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IS WORK ONLY MEETINGS?¹

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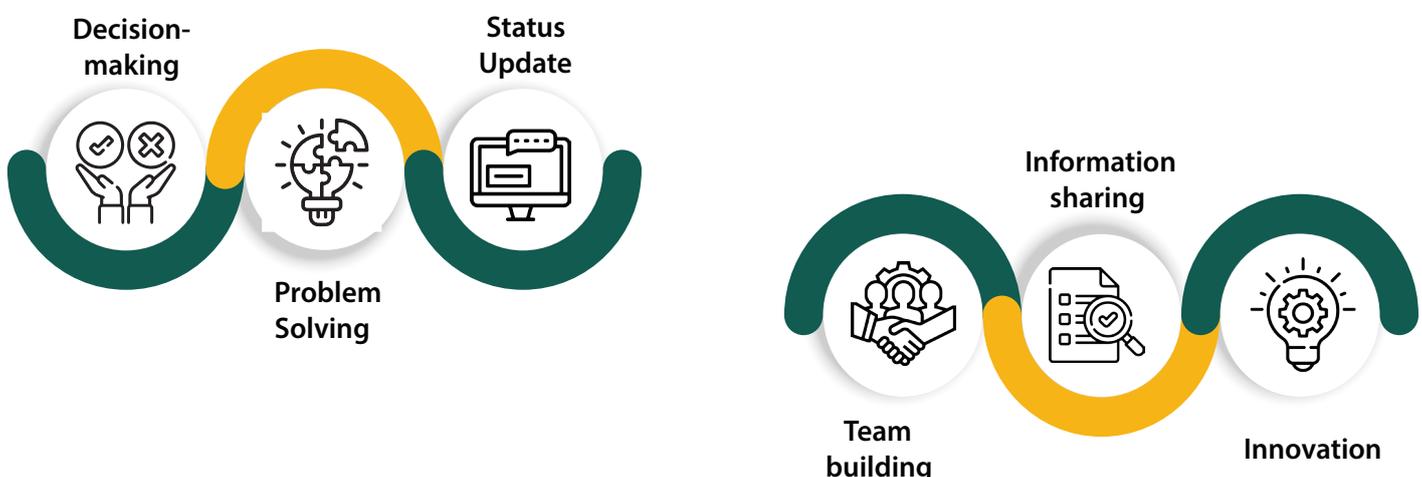
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Every day, newspapers show pictures of meetings. Pictures orchestrated in the ministry of information, taken in the first few minutes of the meeting, contrived to show leaders hard at work. When you call a minister, the usual response, in a somber, grave and responsible tone, is, "can't talk right now; there is a meeting in progress". And if the minister is a member of a high-powered body like the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) or any other high-level inter-ministerial set-up, the sound is even more grave and serious.

Indeed, the fate of the country is decided in those meetings. What happens in those meetings? Who participates? Why are meetings held? How seriously do our officials take those meetings? How well prepared are they? What is the quality of those discussions? How strictly and seriously the decisions made are implemented? We do not seem to have answers to these questions, but we believe that much governance improvement could happen if we can change our meeting culture!

Types of Meetings

Attending too many meetings can become stressful and unproductivity. Online meetings, after Covid, have brought in 'technostress'(Bryant, 2022) too. Irrespective of the mode of meetings, their purpose can be categorised as (Laker, et al. 2022: Porter, et al., 2006) :



¹This Knowledge Brief draws heavily on a blog written by Nadeem Ul Haque titled, "Our Meeting Culture Must Change" (2013), at development20.blogspot.com.

HOW MEETINGS SHOULD BE CONDUCTED²

1. Meeting preparation

Meeting experts suggest that meetings are a result of a lot of hard work on an issue. They are called once:

- 1.1. Background work has been completed and absorbed by concerned people and a debate or decision is required.
- 1.2. Considerable effort to reach common ground on facts and context has been made.
- 1.3. Adequate documentation based on comprehensive research and well-developed proposals, properly whetted by concerned experts, and is succinctly presented.
- 1.4. Interdepartmental coordination is carefully conducted, and all views, data and thoughts are fully incorporated.

2. Notification and organization

The above effort leads to preparing agendas that carefully document the effort that all concerned departments have made. This documentation is again carefully whetted by all concerned departments to see that all views and evidence are fully reflected. When ready, this documentation is shared with all decision-makers who are required to participate in meetings. It must be shared with enough time to prepare for a meaningful discussion. In particular, the offices of the concerned decisionmakers must have the time to carefully whet the material.

- 2.1. By the time of a major meeting much of the documentation has been carefully studied by all departments concerned and an implementation plan prepared.
- 2.2. The complete documentation of research to back up the actions required, decisions to be taken and an action plan must reach the forum with at least 2 weeks to study and comment.



3. Participants must have a purpose

Steve Jobs is famous for saying that meetings must be structured, small and meaningful. He never allowed people who were not needed. . In our pictures of meetings that we see and those of us who go to these meetings know that there are a lot of unnecessary people in meetings.

4. More structure and investigation for higher-level meetings

Higher level meetings of cabinets or cabinet subcommittees, like the ECC, in other countries are prepared through serious long-term research and lengthy inter-ministerial consultation. A policy for industrial development or investment or gas or electricity development happens only occasionally and must be built up through consultation between various ministries over months and backed by serious research and investigation to delineate clear choices. In most countries, this investigation also includes consultations with the nation's intellectual capital.

²There is an ample literature for conducting and analyzing meetings. Here we draw upon Axtell (2020) and Rogelberg (2019)

5. Use the Internet to shorten meeting time

Prior to the meeting, modern communication must be used to limit the time of the meeting which should be as short as possible. Members should file all their comments virtually and they must be collated for outstanding issues only which should be taken up in a meeting. Unnecessary discussion and grandstanding in a meeting will be prevented in this is done well. The meeting that leads to further committee formation as happens in Pakistan often is in reality a failed meeting—one where preparation was inadequate.

6. Rules of engagement to prevent grandstanding

Every meeting is structured by the chair to allow informed views to be aired and aggregated. That is why small meetings are preferred. Hierarchies and verbal pressure are resisted by rules such as equal allocation of time in higher forums and clear guidelines on language and addressing the chair etc. Even if there is no explicit voting, views are carefully tallied so that the chair sums up the sense of the meeting.

7. A budgetary policy cannot be easily changed

Neither the cabinet nor any forum is allowed to violate the budget, which is a law that has been passed by parliament. Re-appropriations must go back to parliament. Hence any proposals of a budgetary nature are not presented at such meetings.

8. Ample time for strategic meetings at higher levels

Country cabinets and high-level forums always keep strategic direction under review and build long-term thinking and policy review into their processes. While they have mechanisms for monitoring transactions, these higher-level bodies largely stay out of transactional work. Unfortunately, here in Pakistan, senior meetings are transactional, not conceptual. Conceptual discussions in policymaking are seldom conducted formally. They remain the domain of friends and family. This is the heart of our governance problem. For example, the National Economic Council remains a perfunctory short meeting even though it is supposed to be an apex conceptual meeting.

9. Meetings are not work

Meetings are required for sharing information, seeking common ground and agreeing on decisions for moving forward. But the real work is building up to meetings and informing individuals and organizations with analysis of available evidence and global experience and knowledge. Enough time is given to reading, researching, and attending seminars and conferences, without which learning does not happen. In the absence of learning, meetings get insular and incestuous, and decision-making and strategy remain uninformed.

10. Monitor the cost of meetings

Everything in the private sector is costed for efficiency. The public sector has the luxury to enjoy taxpayer funds without worry. That is why meetings are long and full of irrelevant people. There should be some study of the cost and productivity of meetings in the public sector.

MEETINGS AT MINISTRIES IN PAKISTAN

No one likes meetings but meetings they conduct all day at government offices in Pakistan! Several serving and retired officials were interviewed to get an idea about the time they spent on calling/attending meetings on an average day. Most labelled them as “productivity killers”, yet unavoidable.

Time Spent on Meetings at Offices in Ministries: An Average Day (in hours)

Level of official	Time Spent			
	Pre-meeting meetings	Meetings	Post-meeting meetings	Total
High	1-2	3-4	2-3	6-9
Mid	2-3	2-3	2-3	6-9
Junior	2-4	2-3	1-2	5-9

Source: Interactions with public servants at various ministries.

2. These figures should not be considered representative, and are presented just to gauge the trend.

The interviews show that majority of the meetings are without clear agenda, and at times participants have no clue why they are called. Sharing meeting documents beforehand occurs rarely. The majority of these meetings keep employees from performing their designated tasks. Post-Covid, online sessions have increased the number of meetings significantly, a trend found worldwide (Bryant, 2022).

From what we gather from our interactions with officials working in the public sector and our personal experiences, meetings in Pakistan are characterized by the following:

1. Meetings, meetings and more meetings

The first thing that strikes you in government in Pakistan is that there are too many meetings. Most people are running from meeting to meeting and then trying very hard to catch up with their file work. No one has any time for through reading, researching or attending conferences or seminars. learning

Often it seems that meetings are called to fill in time. The whole day for everyone in government is spent in meetings. Even when they are not meeting, there are visitors asking for favours. So, when do they read and absorb the material that is supposed to help make policy decisions?

The entire government seems to be in a crisis mode. Where is the crisis? No one seems to know.

2. State of permanent crisis

All governments in Pakistan are in a hurry to do things. There is a constant crisis mode. Even the donors talk in crisis terms: education emergency, macroeconomic crisis, energy crisis, impending water scarcity, millions below the poverty line etc. Not only is everyone in a hurry, but all seem to claim a knowledge of all the solutions. So, all we need is a meeting to make things happen.

'Implement' is the favorite buzzword in Islamabad. Having absolved themselves of the need to investigate and research, they are absorbed in frequent and hasty meetings, and the frenetic urge to 'implement'.

When work is done in a crisis more and in random willful meetings without adequate background work, experience has shown that decisions and their implementation suffer. Perhaps this explains the policy failure in the country which leads to stop-go growth, low investment, repeated IMF programs, the low reserves and increasing borrowing needs.

3. Implementation without thought

'Implement' is the favourite buzzword in Islamabad. Having absolved themselves of the need to investigate and research, they are absorbed in frequent and hasty meetings, and the frenetic urge to 'implement'. Yet there is little clarity on what to implement. Often policies end up being targets and wishes with little knowledge of instruments.

All day through the year, they try to implement in meetings. No one seems to have the time to wonder why the various crises and emergencies are not going away despite the many hurried meetings and the deep knowledge of solutions that Islamabad and influential donors think to have.

Is this approach flawed? Maybe fewer meetings, more thought, research and local thinking are the solution?

The extreme hurry to develop without any real effort to learn and investigate pervades all levels of government. Several senior-level meetings are called in a hurry, supposedly in a crisis mode. Sometimes the joke in the corridor is that this is to keep ministers and politicians busy.

4. Too many participants

At these meetings, some people are called even if they are not necessary, but only because the picture in the paper would look good. One is sometimes even surprised by some itinerant presence, such as a luminary or a friend of the powers that be, even if they have little knowledge of the area. The meetings are way too large and unstructured and become grandstanding events with little substance.

5. Insufficient preparatory work

Often, no agenda is circulated for meetings, nor is there any research or background material. The most that can be expected at most meetings is a hastily prepared PowerPoint presentation (often prepared by a junior official) that is read not by the author but the 'official'. Since there is no investigative report, and everything has been done in haste, opinion and loud voices, and hierarchy speak. Little is achieved. Often the meeting ends in confusion.

"In most cases a large number of people, many irrelevant for the meeting, are called, making a thorough discussion impossible. Meetings having people from diverse backgrounds are even more futile, with no one listening or understanding the other"

A mid-level government official

6. No strategic meetings

The mundane subjects chosen for such meetings are also quite worrisome - some road project or some sectoral issue where participants are looking for a subsidy. Surprisingly, the cabinet is found approving free trade agreements which are passed with a murmur "routine matter" Why do routine matters come to the table, one may ask!

Most meetings in government and the Cabinet are transactional in nature, such as buying commodities like sugar, fertilizer etc., or engaging in some foreign deal such as a big project or a long-term commitment to buy LNG or some similar issue.

Again, proponents of these transactions are in a tearing hurry to obtain approval. For example, every year, fertilizer purchases are only brought to the table within days of an impending shortage without even the data on available stocks in the country or the price of available fertilizer. No explanation is offered as to why such purchases cannot be smoothed out over the year through better planning. Unfortunately, there is no demand for such strategic thinking, and taking informed decisions for long-term solutions to issues.

7. Budget is of no consideration

What is very surprising is that the transactions proposed in a hurry –purchases, subsidies, and fresh projects-- are all submitted and approved without looking at their budgetary implications. How can you approve purchases of billions of rupees or an increase in subsidy without worrying about what it might do to the budget in place?

8. Lack of due process, investigation, and consultation

The crisis mentality and the hurry to deliver mean that all processes are avoided. Ill-prepared work is hurriedly put before the cabinet and all meetings bypassing all rules of mandatory submission intervals, inter-departmental consultations, and investigative requirements. Hastily-prepared summaries and a PowerPoint with the refrain of a crisis and a tearing hurry are the reasons given. We commit billions of rupees, and in the bargain set up grounds for inquiries, litigation, and above all mistrust.

WHITHER MEETING CULTURE!

To change the meeting culture in Pakistan, most important of all, we need to learn from the rest of the world. Much as we hate procedure and rules, they are often required for forcing desired outcomes. These rules and procedures need to be revised and updated with changing times and the ever-evolving needs. Archaic procedures and regulations need to be upgraded for the sake of efficiency.

We must change the culture in our government from meetings to learning. The culture of "meetings is work" should be changed to "reading and learning". Similarly, change is needed from considering meetings as photo-ops to more pointed and result-oriented smaller meetings. Unnecessary people should not be invited merely to fill up a room.

But this "perpetual crisis and hurry" approach must be changed. Rather than rush to act and always fall flat on your face, perhaps a slower, more considered, and deliberate approach might yield better results.

No meeting should take place unless the issue at hand has been thoroughly studied, and the study has been circulated in advance, and all concerned have had a chance to go through it. Poor preparation must be penalized.

All policy, reform and restructuring proposals must be brought to the cabinet meetings. These proposals must be backed by research and a clear indication of ownership by the ministry. This will mean a well-researched background paper, including timelines and implementation modalities, prepared by experts in the ministry. This paper should be circulated at least a month in advance to allow for inter-ministerial review to prevent multiplicity of policies, and to make the eventual meeting more meaningful. Consultants, if used, must be there for expert testimony.

Some suggestions to make meetings at the top level in the public sector more meaningful are as follows:

Meeting should not happen at the whims of anyone. Adequate notice is necessary for preparation time.

- Meetings like Cabinet and ECC should only happen at preassigned times, not randomly. They should also not happen too frequently.

- There should be a quorum defined for the meeting to be held. If experts are required, there must be a procedure and not that they should become a part of the meeting.

- In each meeting, no more than 6 or 8 items should be taken up.

- For the cabinet and the ECC, a rolling agenda should be maintained. All ministries should let the cabinet division know of items that they wish to place before the forums at least a month in advance, assuring everyone of some forethought and some preparation. The rolling agenda must be made public. Emergency additions to the agenda must be discouraged and only entertained occasionally.

- The procedure of meeting should be changed. In this electronic age, there is no reason for a long meeting. More and more written comments should be encouraged. This will also allow better minute taking and disclosure.

- There could be a secure website for Cabinet and ECC exchange, minimizing meeting time.

- The reason for a forum is to allow consensus building. In our case, the Chair often decides independently of the meeting. This is not in keeping with modern democratic governance. Cabinet division must take note of views and ensure that the chairman does not overrule the sense of the meeting.

- Too often, ministries keep returning with proposals forcing an acceptance by attrition. There must be rules limiting a proposal from returning to the forum within a stipulated time, say three to six months.

- Minutes are important for recordkeeping, transparency, and history. Meetings should be recorded, and ministries encouraged to put more of their comments on the paper, taking email as a valid medium. Minutes should be based on written comments of ministries with accurate reporting of oral discussion, if any. Minutes must be circulated and approved before the next meeting.

Musts for an Effective Meeting

1. Have a clear purpose/agenda
2. Invite only the right people
3. Everyone should come prepared
4. Start on time, and end on time
5. Send agenda/documents well in advance
6. Start on a positive note
7. Maintain focus on the agenda
8. Conduct in an inclusive environment
9. End with a summary and an action plan/next step.
10. Detailed minutes to record views and debate, and share with stakeholders.

Adapted from Calvallo, 2021

Meetings should not be just a congregation of people but informed discussions among the right people that lead to decisions. They are necessary and, in many cases, desperately required. When needed, it should be ensured that they are short and focused, with concrete outcomes.

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