, the top issue is *participants*. Sometimes there are 'professional meeting attendees' with no reason to be there. Sometimes, there are 'professional meeting avoiders', who are absent without leave. Senior managers tend not to come when they are needed, and invite themselves when they really should stay away. Of course, unless you have a clear purpose for your meeting, it's hard to know who really should be there – and to challenge those who should not!

How often is the purpose for a meeting clearly stated? An unclear purpose comes second in the list of issues. People often can't see the point of a meeting and this means that they lack a clear picture of what they are there to do.

Provide a clear start: This is a way of getting around many meeting issues. Here's an example - the graphical outline for my presentation for the UK Chapter in London recently. I ran through some key themes. You might like to try the same structure in your own meetings – it really helps to encourage discussion and questions upfront and saves time later.

- *We are here to…* What's the purpose of your meeting today? For us, it was to learn how to make our meetings work better.
- *Today we will…* What are the outcomes you want to achieve by the end? We wanted to gather ideas, try out tools, get inspired and earn pdus (professional development units).
- *Our plan…* What's the agenda today? After coffee, we had fifty minutes for my presentation with ten minutes at the end for questions and answers.
- *Who's doing what…* Who will play which roles in this meeting? As well as the presenter (me!), we needed some volunteers, participants and committee members to host the event.
- *How we work together…* What are the ground rules for this group today? Groups always have rules, even if they are unspoken! Our rules were to have mobiles turned off and to ask burning questions as soon as they arose.
- *What's next…* A record of agreed actions as they come up during the meeting. In our case, this was a reminder to focus on action during meetings.
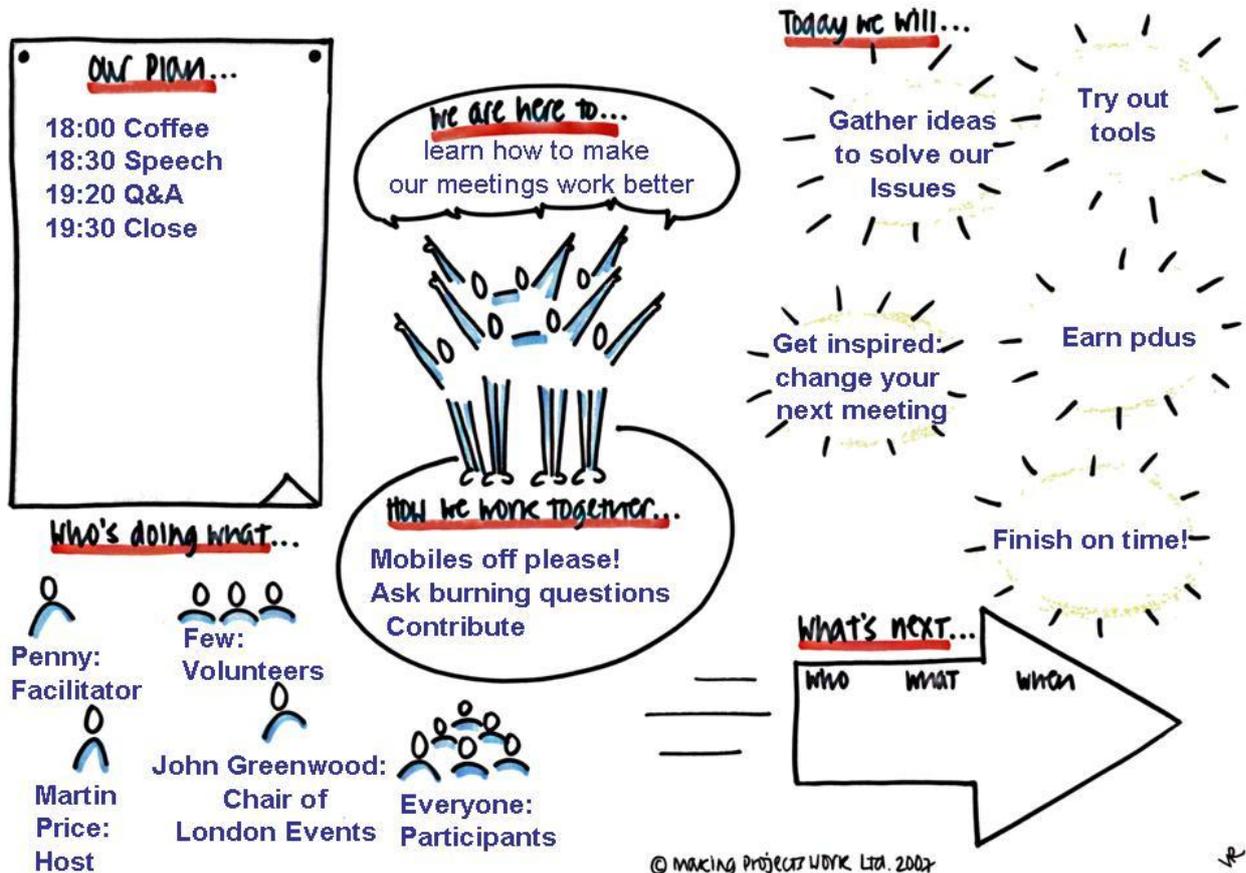
Make sure that everyone can see the complete picture throughout the meeting to provide a clear and agreed overview. Too often, using slides, the overview disappears on the next mouse click! For me, presenting in the BT Auditorium in London, this was a challenge. The room is an amazing, high-tech venue but there just wasn't wall space between the plasma screens to put up a poster –we found a flip chart and that did the trick.

Graphic templates like this can help people see the big picture. It works for virtual meetings too, even using conference calls. A one page overview sent out beforehand can focus the minds of people. I'm currently working on posters that will allow people to use the power of graphics in project workshops and conference calls, without having to draw at all.

Make the most of everyone by designing the environment. Will people be able to discuss issues in small groups? Will everyone be seated as in a lecture theatre, which makes it difficult to come forward to speak out? How will you let people raise issues – anonymous input can be very revealing.

Now what will you do with all those hours you'll free up?

Penny Pullan is a professional facilitator and project manager, whose company Making Projects Work Ltd. is focused on effective meetings.

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