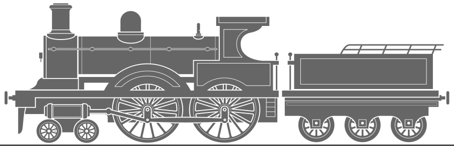

Train Ride Reading
February 2009

Overcoming The Cult Of Action

Conventional wisdom on effective meetings is too narrow.

We live in a time of bold action. A year ago it would have been unthinkable to throw around GDP-size amounts of money to support the economy – now we barely blink and wonder whether this is actually too timid.

Yet there is a palpable sense of unease: In this crisis, bold and swift action has clearly been prioritised over gaining a proper understanding of the economic processes. Is this sensible? Would not a bit more insight and a bit less rushed action be better?

It is impossible to know at the moment. But we can ask the same insight/action question on a much smaller scale – and gain very practical business benefits right now. - If you read this on your way home from work chances are that you have just concluded several hours of meetings – formal and informal, internal and external, small one-to-one chats and large group sessions, consensual and controversial ones. There is abundant literature on how to get the most out of meetings, and plenty of good advice that does not need repeating. However, there is a little blind spot, a missed opportunity, in much of what has been written.

Conventional wisdom says that a meeting is a good meeting if it ends with a clearly defined set of actions. It is an even better meeting if those actions are documented and have owners assigned to them. "Meeting Nirvana" is when those actions are indeed put into practice.

It seems that, as in the handling of the economic crisis, action trumps everything else. But on occasions this leaves an uneasy feeling – sometimes it just seems contrived to squeeze the obvious progress made in a meeting into a set of actions.

This is not because of laziness, or an aversion to commit, or a reluctance to push colleagues to deliver results. A meeting can be incredibly valuable and yet end without a single action – because its fruits are not actions but understanding and insight.

Let me give you an example: A software development team meets to work out the design for, say, an accounting package. Ideas and arguments fly around, the whiteboard is repeatedly filled with diagrams, and, slowly, a rough structure is emerging. While there may well be follow-up actions such as prototyping certain aspects of the system, adjusting the project plan, or clarifying requirements with the customer, equally valuable results may be insights such as -

- "The problem is structurally similar to the Health Care Record system developed last year."
- "Processing of accounting entries will be heavy, hence it is worth writing code with performance in mind."
- "Requirements can be expressed as three fundamental types of transactions. Using this language simplifies the design."

- “The CTO lacks certain specialist knowledge to fully appreciate some of the constraints.”
- “It does not make sense to be inspired by competing products since their product history ties them to legacy platforms and accounting practices.”

Let's be explict about why these insights are valuable: They cannot be followed up, measured, assigned, tracked – but if they are internalised and understood by everyone in the meeting they give something much more useful: a background and context for future actions and decisions, including those that could not be anticipated at the time of the meeting.

> *The user interface designer will go away from the meeting and consider what can be reused from that earlier health care project. He and the rest of the team will remember the dead ends and pitfalls and transfer the lessons learnt from them.*
>
> *When it comes to preparing the first progress update for the board, the project manager remembers insight items 3 and 4 to create a presentation that is appropriate for a non-technical audience but still true to the architecture of the system.*
>
> *The consulting accountant on the project will stop pestering the software engineers with tales of how things are done in Sage and instead force herself to consider from scratch what makes a good accounting package.*

Insights empower people to take day-to-day decisions on their own while remaining aligned with their team. Insights form a solid foundation for a broad range of actions – in particular those that could not be anticipated or planned at the time of the meeting. While the conventional list of actions after a meeting leads to clearly defined progress, a list of insights has a less direct but much more far-reaching impact.

Best practice for meeting actions is fairly uncontroversial – they need to be well-defined, have a single owner who commits to them (ideally in the meeting), they need to be tracked, etc. What is the equivalent best practice for meeting insights? It is clearly not enough if the chairperson walks away from a meeting thinking “yeah, we have probably all learnt something in the past two hours”. Making the most out of meeting insights starts in the meeting itself. Towards the end of the meeting, it is sensible to -

- Pull together the main insights and jot them down on the whiteboard.
  Ask “what have we learnt”, not just “what are we going to do”.
- Find out whether there is <u>consensus</u> on the insight items. This is an important step and roughly equivalent to getting a person's commitment to a meeting action. How controversy is handled depends on the situation but it is rarely a good idea to gloss over it – it will come back and bite. At the very least, the insight item can be rephrased as “There is disagreement over … ”.

When sending round the meeting summary afterwards (you do this, don't you?) the insights are included alongside any action items and decisions. For larger projects, collating insights from multiple meetings on some internal workspace (company wiki) is a nice way of *concisely* documenting the collective knowledge that has been created.

This all sounds quite pedestrian – but the "Cult Of Action" around meetings is so pervasive in many organisations that it can appear somewhat revolutionary. Yes, you can indeed have a perfectly productive meeting without a single action nor decision at the end. After all, if a meeting leads to people working more smoothly and efficiently for a long time afterwards – how could it be regarded as a waste of time?

Empowering people in this way may even reduce the need for future planning and progress meetings, and it stops teams from going round in circles in their collective thinking.

Break the habit, renounce the "Cult Of Action"! Meeting actions do have their place but blinkered exclusivity wastes your and your team's potential.

Sebastian Hallensleben is a specialist coach, facilitator, and writer. Prior to this, he worked in a variety of technology management and technical leadership roles in telecoms and financial services. He can be contacted by phone on +44 (0) 203 051 3349 or by email on sebastian@solysis.com. More details are available on the web at www.solysis.com.