Have traditional meetings reached their expiry date?

Anthropologists trace meetings of humans back to prehistory, when for millennials they served the purpose of ensuring survival. Researchers have actually found that a contemporary hunter-gatherer tribe in the Philippines have maintained an earlier form of meetings which is called upon to discuss "marrying and killing"…

We have all observed how meeting life has changed with remote working from having meetings in slippers to using the strangest room of our home as we hide behind virtual backgrounds. Numerous studies carried out during the covid crisis observe greater discipline with start-end of meetings. Allegedly our working days have lengthened by almost an hour as lines between work/private life get blurred and as the number of meetings have increased. Meeting volume has increased but has its usefulness? Many are still too frequent, poorly run, displaying uncollaborative behaviour or with the wrong attendees. We have largely copy-pasted physical team habits to virtual team habits without giving much thought to rethinking the act of meeting.

A lot of good and recent advice has been written on meeting management and effectiveness. A deeper fix to meeting-mania however begs the following question: why do we really need to attend that next meeting?

Crowd wisdom, really?

Conventional wisdom implies that if you face a large complex problem, or want a good decision, you have to bring a lot of people around the meeting table. Cass Sunstein, an ex-Obama adviser and author of a book on the functioning of groups, thinks group deliberation is overrated as groups tends toward uniformity and censorship, especially if they are highly cohesive or if they are led by a highly directive manager. Groups can even amplify individual errors. The key to smarter groups in Sunstein's view, is to access unshared, new information to improve the effectiveness of collaboration and especially decision-making. This might suggest a new filter for attending/calling a meeting: consider whether each attendee, including yourself, really have something new to bring to the meeting? The hardest of all might be to accept that our own attendance is not so vital.

More control, to add value or calm our insecurities?

Our current crisis-environment is a rich source of complex problems. Yves Morieux, the author of *Smart Simplicity* and partner at the Boston Consulting Group, observes that organisations often respond to complexity with more processes, meetings, and eventually more bureaucracy.

Some managers might also be tempted to use meetings as an instrument of control and exercise their power as they adjust to the remote relationships with their team. In fact, Morieux advocates instead a shift toward "managerial added value" as a source of greater productivity and engagement. This could be an invitation to evolve leadership practices and the opportunity to come up with a post-Covid new motivational "deal" between managers and their teams. Greater self-management could probably work as it meets the regular demands of top talent and new generations in engagement surveys. Leadership behaviours too would also need to evolve in creating an environment conducive to productivity and initiative. Although that could prove more challenging.

Indeed, a new motivational deal would not just be directed at the team, it starts with managers accepting to revisit their role, not feeling threatened by letting go a bit more. David Marquet, a former US commander who experimented empowerment with his submarine crew questions the point of hiring smart people if you end up telling them what to do.

Managers of a team could reduce the number of meetings they create by considering the following question: what is my source of "managerial added value" and as a consequence the legitimacy of my role? Commander Marquet advocates to move authority to where the information is, not the other way around. This requires a continuous investment in ensuring the team has clarity on the team's mission and the competence to engage in the mission. The opportunity for the motivational "deal" can be significant and especially before we are tempted to revert to old habits in a post-Covid world.

Boredom to test meeting ROI

We cannot ignore the simple pleasures and benefits of meetings: companionship, fun, stimulation, learning etc…All good reasons and contributing to making work a more fulfilling activity. All these factors are more implicit and intuitive. So why not also use more our intuition in assessing the usefulness of attending a meeting. I still remember the day when in a simulation of team effectiveness, Manfred Kets de Vries, a professor of leadership, stormed the room and told me I looked bored. I was uncovered. I embarrassingly had to reveal to my team why, being bored by two team members locked into an endless and side-tracked debate. This sparked a tense but then an incredibly fruitful discussion about the purpose of our meeting. This allowed me to re-engage. You might not always have an insightful observer, but if you agree upfront with the team to use safely and respectfully a "boredom" card, it might also enhance your meetings and even clarify the desirability of everybody's presence.

Most of us complain about the meeting culture in our organisations, the first lever, surprisingly is ourselves and which meetings we decide to attend. So how about moving from "marrying and killing" to "enjoying or leaving"?

To find out more:
Studies on changes to office life and meetings during Covid
- https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-03/the-pandemic-workday-is-48-minutes-longer-and-has-more-meetings
- https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/11/success/more-work-from-home-meetings-work-transformed/index.html

On meeting effectiveness
- https://hbr.org/2017/07/stop-the-meeting-madness
- https://execed.economist.com/blog/industry-trends/how-stop-wasting-your-time-and-everyone-elses-meetings
- https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-combat-virtual-meeting-fatigue/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Read%20the%20new%20article%20now%20»&utm_campaign=Enews%20GEN%203/30/2021

On Smart Simplicity, Yves Morieux, (book, Smart Simplicity, 2014) and articles
- https://www.bcg.com/en-es/publications/2018/bringing-managers-back-to-work
- https://www.jabra.com/blog/yves-morieux-how-managers-can-beat-organizational-complicatedness/

On empowerment, David Marquet's video: https://youtu.be/pYKH2uSax8U

On the anthropological origins of meetings - https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nale_Lehmann-Willenbrock/publication/339985080_The_Origins_and_Evolutionary_Significance_of_Team_Meetings_in_Organizations/links/5e75d75a92851cf2719a546a/The-Origins-and-Evolutionary-Significance-of-Team-Meetings-in-Organizations.pdf?origin=publication_detail