



The Meeting Doctor (MD) aims to address key issues that occur during meetings either from a relationship, management, task, and/or process perspective. Its purpose is to provide prescriptions on how to improve meeting effectiveness with the understanding that there are other, equally good prescriptions available.

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Dear MD:

I'm in a quandary! I'm the manager of an IT department and two months ago we engaged in a full-scale redesign and restructuring of our department. At this point all employees are in cross-functional teams dedicated to a customer group. We had all the teams go through a two-day team formation event and it seemed people were satisfied. I felt people really bought in to the team philosophy. They've also received training for improving their meetings, including some discussion around critical alignment components (i.e. things like the team mandate, roles and responsibilities, consensus, facilitation, etc.).

Now, two months later it seems everything's gone to pot. Some people have stopped attending their meetings and when they do attend, they're all attacking one another – even the quiet ones! The team leaders complain that their members are trying to take over while the leaders are trying to do the best that they can. There also appears to be a lot of resentment to having made this change. I cannot for the life of me understand why people can't accept change!?!

Signed,

Quandary

Dear Quandary:

First, I'd like to say how impressed I am that you kicked your team into gear by starting off with a team formation exercise. So often people are thrown into this "team thing," given a mandate, and told to go for it. Without any training around group dynamics, meeting facilitation, etc., teams tend to flounder at the best, and then those who reluctantly set up teams in the first place have an out. In these circumstances it's not uncommon to hear "I could have told them teams are a waste of time!" or "just keep your heads low, this team thing will be dropped in a few months like that quality joke we did last year!" Does this sound familiar?

You've mentioned that your team may be having difficulty accepting change. This may be the case, however by your assessment it sounds more like they're experiencing some growing pains and requiring an intervention to get them back on track. The good news is that your team has formed and in team developmental language that's stage #1 of four stages in team development. Stage #2 is where I think your team is now. Team theorists call this storming – I call it "puberty." It's like we're dealing with some unruly teenagers who are trying to make their statement in the world with "attitude" playing out big time. At the same time, the team leaders have to manage this behavior and be prepared to deal with conflict and frustration. So how could you do this?

I believe that at this point it is very important the teams stop what they're doing and regroup. I mean, take a half-day for allowing them to vent and get all the issues out on the table followed by some kind of problem solving and action planning. This process of identifying and solving issues is Stage #3 of team development, referred to as norming. It's a quick, transitional step that helps teams get back on track and enter into Stage #4 – performing.

Here's the meeting process that I would recommend:

Step 1

First, get all your teams in one room for this meeting, as there may be issues that are similar at the team, leadership, managerial, departmental, and/or organizational levels. Having everyone present enhances the energy level, identifies overall trends, and validates concerns as part of a normal developmental process. Have each team sit together with their respective members during the event and have their team leaders act as the facilitators. To start off the meeting event, review any previous training literature that identified what a high-performance team looks like. This sets a context for the upcoming discussion. Ask for additional input from the participants.

Step 2

In my experience, there are always some positives that seem to get washed out when the negatives become so pervasive. So to ensure that both the positives and the negatives of teaming come out, I suggest doing a Forcefield Analysis – a Star Trek name for a very simple, practical tool. This tool fleshes out the good, the bad, and sometimes even the ugly! To do this, divide a flip chart in half. As the header of one column, scribe "What currently is helping us achieve high-performance as a team?" In the other column, scribe "What currently is not helping us achieve high-performance as a team?" Have the team leaders help their team prioritize the most urgent and high-impact issues that the team has some control over versus low impact, externally controlled issues (i.e. ineffective meetings versus departmental budgets).

Step 3

Once the issues have been prioritized, have each team pick what they perceive to be their #1 issue – typically the easiest to solve and has the greatest impact on helping the team become more high-performing. Start brainstorming solutions. Make sure the team leaders encourage creativity and monitor any members' attempts to invalidate another team member's idea. Sometimes members may feel insecure in putting forth their issues because they don't want to feel singled out. When anonymity is required, have members write their ideas down, one per post-it note. Throw the papers in a pile and redistribute them randomly for presentation and scribing purposes.

Step 4

From the array of collected solutions, have members then discern easy from not-so-easy solutions to implement. Once the easy solutions have been identified, start to action plan. My favorite format for action planning includes: What the solution / activity is? How we're going to go about doing it? Who's responsible? When's it going to be done? What will the results look like? Who's going to monitor this plan to ensure it gets done? Make sure that the team leaders challenge the realism of the prescribed actions – are these actions doable? There is nothing like enhancing poor employee morale by having a team go through an action planning session with no resulting follow-up!

Step 5

If time permits, have the teams go on to their second highest priority issue. If no time is left, these issues then become the immediate focus of their upcoming meetings. At the very least, once the plans are made have the teams present their issue/action plan to the other teams for feedback and validation (i.e. this is what we liked about your solution(s) and this is what we think you could improve on). This process helps the teams feel part of the larger departmental picture. This will provide better objective input to solutions that may be unrealistic or require additional information that only other teams may be able to provide.

As the manager, make sure that the teams feel your support for these non-task activities. Too often management has teams facilitate the norming event, but are unwilling to help the teams with the necessary resources to help them get back on their feet (i.e. time, coaching, team leader training, etc.). What you've noticed already are the consequences of not maintaining the team process which, when avoided, significantly impact all task related activities.

At the end of this event, you may even want to have your senior manager attend for purposes of positive support and confirmation of the team process. This is where challenging up becomes necessary and demonstrates your commitment to the team initiative.

My experience is that this norming process occurs quite frequently as teams, especially in this day and age, will regress back to storming as a result of any organizational changes (i.e. new team leader, new team member, new mandate, etc.) So be prepared to do the above activity a number of times.

Good luck!

