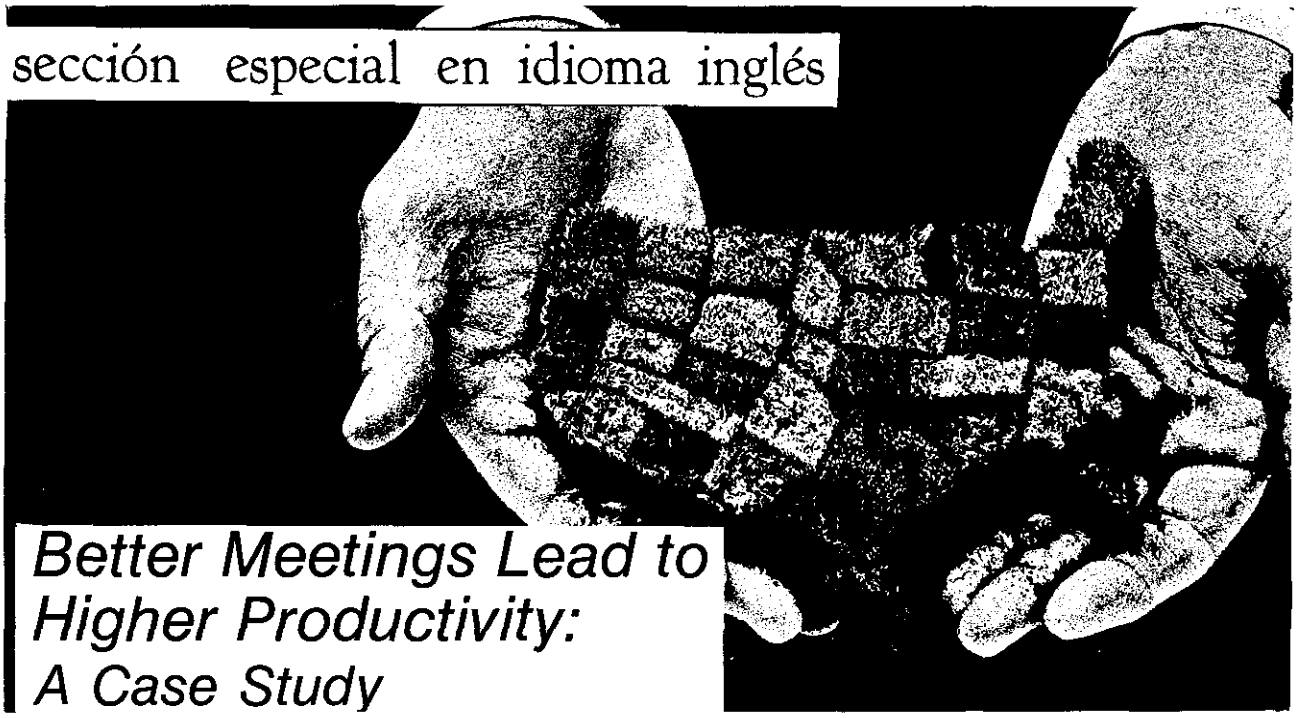
sección especial en idioma inglés



Better Meetings Lead to Higher Productivity: A Case Study

A division of the Social Security Administration trained its managers in a new way of running meetings; results included greater motivation, better problem solving, and higher output.

JANE PRESLEY
SALLY KEEN

Do you ever feel that the meetings you attend are too long; or irreelvant, or a waste of your work time? In our organization, the Western Regional Program Center oh the Social Security Administration, hundreds of meetings take place every week at all levels. We knew these meetings were not effective enough in solving problems and in building cooperation within and between work groups; moreover, many people felt the meetings didn't make good use for their time and energy. When we considered the time managers spent conducting and attending meetings, we decided we needed to make these gatherings more productive.

In every organization, there ar two basic skills that every employee, supervisor, and manager needs in order to be effective: technical skill and proceess skills. Most people at the Program Center are highly skilled in the technical aspects of their jobs, including the managers and the supervisors, who have risen through the ranks. We are concerned with making sure each benef iciary gets a check on time for the right amount of money. The cases are kept in claims folders; 1,600 employees handle and dispatch these folders every month for approximately 4 million people. This is a highly complex and sophisticated procedure involving a great deal od technical training and skill.

But the Program Center had problems that could not be solved through technical skills alone. These problems (motivation, worker commitment and responsibility, accountability, morale, and productivity, to name a few) related to the more open-ended process skills: analysis, communication, problem solving, decision making, and planning

Meetings are a very valuable but little understood management tool. We feelt that if we could improve the effectiveness of our meetings and at the same time develop the procecs skills of the participants, the productivity and effectiveness of the Center would increase. Meetings have, after all, extremely high leverage in organizations; what happens in meetings creates waves that go back into and through the levels of the organization.

On that assumption, in the spring of 1974 we initiated a program aimed at equipping one of our natural work groups with a more effective meeting methodology. The results did, indeed, improve productivity and create a better organizational climate. We began with one module, or work group, in the Center and are now in the process of extending the program to other work groups.

Transferring what has been learned

Most skill training sessions, whether technical or process, take place in classroom settings away from the work environment. This "university model" is very popular with trainers, and with learners as well, since their formal schooling ocurred in this manner. Yet after a couple of hours or a day in a classroom, people often return to their jobs with only a hazy notion of how to transfer what they have learned from the case-study method to the on-the-job situation. We wanted to design a process skill training program that would achieve a high degree of transfer to the work environment.

With the help of Interaction Associates, whose president, Michael Doyle, helped us design our program, we decided on certain basic principles that would underlie our efforts:

1. The program would be experiential and not didactic in nature. Learning to run more effective meetings, like learning to play the piano, is an ongoing process based on practice.

2. Real work problems and issues would form the content of the program. People tend to invest themselves much more in learning a skill if there is a real, immediate payoff.

3. Participants would have input in, influence, and "own" the program. If people don't agree on the problem, they can hardly be expected to agree on the solution.

4. To minimize any resistance to change, new material would be gradually introduced and then only after the successful integration of the previously introduced skills and concepts.

5. Leadership and responsibility would be distributed throughout the group. People who were to assume the leadershipe of meetings would be trained in the context of their own groups; that is, the work groups would be trained to lead themselves.

The Center's Module 10—so named because it was on the tenth floor—was selected to participate in the pilot program. A natural work group consisting of the manager, her two assistants, and 10 supervisors was trained and coached over a 10-week period, using the weekly staff meetings as the training context and their actual work-related problems as the training content. Each week's activity built upon and expanded the previous week's successes.

How did we know where we were in terms of "success"? We had a number of feedback mechanisms: questionnaires filled out by participants, follow-up interviews, a videotape of an actual Module 10 meeting, checklists filled out by the trainers, and Module 10 productivity indices and reports. Another technique was employed during the sessions themselves: When participants got bogged down interpersonally, went oft the track, or got stuck in some kind of process logjanm, the trainer (Sally Keen or Michael Doyle) would say "Freeze!" Then the group would analyze its process, develop alternative strategies for proceeding, select one, and carry on. Thus, we had a selfcorrecting procedure with a butilt-in evaluation method.

The meeting strategy

We had been used to the "traditional" form of conducting meetings: The group would sit around a long conference table and the chairperson (usually Jane Presley) would explain the agenda and then conduct the meeting according to a Robert's-Rules-of-Order format. A few peopde did most of the talking, and the others looked at the speaker only when happened to be the "authority figure". People took their own notes and each made private interpretations of what was said, waht it meant, what should be relayed outside the meeting, and who should do what as a result of the meeting. Gradually, we changed this wind of procedure.

The first change we made was to eliminate the long meeting table and substitute a semicircle of chairs. (First we had a semicircle with tables, but during the eighth week we eliminated the tables). This made the meetings less stiff. The next thing we did was to switch from the chairperson concept to the facilitator-recorder concept. We began explaining and discussing this new setup during the second week and introduced it during the fifth week. Then, it took five more weeks for people to begin to use the concept skillfully.

The facilitator is the key person in our new method. Unike a chairperson, the facilitator is a neutral, nonevaluative process (not people) manager. His or her role is to keep the group focused on the task, not to make content decisions or offer solutions. The role of the recorder is to capture basic ideas in the speakers' own words—on large sheets of paper in full view of the group. The other group members have a responsibility under this system too: to see that their ideas are adequately recorded, that the facilitator and recorder remain neutral and do not manipulate the group, and that they themselves focus all their energy on the problem. These concepts were introduced gradually in the group via discussion, printed matter, and demonstrations.

Our use of the facilitator-recorder team was based on the assumption (confirmed by the results) that managers should not conduct many of their own meetings. Managers leading meetings are doing four things simultaneously: maintaining their power role, making content suggestions about problems and decisions, guiding the meeting process, and facilitating the group dynamics. It's hard to be completely effective at all four tasks siultaneously. Since managers are ultimately accountable for the successes and failures of their work groups, they must maintain ultimate responsibility and control. Managers can'tgive away their power to subordinates; yet they can let subordinates particlpe in the decision making at meetings by separating out the power and process roles and letting the subordinates conduct their meetings for them.

If someone else is responsible for the process of the meeting, the manager can focus on his or her content expertise and be very clear about having the final say. And if someone else is responsible for the pre-meeting planning and the follow-up work, the manager's valuable time can be spent in more useful and appropriate enterprises.

In our case, various members of the group took turns serving as facilitator or recorder, and thus the responsibility was divided in such a way that no one was overburdened.

During the 10-week session, we noticed that people were becoming more participative and more open. We consciously encouraged this and made sure that each person knew his/her role—the recorder, the facilitator, the group member, and the authority person (the manager). The facilitator made sure the participants focused on the issues at hand, one at a time, and that problems were identified and either solved by the group or deferred until the next meeting. (It became legitimate to have 'problems", to share information, to disagree, and to work out solutions agreeable to everyone). The agenda was distributed beforehand and consisted of items solicited from everyone in the group.

The productivity angle

In evaluating the productivity improvement in Module 10 we reviewed the numbers of claims folders received, pending, and dispatched; these were compared with the numbers of folders processed by the other five similar work groups in the Center. Six months after the training program began, the porductivity profile (average number of folders cleared divided by gross work days) of Module 10 exceeded, by a statistically significant level, the sample of all the modules (including Module 10). Receipts and dispatches of folders for Module 10 increased during and after the training period, and the "pending" file decresead consideraby— indicating that the work was being processed more efficiently than before.

Of course, no one-to-one correlation could be made between the productivity of the entire module (180 employees) and the effective-meetings program involving the management team. However, the manager and the supervisors credited a portion of the productivity increase to the program. It was clear that the supervisors had, as a result of the program, become much more involved and interested in the problem-solving process. Many of the new ideas originated with the supervisor, who in turn seemed eager to extend the process to the employees outside the supervisory meeting group.

For example, during the third meeting the group was dealing with the problem of how to bring down the number of pending folders (i.e., increase productivity). The supervisors decided not to solve it exclusively in their own group but to set up a process to let all the module employees participate in solving it. That day a 15- minuute standup meeting of all 180 employees was held. The employees turned in 74 posible solutions over the next few hours, many of which could be—and were—implemented. That was one main reason for the shrinking or our pending file.

We also observed a significant increase in cooperative spirit and enthusiassm for meetings. After the traininig was completed, Jane Presley overheard one group member commenting to another employee, in tones of obvious disappointment, "We re not having a meeting this week". This was a far cry from the "Oh, no, not another meeting" kind of comment we usted to hear.

As a result of the new way of conducting meetings, our module confronted and resolved many organizational problems. Supervisors increased their proficiency in the five process skills; internal leadership developed; commitment to decisions increased; implementation time decreased.

If the program had been conducted as a three-day seminar, it would have taken 24 hours of each staff member's time. The total time expended under our system—using the weekly staff meetings as the training context—was 20 hours per staff member, and that included 10 hours of staff meetings during which many of our module problems were solved.

The disadvantage of this training approach was that, although it saved valuable staff time, it took a good deal of trainer time. However, the in-house trainer (Sally Keen) is using the facilitation method to work with other groups in the Center. The training and development staff hopes eventually to have this training capacity in-house for all organization work groups, and possibly to establish an internal facilitation and problem-solving service for the Program Center.

The process process

In sum, the sucess of our effective-meetings program was dependent on two interrelated factors: One was the new kind of meeting process—involving the facilitator, who made sure no one dominated the group, that everyone's views were heard, and that the meeting didn't get bogged down; the recorder, who made the development of ideas visible to everyone; the relaxed semicircular seating arrangement. The other factor was the process by which we introduced the process:using the actual meeting as the setting for the training; getting all the group members involved in the planning from the beginning; bringing in new concepts one at a time, when group members had fully understood the ideas behind them; providing for continual feedback from group members, manager, and trainers.

A task-oriented program such as this one builds team spirit and gets everybody involved in the organization, planning, and problem solving process. Members of the work groups "buy" the decisions, even if don't entirely agree with them, because they have had their input and have been listened to. The facilitation method and this approach to conducting a meeting-effectiveness training program would, we think, be beneficial to any group that works together on a day-to-day basis.

JANE PRESLEY is a division director of the Western Regional Program Center, Social Security Adminisration. A graduate of the University of Texas, she worked for private industry before joining SSA as a claims representative in 1961. She has held a variety of managerial positions in SSA. As assistant regional representative in its Western Program Center (locted in San Francisco), she coordinated the liaison function between the Center and the social security offices in the 12 western states.

SALLY KEEN is employee development specialist at the Center, where she conducts seminars and workshops in management techniques and communication skills. She is a graduate of California State University at Hayward.