

# Meetings without Discussion®

## Overview

Have you ever attended a meeting where ....

1. There was no clear agenda or where people did not stick to it,
2. People waffled or got off track,
3. Where one or two people dominated while quieter people said nothing,
4. Where decisions did not get made.
5. Where you really wondered if you wanted to attend the next meeting, given that you had better things to do with your time?

These experiences are common and result in groups self-destructing, despite a great reason for being.

Would you like to attend a meeting where none of the above occurred?

Whilst we are very aware of what we don't like about some meetings, we are less aware of what we can do differently.

Well, the good news is that there is a better way, built around a series of concepts collectively known as "Meetings without Discussion®". The concept of "meetings without discussion" might seem an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. After you have been exposed to it, my hope is that you will regard it as possibly the most effective way to conduct a meeting, particularly one that is democratic rather than autocratic. If this is too bold a hope, then it will be sufficient for you to be aware that there is another way, one that people who have used it find immensely satisfying.

Jonathan Swift, the renowned 18<sup>th</sup> century British satirist, described the shortcomings of discussion: "*an impatience to interrupt each other, and the uneasiness of being interrupted ourselves, flooding listeners with self-indulgent talk, overemphasizing the importance of being witty, using jargon to show off, and the custom of pushing women aside during serious discourse.*" (Swift, *A Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversations*.).

We live in a culture of advocacy. The advocate is one who pleads, recommends, pushes a specific perspective, proposal, point of view or particular product. The advocate is convinced that his/her position is right and seeks others who will support it. The inquirer, on the other hand, comes at a topic with an open mind looking for a creative or viable option, or the facts of a particular matter.

We are not good at balancing advocacy and enquiry. Many of us are inclined to be very good advocates. While there is nothing wrong with persuasion, positional advocacy often takes the form of confrontation, in which ideas clash, rather than inform. Our egos are often so hell-bent on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for the others to finish talking. What others are saying becomes a threatening interruption to what we are trying to say. (Stanfield, 2000).

Edward de Bono (1994:36) offers an alternative which he calls "parallel thinking".

*"Instead of a conversation which is really an argument where opinions clash with each other, and the best man wins, a good conversation employs a kind of parallel thinking where ideas are laid down alongside each other, without any interaction between the contributions. There is no clash, no dispute, no true/false judgement. There is instead a genuine exploration of the subject from which conclusions and decisions may then be derived."*

Physicist David Bohm (2001) refers to the concept of "dialogue", a disciplined form of conversation. In dialogue:

- You enter the dialogue with a certain position but do not cling to it.
- You are ready to listen to others.

- Your mindset is not one of 'convincing others that your way is right' but of asking what you can learn from them.
- It is recognising that other people's input will help you refine your own ideas or reveal your misconceptions.
- It is not argument or debate. It is not win-lose. In dialogue all sides win by coming up with a more appropriate solution than a single person could ever have. It is win-win.

Swift's, Stanfield's, Bohm's and de Bono's thoughts are a natural lead into "meetings without discussion", a series of easily understood and applied processes, which extend the ideas of those previous authors in new and practical ways.

Those of us that drive motor vehicles understand the value of having a set of shared rules or protocols that enable all road users to travel safely. Those protocols give us the freedom to do certain things within a domain of discipline. We accept that discipline because of the benefits that are conferred on all users.

"Meetings without Discussion<sup>®</sup>" is, like driving, a discipline with its own set of 'road rules'. Those 'rules' are counter-intuitive, yet easily learned. Like road rules, they enable all parties to arrive at the desired destination safely, efficiently, happily and with a minimum of disruption.

As a discipline, driving is comprised of a large range of subsidiary skills. These include starting, steering, accelerating, braking, indicating, stopping, parking, etc. Each of them are learned separately and then combined into a seamless whole.

"Meetings without Discussion<sup>®</sup>" also has its own set of subsidiary skills. These include focussing attention on a topic, understanding what is presently known, generating alternatives, making decisions, developing plans, etc. Each of them can be learned separately and then combined into a seamless whole.

Like driving, you may benefit by initially having an instructor or coach in your "Meetings without Discussion<sup>®</sup>" whilst everybody becomes comfortable with the 'road rules'. That coach might be a facilitator or the chair of the meeting. Whoever takes that role must adhere to their own discipline – to remember that they are the coach and to *avoid making any comment at all on the content of the meeting*.

After several journeys (meetings) together, participants will understand the protocols of "Meetings without Discussion<sup>®</sup>" and will no longer need the services of the coach. The contents of the workbook/resource-kit will be sufficient.

*Says one past participant: A large part of what makes [our group] work is the way we are set up for success. The initial meetings involve a workshop with Ian Plowman on "Meetings Without Discussion". The results of the first 1-2 workshops are respect for all group members' knowledge and experience, as well as an understanding of how to conduct democratic meetings where everyone contributes. The process works – it is unique and to my knowledge none of us had seen anything like it and we are nearly all people who are involved in a lot of groups. The result seems to be firstly that we have come to know each other better and respect each other so that we enjoy coming together, and also that when we come together our meetings are to the point, don't waffle, are meaningful and we feel not only satisfied but that we have achieved something.*

I'm happy to conduct a workshop for you and members of your organization or community. Two versions – one day or two day. Or, alternatively, I can facilitate any special meeting, forum or workshop where there is potential for disagreement or disharmony or where speed and clarity of decisions is essential.

Ian Plowman  
 Organizational Psychologist  
 Ph (07) 3870-2231, Mob 0417 705 489  
 Email: [ian@plowman.com.au](mailto:ian@plowman.com.au)