

Stop wasting valuable hours of your life in meetings!

Why so many meetings are boring, inefficient and pointless and how you can change it

Let's take a look at it from the point of view of various participants. Some typical thoughts that occur depending on their perspective...

An employee: "They've been talking for hours and I don't even know why I'm here... oh well, I'll just check my emails on my Smartphone..."

Another employee: "They've been talking for hours about things that I'll have to deal with later but I can't get a word in edgeways..."

An expert: "Why do they keep interrupting me? There are some really important details that need to be considered which can have an enormous impact on the project..."

Another expert: "Why bother.... no matter what you say, in the end the boss will decide whatever's best for him regardless whether it is sensible or not..."

Manager: "I can't stand this drivel very much longer... if they don't get to the point soon, I'll just make a decision regardless whether it is the best solution or not..."

If you recognize yourself in one or more of these perspectives, you might find it well worth your while to read the next few paragraphs.

Why meetings can be so awful and what it costs

A few figures to get started: a survey of 1,800 German managers turned out the following results: 68% spend up to 50% (in average 31%) of their time in meetings. According to their estimates only about 41% of meetings or of the time spent in meetings is productive, leaving 59% of unproductive time. The other 32% spend more than 50% (in average 61%) of their time in meetings. The estimates here get even worse: only 21% of these meetings or of the time spent in the meetings is productive, leaving 79% unproductive.

Let's derive a little calculation from these results:

100% of managers spend at least an average of 31% of their time in meetings and believe that 59% of that time is unproductive. If you were responsible for productivity and finances of a company you should be knitting your brow: what it means is that 18% of management resources are being wasted.

It gets worse: the most dissatisfied are the representatives of higher levels of management. They say that they spend an average of 61% of their time in meetings and 76% of them are unhappy with their productivity. The same calculation as above yields that 46% of the time of higher management, the leaders of the company (!), is being wasted.

If you want to feel a little worse, just work out what that can mean in terms of cost for a company....

So what are the typical problems that so often make meetings run this disagreeable course? You have probably already read books that list the 10 don'ts of meetings etc. and I can only confirm that they are probably all true.

If we look a little closer, a few interesting fantasies come to light that contribute to the meeting problem...

The fantasy that the meeting is “only” about the matter at hand

If that were the case, we would simply fill computers with data, program evaluation algorithms and accept the results as the best possible solution. Who would want to work for a company like that? Not I.

Humans are sociable creatures and want to communicate with one another. A horrible experiment at the end of the middle ages illustrated this: Emperor Maximilian wanted to study “natural speech” and ordered newborn infants to be brought up with every available luxury and care, with a single rule: the nurses were not permitted to speak a single word to the children nor to communicate with them with gestures or in any other way. The Emperor hoped that the test children would start speaking the original language of mankind. The poor children all died long before they would have been able to talk.

Humans need relationships and relationships define much more of the content than some would like. The research group around Don D. Jackson, Paul von Watzlawick and Virginia Satir at the MRI in Palo Alto has proven this repeatedly and published their results in a number of books amongst which „Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies & Paradoxes”. Karl Kraus said the same in more humorous terms, more easily usable in the context of meetings: “Humans must communicate even when it is insignificant”.

The fantasy that everyone always has to attend...

It is a common opinion that the more people participate in a meeting the better because it raises levels of identification with the results. That is true enough but in practice it means that invitations are sent out to liberally. It is called the cc effect from the sadly all too common practice of sending emails to as many people as possible via cc.

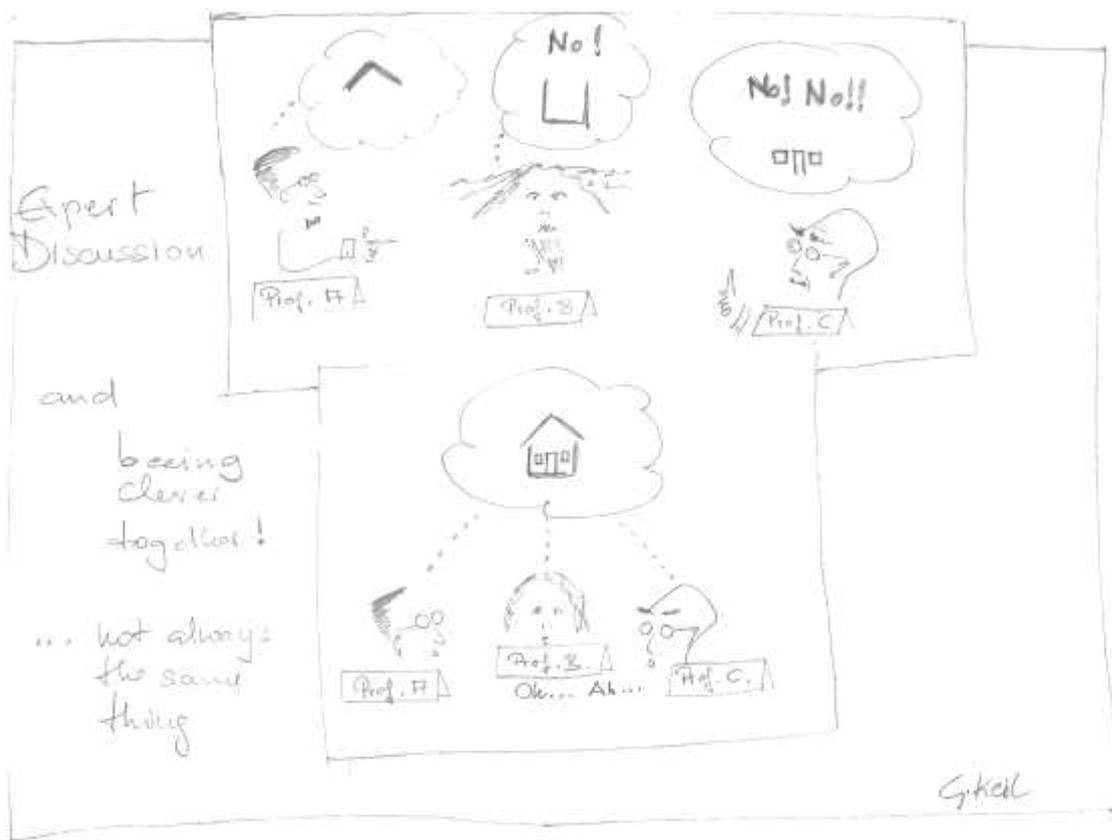
As mentioned before, relationships play an often underestimated role in meetings: you may have a different estimate how large the open or hidden influence of relationships on meetings is but I am assuming we can agree that relationships need to some extent to be “managed”. Do you recognize at least one of the following comments? “We must take care: that is a sore topic for Mr X...” “Please be careful, Mrs Z could take that badly...” “Don’t introduce the topic of filling the vacancy: Mr Z and Mrs X are both applying for the post...” etc. etc.

Put it this way: when only 2 people speak to each other, the complexity of the relationship equals 1. When a further person is added, the complexity rises to 3. With 4 people the complexity is at 6 and 5 people are managing 10 different relationships. And that can be incredibly demanding!

The next effect in the chapter “everyone always has to be there” is as follows: if each person were to be given their equal share of time, then in a meeting of one hour and 6 participants, each person would be allowed to speak for 10 minutes and would have to listen for 50 minutes. Some may have more to say than others and some may like to say more but one thing (almost) everyone has in common: they prefer to talk than to listen.

So what often happens at meetings with more than 10 people that last longer than 1.5 hours: asides, email communication, gentle snoozing or sudden, urgent topics being added to the agenda... There is a good enough reason to take the warning seriously: please decide carefully, who really needs to be there.

And because it is this about identification with the subject matter and with the results and that identification is more commonly born of doing something together and not of listening, here is another time critical effect best described by the Bavarian comedian Karl Valentin when he said: “It has all been said but not yet by everyone.”



The fantasy that there should be a meeting for everything

“...and so I would like to conclude that in future all pencils will be ordered in red and not blue in better compliance with CI!” 12 people nod.

In the course of my research I have often noticed that topics were given inappropriate importance in meetings or that meetings were misused for topics that were not obviously relevant.

There are many reasons for this.

To start with: insufficient perceived appreciation (my topics are important too and I want to have my limelight at this meeting). It is irrelevant whether it is their need to profile themselves or their inferiority complexes that make people want to discuss non-meeting matters in a big circle.

It can also be the control addiction of some big chairman that makes even members of higher management prefer to call up a large meeting, making as many people share the responsibility just in case something goes wrong rather than making decisions independently or with just a minimum of coordination. It is a popular trick to circumvent responsibility by always being able to arm oneself with the excuse that everyone was consulted in advance and gave their approval.

Even though it only takes a little common sense to know who can contribute valuable content and who should therefore be present at the meeting, the non-topic-related effects still play a major role. Once again we see that logic and rational justification are not enough to make a meeting efficient, relevant, result-oriented and fun. Yes, fun. I'll come back to that a little later.

The fantasy that someone who can talk, can communicate

This one amuses me most. The statement “someone who can talk, can communicate” is about as true as saying “someone who can write numbers is a mathematician”. Those most in danger of succumbing to this disastrous error are high level experts in recognized fields of expertise.

In my experience so far, the most difficult groups have been people with technical degrees, lawyers and specialized doctors, followed closely by university professors. (If you belong to one of these groups my apologies in advance for the necessarily unfair generalizations! Still, I would be glad of your feedback as to whether in your experience discussions amongst colleagues are not a lot more strenuous than in other groups!)

I can for example prove that in expert discussions the following communication problems occur most frequently: instead of trying to achieve common understanding by collecting facts and creating a collective overview and only then evaluating the issues and initiating the necessary discussions, the participants focus on heated and embittered discussions about details of facts and circumstances that appear to be subject to disagreements. Nobody checks whether the topic is even relevant or whether the discussion serves the greater goal.

Do you know who is served by such discussions? Egos and the competition. Once again we note that the matter at hand is pushed to the background by other, emotional and “human” motives.

The fantasy that knowing how to do something means doing it

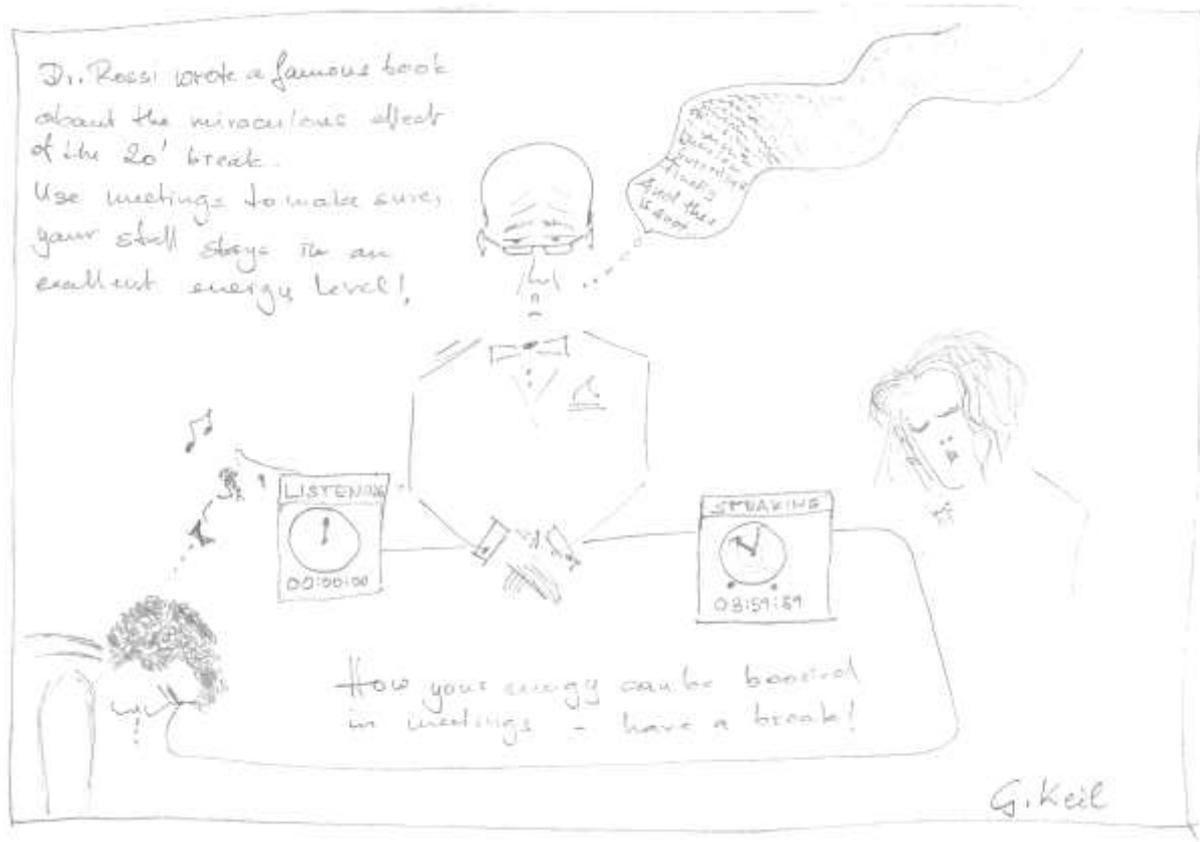
How many people do you know who know that smoking is unhealthy and who know how to stop but who still don't stop smoking?

Or the issue with physical exercise: most people know it would be supporting one's health but still we don't do it. In many situations of our life we know what we should do, what would be best for us, the situation, for others involved. But still, we don't do it.

Once again: I won't bore you with the usual rules for efficient meetings. You probably know them as well as I do. Particularly when it comes to meetings, all you need is commonsense (and to put the inspirations of commonsense into practice) to realize what makes meetings successful, or to be more precise, what could make meetings more successful.

Because to know about something, does not necessarily mean to be able to handle this. I know about Golf but unfortunately I cannot play properly. And even if I knew how to play golf, it does not automatically mean that I am following all rules to be obeyed in order to play correctly.

You have just read a selection of the most prominent reasons why that doesn't happen! Not being used to it, being too lazy and finding good reasons why not to do it are amongst them.



A simple approach to making things better...

“Technology always develops from the primitive, via the complicated, to the simple.” (A. de Saint-Exupéry). When it comes to meetings, we have been down this path and I don’t want to set up a complicated system (that nobody can use because that is exactly what it is: complicated). I want to give you a few simple tips that should help you avoid the experiences I have described up until now. If you need a more complex solution, I would be happy to help, so don’t hesitate to get in touch.

Simple.

Whilst describing the problematic fantasies I kept coming back to a few main pillars or elements that are always at work in meetings:

Relationships. Purpose. Facts. Emotion.

The list starts with relationships for good reasons but you should start your own deliberations with...

...purpose

Ask yourself the first question. What is the purpose you wish to fulfill by calling this meeting? Ultimately there are 4 goals (not reasons why!) that motivate people come to a meeting:

1. Social contact (relationships are back in pole position)
2. Information
3. Development of new solutions
4. Decisions

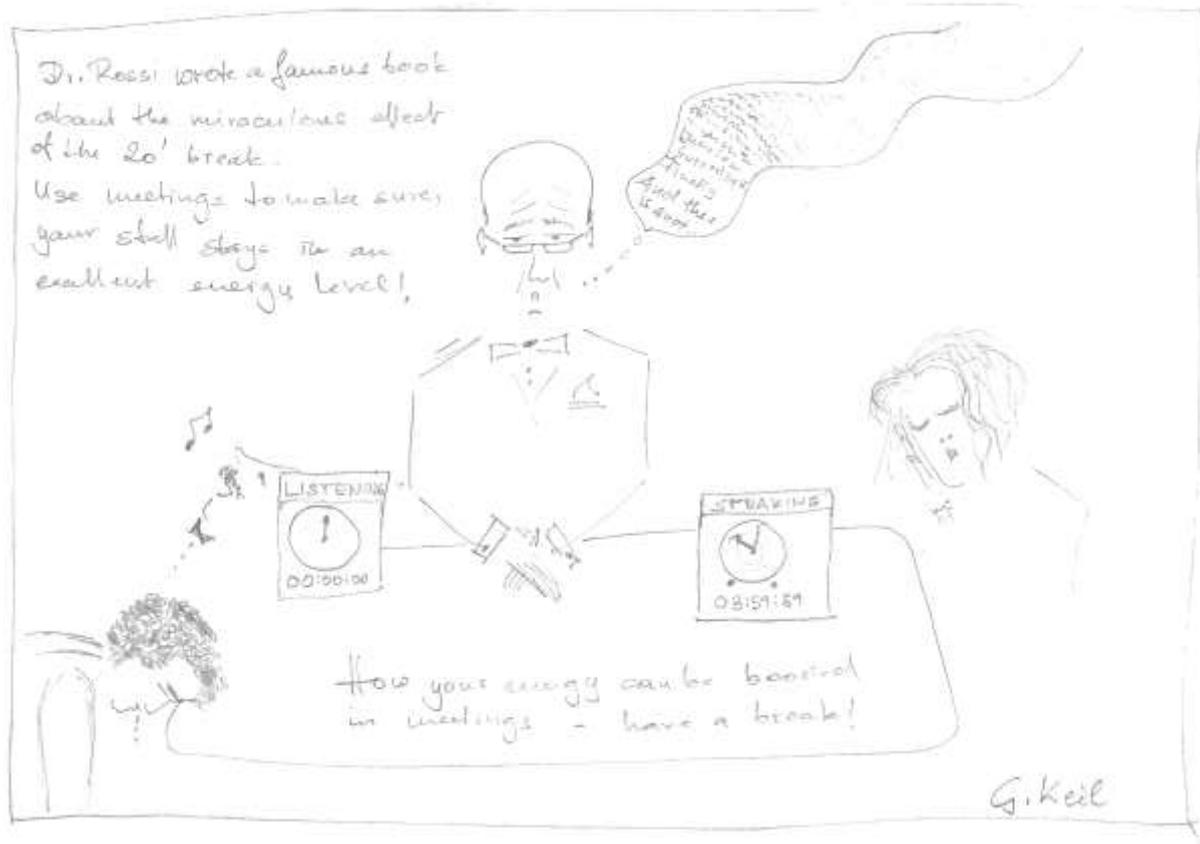
...and actually, to agree on actions in order to make their own goals, wishes, dreams... reality. Or to put it simply: to create facts.

What does this mean for meetings? Just add the ultimate goal of the meeting to the word meeting and you are already inviting to an information meeting, a development meeting or a decision meeting. And not just to a meeting. Taken literally: you will have fulfilled the purpose of a meeting when you have met and the purpose of a discussion when you have spoken.

If you have invited to a “Meeting about the new car policy”, then it is sufficient to have exchanged ideas, explained other company policies on the subject, just listened or caught up on your email correspondence, to have fulfilled the purpose of the meeting. What happens if you have invited your colleagues and staff to a “Decision-making meeting on the topic of the new car policy” (a dreaded topic because it is always emotional – not only for male participants) and then you fail to make any decisions? It becomes clear that the assembled team was not able to fulfill the purpose of the meeting.

It is quite simple:

Give your meetings the name of their purpose eg. Decision-making meeting for ... and much will change.



Relationships

„I just liked the teacher...“ is a common answer if you ask someone why they were good in maths, history or another particular subject. A good relationship is a powerful motivator to focus on a subject.

Co-operation works better when the relationship between people is friendly rather than just topic-related or professional. How do you enter into a relationship? By liking a person, thinking about them... maybe. But more often by going towards the person and exchanging a few words with them. Even just by talking about the weather, you can build a relationship. (Please don't understand that as a recommendation to stock up your repertoire of small talk with a list of weather-related remarks!)

You maybe recall the small matter mentioned earlier of the need to communicate. Now imagine you have called a meeting with an interesting topic. There will be people coming who like each other, people who do not and people who haven't seen each other for a while and just want to catch up but they all have one thing in common: a need for contact.

Use this need for contact and relationship and start your meeting with the agenda item: bilateral exchange of information. You could of course call it check in coffee, warm up round or general meeting over coffee but then many people would only come to the official start and they would still have the need to chat to their neighbor, to ask if they missed anything etc.

That is why it helps if an important person within the company is present at the bilateral exchange of information, at least the first few times. You'll soon notice that the agenda item is particularly appreciated and you might even find it difficult to move onto the more structured part of the meeting.

Our experience shows that this 15 minute investment at the beginning of a long meeting is well worth it since it means that the participants have already established contact and do not need to use the more impersonal topics within the formal framework to make contact. Especially as this can be quite difficult.

When you do start the meeting make...

...the purpose...

...clear again: the „what for“ that brings you together. How often have I seen meetings begin with “Today we will be discussing the introduction of a new CRM system...” and that is exactly what happens. They discuss it! But no decisions are made, no responsibilities distributed, nothing written down about who will do what until when... they just talk. Exactly as it was announced in the introduction!

Try to imagine what is going through the mind of a meeting participant when at the beginning of a meeting they are told: “In today’s decision-making meeting we will define the functions of the new CRM and the measures necessary for implementation including deadlines and responsibilities.” By using this effect called priming you set peoples’ expectations to feel that without decisions and the definition of actions, the whole exercise was pointless. Simple, isn’t it?

Facts...

... are necessary for decisions. On the one hand to check the plausibility and on the other hand as arguments to convince people about the goals you are trying to reach.

But how do you get the relevant facts? Usually there are more than one clever heads around the table that could and should provide facts, whether from marketing, sales, legal, production, engineering or personnel.

Experts are an important source of information but not everything is relevant to every topic. The art is to work with the intelligence, the creativity and the knowledge of other people to get exactly the information necessary for decision making and piece it together to a complete picture.

That means using the collective intelligence of the group. We have run various simulations that prove that statistically speaking the collective intelligence of a group is better than an individual intelligence. To this effect we asked a group of people to make a ranking of priorities on the basis of incomplete information, first individually, and then to discuss the ranking in the group and deliver it as a result of a consensus within the group. A correct ranking by priority was only possible with the collective information of the group. The individual results differed according to the person’s capacity to work with partial information.

Between 1994 and now the result in 90% of the simulations studied have delivered the same qualitative results:

- The mathematical average in more than 90% of the cases was better than the best individual result.

- Depending on the maturity of the co-operation within the group, the result of the discussion was worse or better than the mathematical average.
- The most important weak point was the commitment of the group to the result. The participants usually didn't feel that the result of the discussion was right but that their own result was the correct one (which of course contradicts the idea of "CONSENSUS") So they often stayed with their original result and by that did not go for the better ranking from the group.

In short: the challenge is not only to collect existing information but to create a concordant, lasting, common picture, where everybody feels committed and aligned to go for it. But isn't that the final purpose of meetings? Beneficially working with the knowledge and the talents of all the people involved, getting a focus on what has to be achieved?

What helps? The three rules of discussion:

1. Collect information first, before evaluating
2. Look for points of agreement before addressing differences
3. First create an overview before collecting details



Emotion - joy

What most meeting initiators or decision makers want, is the commitment of the meeting participants to the decisions made and to their subsequent implementation.

Here is a question: how do you bring commitment into the factual context?

Commitment is an emotional quality in reference to a topic. To give an example: if someone sees the following fact as correct: “it is necessary to cancel a holiday and to continue working in order to achieve a project result” but is not committed to the goal, to the action and/or to the company, they are more likely to make their decision in favour of their holiday than in favour of the company’s interests.

Someone who believes that they can generate commitment and emotional attachment by simple rationality is making a particularly fatal mistake: that of intellectual arrogance. This can turn up in various forms such as so called corporate visions expressed uniquely in terms of turnover and profit. The fact that this represents nothing but a dangerous threat for most employees, is something that the “visionaries” oversee (to an attentive employee “Our vision for 20xx is to double our turnover and at the same time double our profitability” only means: work twice as much and twice as fast for the same wages and is therefore nothing but a threat). Joy is not the most frequent reaction to such statements.

Back to joy and to meetings. There is a phenomenon that I continue to find interesting: a large proportion of meeting participants do not feel the most emotional quality when working in a professional, structured ambiente where personal interests are put in the background. On the contrary, they enjoy free, unstructured debates and discussions and the less binding the discussion and the more optional, the more fun it is.

To carry the same idea further: given that the genuine function of meetings is to inform, create new possibilities and finally initiate actions to reach goals, we have to find a solution where both elements, ratio and emotion, have their place.

Repression of any upcoming feeling does not work, so make sure there is room for it, especially if you are expecting a lot of emotional reactions, no matter whether good or bad.

And on the other hand: an enactment of feelings is also not a very promising strategy. I have never experienced, that a person trusted another because it was written in the mission statement (we trust in each other, we cooperate professionally and so on)

The best way is to plan app. 20% of the meeting time for emotional issues. Some might find that contradictory to what is written in the beginning and the estimation of how much time is spent productively. Depending on the agenda of the meeting you might not need this time, but let me assure you, most probably you will, reasons for that please see above.

And the proposition is: if you expect a lot of controversial and polarising energy, plan it in at the beginning of the meeting. Actually you should provoke it to be articulated. Then the emotional cleansing effect takes place before you start with the fact-oriented discussion.

If you expect positive reactions, take some time at the end of the meeting, enjoy the success you had and see the 10-15 minutes when you are having fun as a very valuable, motivating and commitment-founding investment.

Summary of how to be significantly more successful in meetings in 5 Ps

People meet people and work with people. Give them 15 minutes time to get in contact and make it a standard in your meetings, called: bilateral information update

Participants: please select carefully who you invite to participate in the meeting

Purpose: name your meetings with the genuine purpose they serve – decision meeting, information meeting and so on.

Process of discussions:

1. Collect information first before evaluating
2. Look for points of agreement before addressing differences
3. First create an overview before collecting details

Pursue the agreements you made unconditionally, set up the action plan and execute

A few last words... I hope you enjoyed reading this short outline on meetings. If you are thinking of changing your meeting culture and transforming it into a more efficient and joyful one, the return on investment will be tremendous. I wish you lots of success!

Appendix: All the know-how and experience I have cumulated in the last 20 years have been the basis for a supporting shareware solution called "*tact*". *tact* paces the process of preparing a meeting, conducting a purposeful meeting, creating action-oriented minutes and tracking the outcome of a meeting.

If you are interested, you can find further information here: www.tactyourmeeting.com