



**KETS DE VRIES
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THE VIEW FROM A BATHYSCAPH:

EXPLORING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE ORGANISATIONAL SEA

MEETINGS: A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

Liz Florent-Treacy & Caroline Rook



The Elephant in the Room. Julien Baillargeon. © 2017 KDVI Ltd

Most people, if they are honest, will admit that they don't always like meetings. In this two part blog series, we explore what might be going on under the surface in meetings. In Part One, we look at the fact that in meetings, people are not always able to tackle the real challenges the group faces, and may not even be aware that as a group, they are off course. In Part we explore group role identities and how they influence meetings in hidden ways.

Do you often think at the end of a meeting: "Thank God that's over!" You are not alone. One senior executive recently told us: "Meetings have been like that since the beginning of time. There's not much you can do about it."

In actual fact, have meetings always been like that? Are we just meeting because we think that's what professionals do? Or have we somehow forgotten the fundamental purpose, or purposes, of meetings?

One of us recently visited the tiny island of Hirta, in the isolated archipelago of St Kilda, west of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Hirta was inhabited for several thousand years, never supporting a community larger than about 200 people. St Kilda was only accessible during brief periods in the summer, when storms abated. The only means of communication well into the 19th century was by bonfire, which was sometimes visible from the island of Harris. Help might, or might not, arrive days or weeks later. St Kildans had sheep, seabirds and fresh water, but little else to sustain life. Their small cottage gardens were protected and nurtured, providing a few vegetables and meagre harvests of corn. St Kildans earned a little cash from the mainland, selling seabird feathers, oil rendered from bird fat and tweed cloth.

From time immemorial, all able-bodied St Kildan men gathered every morning for a meeting. The objective was, literally, a life or death matter: stabilising social order and maintaining shared resources and land. There was no leader, and everyone was encouraged to speak. There was a keen awareness of the vital importance of a well-functioning group.

The purpose of the morning meeting was to harness the right man to each of the day's tasks. The agenda was always the same:

Is everyone here? With such a small group of workers, no one can be spared. If someone is missing, find out why, and see if he needs help.

What are the day's activities? The requirements and challenges of each task are well known. So, who is the best man or team for the job? Could a boy be sent along to learn from them?

Do we all agree? Do we all have what we need? Go! Underlying the brief meeting was a sense of urgency—breaks in the weather or gathering storms; the short growing season; the arrival of boats—tightly linked to survival. There was an element of camaraderie—everyone was needed and would look out for one another as they set at their highly dangerous tasks.

Conversely, the primary task of these meetings was not related to community ties or individuals' spiritual needs or anxiety. Community events like weddings, funerals and church attendance brought all members of the community together. Existential dilemmas might be addressed in church, or privately with friends or family members. Disputes came up, but were soon resolved. No serious crime was ever recorded on St Kilda.

The men's morning meetings were driven by the precious element of time—there were only so many hours of daylight. Check-in and organizing was quickly done, and each man would set out to descend a sheer cliff face to capture sea birds or harvest eggs, or take to sea in one of the community's small boats. Most men returned as evening fell, but sometimes one was lost. He would be mourned in church, but the morning meetings always looked resolutely towards the requirements of the new day.

The problem in modern-day business meetings is often that the relevance of the meeting and urgency of the tasks is not always clear. The frustration that many of us feel in meetings is related to the fact that although members of a group may truly believe they are aligned towards the same objective, in reality individuals, or even the group itself, may be simultaneously avoiding other, more difficult or challenging realities, both factual and/or emotional. As psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion explained it, the ["life of groups is always pervaded by, and under threat from, phenomena that distracts them from their purpose"](#).

Take one company we know of where the directors of marketing, sales, logistics and finance were required by global headquarters to meet weekly to revise their quarterly sales targets and profits. Needing to drive up sales and profits quickly, it was an all-hands-on-deck situation, with as many as 20 people in the room. They spent up to 80% of their time in these meetings. Not surprisingly, they didn't even have time to explore the critical issue – why sales were down.

The group is collegial and genuinely wants to work well together. They have a clear and common "enemy": sales figures. But they are under tremendous pressure and they lack critical information about the root causes of the problem. Like swans on a pond, they appear calm above the surface, but below the waterline they are paddling like mad.

What might be going on under the surface? The group may simultaneously try to stick to the stated objectives—sales figures—while at the same time they unconsciously resist addressing the deeper issues that may be linked to the sales problem. One executive told us that there were many undiscussables floating in the room each time they had a meeting. But, he said, he never brought them up. The group was under enough pressure already. He didn't want to say anything that could make matters worse.

Bion described this as being not a change of purpose, but a change away from purpose. In addition, he suggested that in this type of scenario, the group is unlikely to recognize that their purpose has shifted. This allows the group to ignore the need for (short-term) pain and (constructive) conflict—essential to resolving the very real business problem they face.

What can be done?

There are multiple ways to improve efficiency and momentum in meetings.

- Like the St Kildans, make sure meetings are linked to organizing tasks related to survival. Emphasize the Task-Skill-Resources equilibrium for each challenge. — Are the right people and resources allocated to address the organizational challenge? Create a sense of urgency about the need to end the meeting as quickly as possible.
- Do a thought experiment: if a stranger wandered into the room, would they quickly be able to grasp the purpose of the meeting? What would they say about the level of energy?
- If the situation seems stuck, look for the pain points. Explore whether the group has undergone a change from purpose that allows the group to avoid dealing with the real problem.
- Recognize universal human need for community and existential reflection. Have fun events. Foster a culture of trusting and supportive relationships with peers outside of meetings. In meetings, stick to the survival tasks.

An Urban Dictionary definition for meetings reads: "... where minutes are taken and hours are lost." The cynical executive above who said meetings have been the same forever also had a very practical solution: For each meeting, put a different person in charge of setting and following the agenda, time keeping and taking notes. Having to do these admittedly mundane chores will help each person to understand the value of each saved minute and the cost of each empty word. Go!

We would like to hear from you. Share any thoughts triggered by the following questions.

What do you do to keep meetings focused on "survival"?

What does your company do to create space for reflection outside of formal meetings?

What events does your organisation have that help to build a sense of community?

How could you intervene in a meeting that you sense has had a "change from purpose"?

How would you help the group address the real problem? Or conversely, what might prevent you from doing so?