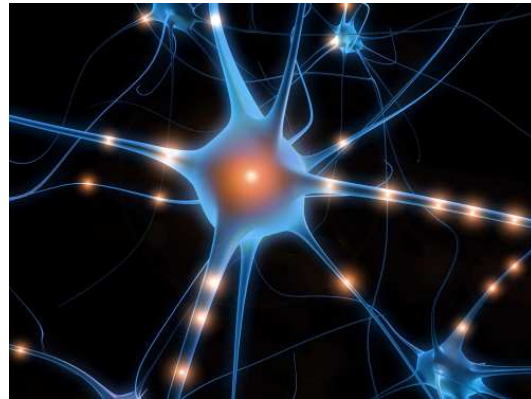


How does your organisation think?

*How to **POP** your meetings and develop a toolbox for genuine collaborative working.*

In my work I often pose the question "How does your organisation think and I will get answers such as 'creatively' or 'on its feet'. I ask it again and gently probe beyond those first answers as the question is more about the processes at work when an organisation, or indeed any group of people, thinks collectively.



The answer is so obvious that many people overlook it completely - dialogue. Organisational thinking is people talking and listening to each other. Some joint thinking will take place through e mails and reports, people reading and making responses for example but there will usually be a form of dialogue at some point in a face to face meeting or phone call.

So that is it, an act that is fundamental to our everyday lives both in and out of work. We can take it for granted in the sense that it will happen but think of the performance and productivity gains of making it more effective and more efficient at the same time. Paying attention to our talking and listening and improving it even just a little bit has great benefit; makes a positive change to the 'bottom line' and yet costs very little.

Don't let yourself be told any different, these processes are incredibly simple. When something is simple, people tend to create complexity around it. They elevate it into a science and create an elaborate jargon. That in turn creates a mystique and confusion that makes us unwilling to even attempt the simple things that will make a big difference to how we think together.

Good dialogue needs good preparation, not necessarily laborious but again paying attention to some fundamental things. Getting people to the right place at the right time; preparing them and yourself to get the intended outcomes and considering some options for the process of the dialogue to achieve those outcomes. Next time you are about to 'pop' a meeting in the diary, consider the **POP** below:

- **Purpose:** Do you always give this enough thought? I often hear the process of the meeting confused with the purpose. 'This meeting is to explore the ideas for X'. tells me the process NOT the outcome we want to achieve. Lets say the stated outcome is to 'decide the specific ideas for X that we will work on and agree next steps'. Now it is clear that you should walk out of the meeting with a shorter list of ideas and some agreements about how they will be taken forward. It engages me. I know I am attending a meeting to choose ideas and that there will be action to follow. Be **EXPLICIT** about Purpose.

*Vital question: **WHAT** is this meeting intended to achieve?*

- **Outcomes** When you achieve your purpose, if it was correctly stated you will have outcomes. Make sure you have a round up that includes agreement on next actions and sets deadlines for them – obvious? In a study at Microsoft **56% of actions were rarely or never recorded!** Make

the outcomes EXPLICIT.

*Vital question: **WHAT** do we need to do next? **WHO** does it & by **WHEN**?*

- **Process:** You sit in a meeting, the chair, if there is one, introduces the meeting and waits for the first person to speak – familiar? There are so many exciting and engaging ways to improve conversation. Learn about some and start to use them regularly. Just sitting around a table does not create magic on its own. Any dialogue is richer for the participation of varied voices not just the usual ones. The process should be planned and having a toolbox of approaches that can be deployed when participation is low can be a real advantage. For instance, try using scales [on a scale of 1 – 10 where are we now?]; allow people a few minutes to think about an issue that arises and jot notes before offering these back to the group; map the conversation using flipcharts or sticky notes; stopping the meeting for a round of comments so far. All of these things help to break out of dull meeting syndrome and draw people fully into the conversation.

*Vital questions: **HOW** can we work best to achieve the outcome?*

So the 2 P's are for planning [Purpose/ Process] and the O is about making sure the outcomes are explicit and recorded. Having improved your meetings with **POP**, you can move on to stage 2 where considerable organisational savings of time and money can be made. This involves asking "do we all need to meet together or would something else be better?" If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Is calling a meeting the right response to every issue?

It could be time to develop a toolbox for collaboration that gives you greater variety than just the mass 'get together' meeting. Here are some ideas:

- **Put yourself at the centre:** in effect you become a project or task hub, having individual meetings with people can be very effective and much more time efficient. Have short focused meetings when you need them. Use up the end of mornings or afternoons for these leaving time available for your own work. Meet together only when really necessary for your purpose.
- **Publish information:** meetings to give out information are a waste of time for everyone. Get into the habit of creating newsletters by e mail that people can read when they have time and respond if they really need to. Encourage direct replies only and discourage the reply to all. The fact is a round of 'activity review' at the start of a meeting saps energy and gives most people information they don't need. When it is written they can select.
- **Have clear criteria:** have meetings only when decisions need to be made or joint problem solving is desirable. Data gathering and information giving are best done in other ways such as by e mail, telephone or 1:1.
- **Find other ways to network & exchange:** chance discussions are the creative heart of any organisation. Connections made at random can be highly productive but meetings are not the best place for this. With the time saved you can allow work time networking that allows people to relax and talk about what matters to them. There are some great formats for this such as Open Space or World café – find out about them and timetable creative sessions.

I hope that you find this useful and are thinking that this could be relatively easy to put into practice. At Summerhouses: dialogues at work we advise organisations on how to make the best use of time through simple changes. If you think we could help you then give me, Phil Aspden a call on 01617488845 or e mail philaspden@summer-houses.eu. Because I do use the methods above – I will always have time to talk to you!