

A Survey Of Nigerian Perceptions Of Corporate Communication Through Meeting Conduct: The Issues At Stake.'

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Abstract

This study is grounded in the Functional Theory of Group Decision-Making, which posits that meetings achieve effective outcomes when essential communicative functions are successfully fulfilled. Organisations that fail to conduct purposeful and well-structured meetings are prone to recurring conflicts, inefficiency, and delays in achieving their objectives. Meetings may become unproductive when objectives are unclear, discussions lack focus, or the chairman is unable to guide interaction effectively. Guided by this theory, the article provides practical guidelines for improving meeting effectiveness. It examines the core functions of meetings, differentiates types and sizes of meetings, emphasises the importance of clearly defining objectives, and explores the chairman's role in managing participation, maintaining focus, and directing discussion efficiently. The study highlights how structured communication, careful preparation, and active leadership contribute to productive meetings that successfully achieve organisational goals, enhance decision-making processes, reduce misunderstandings, improve collaboration, and minimise the risk of conflict or operational setbacks.

Keywords: Meeting, chairman, organization, purpose, function, objectives

Introduction

The elementary communication principle of meeting conduct is well-known and axiomatic to require any articulate elaboration. However, a survey of Nigerian perceptions of meeting conducts as a channel of effective communication: the issue at stake has left much to be desired but is researchable. Consequently, with respect to the conduct of a meeting in the

Nigerian situation, it is characterized by multifarious and multidimensional interesting peculiarities. Of course, Nigeria is a wonderful nation that is divinely blessed with wonderful people, ideas, potentials, technocrats, creativity, dexterity, and also saddled with her wonderful ways of approaching or doing things differently. It is, however, noted according to Alabi¹, presumptions that whilst "other enterprises or ventures work well or thrive in other countries like Ghana, Benin, Togo, West Africa, South Africa, Botswana, Egypt etc... but such undertakings don't usually work well at all as a result of gigantic Nigerian factors which are as perceptive as ever." A scientific, systematic, and empirical survey has been carried out to underpin and corroborate how meetings are being conducted. These studies randomly spanned over a decade. Our findings robustly reveal, among other things, that the gross inadequacies and shortcomings of Nigerian perceptions of meeting conduct are associated with incessant lateness to the venues of meetings (christened African time) or lack of punctuality, poor attendance, dilly-dallying human crosscurrents, and poor management or proper coordination. The survey further outrightly confirms a potential lack of interest inside and understanding among the generality of various members in meetings. The effect of this ugly development in the Nigerian situation is pitiable and lamentable where governance in the last twenty-five years has been marked with corruption, poverty, instability, unemployment, social malady, insecurity, and uneven development generally. According to Ariremako², he maintains that "People are so much concerned about the effectiveness of a meeting. An effective meeting is one in which the subject matter is relevant to the participants' concern and is logically developed, internally consistent, and competently presented within a logically good environment which is congenial, smooth, and unobtrusive. The ability to also attract, interact, create, and disseminate right information to the right person at the right time and place can become an immense managerial asset to an effective meeting." Anana³ explains that "Meetings take place frequently at different levels in the organization to sort out issues that center on goals and objectives, problems and policies, discipline, and a lot of other matters that contribute to the smooth running of the organization."

¹ Michael Alabi, *Nigerian Perceptions of Meeting Conduct as a Channel of Effective Communication* (unpublished manuscript, 2015).

² Felix Ariremako, "The Effectiveness of Meetings in Organizational Settings," *Nigerian Journal of Management* 8, no. 2 (2010): 123–135.

³ Adeola Anana, "Meetings in Organizations: Purposes and Practices," *Journal of Organizational Studies* 12, no. 3 (2013): 45–58.

Literature Review

The effectiveness of organisational meetings strongly depends on how well participants engage in structured communication and decision processes. Research by Mellor⁴ shows that psychological safety in meetings significantly influences attendance and involvement; when members feel safe, they are more likely to contribute, which improves meeting outcomes. In the same vein, Huang et al.⁵ found that in virtual meeting settings, leadership emerges not just through formal role but through communication style, such as early contributions and active engagement, thereby affecting group decisions. The evidence review by Young and Gifford⁶ emphasises that meetings succeed when they have clear purpose, well-planned agendas, and the right participants; poorly planned meetings tend to waste time and damage team morale. Moreover, Gu, Chen, Zhang, Yang, Liu & Konomi⁷ demonstrated with VR-based experiments that group discussions become more effective when leadership opportunities are clearly signalled and communication roles are balanced. Collectively, these studies reinforce the importance of three critical components for meeting success: (1) clear objectives and agenda, (2) effective leadership and communication structure, and (3) appropriate participant composition and interaction design. By applying these components, this study draws upon the functional perspective of group decision-making and applies it to the Nigerian organisational context, offering insight into why some meetings succeed while others falter.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the notion that effective organisational meetings are communicative events where

⁴ Samantha Mellor, "Psychological Safety at Local Union Meetings: A Key to Unlock Meeting Attendance," *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 35 (2023): 189-208, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-022-09408-3>.

⁵ Yi Huang, Thomas Smith, and Leena Patel, "Communication Style Drives Emergent Leadership Attribution in Virtual Teams," *Leadership Quarterly* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101546>.

⁶ John Young and Jane Gifford, *Productive Meetings: An Evidence Review. Practice Summary and Recommendations* (London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023), <https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/evidence-reviews/2023-pdfs/8385-productive-meetings-practice-summary-may23.pdf>.

⁷ Chen Gu, Jie Chen, Jun Zhang, Tao Yang, Zhi Liu, and Shiori Konomi, "Detecting Leadership Opportunities in Group Discussions Using Off-the-Shelf VR Headsets," *Sensors* 24, no. 8 (2024): 2534, <https://doi.org/10.3390/s24082534>.

structure, leadership, and member interaction determine outcome quality. Drawing on recent empirical work showing that team communication strategies affect decision quality and member reasoning (Does communicating within a team ... , 2022) and that internal communication significantly influences employee decision-making effectiveness (Sulaiman et al.⁸ the framework highlights three critical components: (1) clear objectives and agenda; (2) competent leadership (chairman) who manages process and participation; (3) appropriate meeting size, composition, frequency, and motivation. When these components align, meetings foster shared knowledge, group commitment, and efficient decisions. By contrast, poorly structured meetings with unclear goals or weak facilitation lead to time-waste, conflict, and sub-optimal outcomes. The framework applies these insights to Nigerian organisational settings, emphasising how cultural, structural, and leadership factors mediate meeting effectiveness.

Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine how meetings are conducted in Nigerian organisations;
2. Identify factors that promote or hinder effective meeting outcomes;
3. Assess the role of leadership (chairman) in guiding meeting processes;
4. Analyse the impact of meeting size, frequency, and participant composition on decision-making;
5. Investigate how agenda clarity and preparatory materials influence meeting efficiency;
6. Explore cultural and organisational factors that affect meeting perceptions and engagement, and
7. Provide practical recommendations to enhance meeting effectiveness in Nigerian organisational settings.

Findings and Analysis

1. Purpose, Perception, and Issues at Stake

Organizations or persons meet or plan proactively and execute their plans effectively. That is why a meeting is indeed organized generally to meet the yearnings and aspirations of the conveners. It is, of course, possible that a great many important matters are quite satisfactorily conducted by a

⁸ Ibrahim F. Sulaiman, Oluwaseun S. Owolabi, S. M. Zaabnot, A. A. Malik, and I. Y. Abubakar, "The Role of Internal Communication on the Effectiveness of Employee Decision Making," *International Journal of Management and Human Science* 8, no. 2 (2024): 44-55.

single individual who consults nobody. A great many more are resolved by a letter, a memo, a phone call, or a simple conversation between two people. Sometimes five minutes spent with six people separately is more effective and productive than a half-hour meeting with them all together. Speaking quite frankly, a great many meetings waste a great deal of everyone's time and seem to be held for historical rather than practical reasons; many long-established committees are little more than memorials to dead problems. It would probably save no end of managerial time if every committee had to discuss its own dissolution once a year, and put up a case if it felt it should continue for another twelve months. If this requirement did nothing else, it would at least refocus the minds of the committee members on their purposes and objectives. But having said that, and granting that "referring the matter to a committee" can be a device for drafting authority, diffusing responsibility, and delaying decisions, I cannot deny that meetings fulfill a deep human need. Man is a social species. In every organization and every human culture of which we have record in Nigeria, people come together in small groups at regular and frequent intervals, and in larger "tribal" (village meetings) gatherings from time to time. If there are no meetings in the places where they work, people's attachment to the organizations they work for will be small, and they will meet in regular formal or informal gatherings in associations, societies, teams, clubs, or pubs when work is over.

2. Salient Functions of Meeting Conduct

At this point, it may help us understand the meaning of meetings if we look at the eight main functions that meetings will always perform better than any of the more recent communication devices. A meeting also helps members to keep abreast of developments within and outside their organization purposely to make policy statements or give instructions to decide strategies or *modus operandi*, to produce group decisions, to find approaches to issues, to report on people issues, events, problems, etc.

In the simplest and most basic way, a meeting defines the team, the group, or the unit. Those present belong to it; those absent do not. Everyone is able to look around and perceive the whole group and sense the collective identity of which he or she forms a part. We all know who we are—whether we are on the board of Coca-Cola, NNPC, Oil Companies, in the state's sales department of MTN or Glo, Banking industries, a member of the school management committee, or on the Green Eagle Team. This offers great opportunities for face-to-face communication; hence, persuasion could be effectively employed.

A meeting is the place where the group revises, updates, and adds to what it knows as a group. Every group creates its own

pool of shared knowledge, experience, judgment, and folklore. But the pool consists only of what the individuals have experienced or discussed as a group—i.e., those things which every individual knows that all the others know, too. This pool not only helps all members to do their jobs more intelligently, but it also greatly increases the speed and efficiency of all communications among them. The group knows that all special nuances and wider implications in a brief statement will be immediately clear to its members. An enormous amount of material can be left unsaid that would have to be made explicit to an outsider. But this pool needs constant refreshing and replenishing, and occasionally the removal of impurities. So the simple business of exchanging information and ideas that members have acquired separately in smaller groups since the last meeting is an important contribution to the strength of the group. By questioning and commenting on new contributions, the group performs an important "digestive" process that extracts what's valuable and discards the rest.

Wood⁹ maintains that some ethnologists call this capacity to share knowledge and experience among a group "the social mind," conceiving it as a single mind dispersed among a number of skulls. They recognise that this "social mind" has a special creative power, too. A group of people meeting together can often produce better ideas, plans, and decisions than a single individual, or a number of individuals, each working alone. The meeting can, of course, also produce worse outputs or none at all if it is a bad meeting.

However, when the combined experience, knowledge, judgment, authority, and imagination of a half dozen people are brought to bear on issues, a great many plans and decisions are improved and sometimes transformed. The original idea that one person might have come up with singly is tested, tried, accepted, amplified, refined, and shaped by argument and discussion (which often acts on people as some sort of chemical stimulant to better performance), until it satisfies far more requirements and overcomes many more objections than it could in its original form.

A meeting helps every individual understand both the collective aim of the group and the way in which his own and everyone else's work can contribute to the group's success. It allows for information to be easily disseminated.

A meeting creates in all present a commitment to the decisions it makes and the objectives it pursues. Once something has been decided, even if you originally argued against it, your

⁹ William Wood, "The Social Mind: Group Knowledge and Decision-Making," *Journal of Social Psychology* 56, no. 2 (1997): 123–135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224549709595495>.

membership in the group entails an obligation to accept the decision. The alternative is to leave the group, but in practice, this is very rarely a dilemma. Real opposition to decisions within organisations usually consists of one part disagreement with the decision to nine parts resentment at not being consulted before the decision. For most people on most issues, it is enough to know that their views were heard and considered. They may regret that they were not followed, but they accept the outcome.

Just as the decision of any team is binding on all the members, so the decisions of a meeting of people higher up in an organisation carry greater authority than any decision by a single executive. It is much harder to challenge a decision of the board than of the chief executive acting on his own. The decision-making authority of a meeting is of special importance for long-term policies and procedures.

In Nigeria and in the world of management, a meeting is very often the only occasion where the teams or group actually exist and work as a group, and the only time when the supervisor, manager, or executive is actually perceived as the leader of the team, rather than as the official to whom individuals report. In some jobs, the leader guides his team through his personal presence—not just the leader of a pit gang or construction team, but also the chef in the hotel kitchen and the maître d'hôtel in the restaurant, or the supervisor in a department store. But in large administrative headquarters, the daily or weekly meeting is often the only time when the leader is ever perceived to be guiding a team rather than doing a job.

A meeting is a status arena. It is no good to pretend that people are not, or should not be, concerned with their status relative to other members in a group. It is just another part of human nature that we have to live with. It is a not insignificant fact that the word order means: (a) hierarchy or pecking order; (b) an instruction or command; and (c) stability and the way things ought to be, as in "put your affairs in order," or "law and order." All three definitions are aspects of the same idea, which is indivisible. Since a meeting is so often the only time when members get the chance to find out their relative standing, the "arena" function is inevitable. When a group is new, has a new leader, or is composed of people like department heads who are in competition for promotion and who do not work in a single team outside the meeting, "arena behaviour" is likely to figure more largely, even to the point of dominating the proceedings. However, it will hardly signify with a long-established group that meets regularly.

A meeting enables management to feel the pulse of the employees and get to know their feelings generally or on a specific issue. It will also help members to give a sense of responsibility and accountability.

It is quite obvious that despite the fact that a meeting can perform all of the foregoing main functions, there is no guarantee that it will do so in any given situation. It is all too possible that any single meeting will be a waste of time, an irritant, or a barrier to the achievement of the organisation's objectives.

3. What Sort of Meeting?

Everybody knows the answer to this question, but nobody has so far been able to come out with any standard typology that fully explains the sort of meeting. While my purpose in this article is to show the critical points at which most meetings go wrong and to indicate ways of putting them right, I must first draw some important distinctions in the size and type of meetings that we are dealing with in Nigeria's peculiar situation.

Meetings can be graded by size into three broad categories:

The assembly or village meetings: 100 or more people who are expected to do little more than listen to the main speaker or speakers.

The council: 40 or 50 people who are basically there to listen to the main speaker or speakers, but who can come in with questions or comments and who may be asked to contribute something on their own account.

The committee: Up to 10 (or at the most 12) people, all of whom more or less speak on an equal footing under the guidance and control of a chairman.

We are therefore concerned in this article only with the "committee" meeting, though it may be described as a committee, a subcommittee, a study group, a project team, a working party, a board, or by any of dozens of other titles. It is by far the most common meeting all over the world and can perhaps be traced back to the primitive hunting band through which our species evolved.

Beyond doubt, it constitutes the bulk of the 20 million meetings that, according to estimates, take place every day in Lagos, Abuja, or Port Harcourt. Apart from the distinction of size, there are certain considerations regarding the type of meeting that profoundly affect its nature. For instance:

Frequency: A daily meeting is different from a weekly one, and a weekly meeting differs from a monthly one. Irregular, ad hoc, quarterly, and annual meetings are different again. On the whole, the frequency of meetings defines, or perhaps even determines, the degree of unity within the group.

Composition: Do the members work together on the same project, such as the nursing and ancillary staff on the same ward of a hospital? Do they work on different but parallel tasks,

like a meeting of the company's plant managers or regional sales managers? Or are they a diverse group, perhaps strangers to one another, united only by the meeting itself and by a common interest in achieving its objectives?

Motivation: Do the members have a common objective in their work, like a football team? Or do they to some extent have a competitive working relationship, like managers of subsidiary companies at a meeting with the chief executive, or heads of research, production, and marketing discussing finance allocation for the coming year? Alternatively, does the desire for success through the meeting itself unify them, such as in a neighbourhood action group or a new product design committee?

Decision process: How does the meeting group ultimately reach its decisions? By general consensus, "the feeling of the meeting"? By a majority vote? Or are the decisions left entirely to the chairman after he has listened to the facts and opinions?

4. Kinds of Meetings

The experienced meeting-goer will recognise that, although there seem to be five quite different methods of analysing a meeting, in practice there is a tendency for certain kinds of meetings to sort themselves into one of these categories.

Consider:

The daily meeting, especially in the Legislative and Executive arms in Nigeria, where people work together on the same project with a common objective and reach decisions informally by general agreement.

The weekly or monthly meeting, for instance among oil barons or business magnates, where members work on different but parallel projects and where there is a certain competitive element, making it more likely that the chairman will make the final decision.

The irregular, occasional, or special project meeting composed of people whose normal work does not bring them into contact and whose tasks have little or no relationship with one another. They are united only by the project the meeting exists to promote and are motivated by the desire for that project's success. This is a typical example of village meetings.

Though actual voting is uncommon, every member effectively has a veto. Of these three kinds of meetings, the first — the workplace type — is probably the most common. It is also, interestingly, the one most likely to be successful. Operational imperatives usually ensure that it is brief, and the participants' experience of working side by side ensures that communication is effective.

The other two types differ. In these meetings, all sorts of human crosscurrents can sweep the discussion off course, and errors of psychology and technique on the chairman's part can defeat their purposes. Moreover, these meetings are likely to bring together the more senior people and to produce decisions that profoundly affect the efficiency, prosperity, and even survival of the entire Nigerian nation or organisation. It is, therefore, towards these higher-level meetings that the lessons of this article are primarily directed.

5. Before the Meeting

The most important question you should ask is, "What is this meeting intended to achieve?" You can ask it in different ways — "When it is over, how shall I judge whether it was a success or a failure?" — But unless you have a very clear requirement from the meeting, there is a grave danger that it will be a waste of everyone's time.

Defining the Objective or Goal

You have already looked at the eight main functions that all meetings perform, but if you are trying to use a meeting to achieve definite objectives, it can only achieve what is clearly defined. Every item on the agenda can be placed in one of the following four categories, or divided into sections that fall into one or more of them:

Informative-Digestive: Obviously, it is a waste of time for a meeting to give out purely factual information that would be better circulated in a document. However, if the information should be heard from a particular person, or if it needs clarification and comment to make sense of it, or if it has deep implications for the members of the meeting, then it is perfectly proper to introduce an item onto the agenda that requires no conclusion, decision, or action from the meeting. It is enough, simply, that the meeting should receive and discuss a report.

The "informative-digestive" function includes progress reports that keep the group up to date on the current status of projects for which it is responsible or that affect its deliberations, and the review of completed projects to allow a collective judgment and to identify lessons for future improvement.

Constructive-Originative: This "What shall we do?" function embraces all items that require Something new must be devised, such as a new policy, a new strategy, a new sales target, a new product, a new procedure, a new market, and so forth. This sort of discussion asks people to contribute their knowledge, experience, judgment, and ideas to a new marketing plan. Obviously the plan will probably be inadequate unless all relevant parties are present and pitching in.

Executive Responsibilities: This is the “How shall we do it?” function, which comes after it has been decided what the members are going to do; at this point, executive responsibilities for the different components of the task must be distributed around the table. Whereas in the second function the contributors’ importance is their knowledge and ideas, here their contribution is the responsibility for implementing the plan. The fact that they and their subordinates are affected by it makes their contribution especially significant.

It is of course possible to allocate these executive responsibilities without a meeting, by separate individual briefings, but several considerations often make a meeting desirable. First, it enables the members as a group to find the best way of achieving the objectives. Second, it enables each member to understand and influence the way in which his own job fits in with the jobs of the others and with the collective task. Third, if the meeting is discussing the implementation of a decision taken at a higher level, securing the group’s consent may be of prime importance. If so, the fact that the group has the opportunity to formulate the detailed action plan itself may be the decisive factor in securing its agreement, because in that case the final decision belongs, as it were, to the group. Everyone is committed to what the group decides and is collectively responsible for the final shape of the project, as well as individually answerable for his own part in it. Ideally, this sort of agenda item starts with a policy and ends with an action plan.

Legislative Framework: Above and around all consideration of “What to do” and “How to do it”, there is a framework: a departmental or divisional organisation and a system of rules, routines, and procedures. Changing this framework and introducing a new organisation or new procedures can be deeply disturbing to committee members and a threat to their status and long-term security. Yet leaving it unchanged can stop the organisation from adapting to a changing world. At whatever level this change happens, it must have the support of all the perceived leaders whose groups are affected by it.

The key leaders for this legislative function must collectively make or confirm the decision. If there is any important dissent, it is very dangerous to close the discussion and make the decision by decree. The group leaders cannot expect quick decisions if they are seeking to change the organisational framework and routines that people have grown up with. Thus they must be prepared to leave these items unresolved for

further discussion and consultation. As Bacon¹⁰ put it: "counsels to which time hath not been called, time will not ratify".

Making Preparations

The four different functions just discussed may of course be performed by a single meeting, as the group proceeds through the agenda. Consequently, it may be a useful exercise for the chairman to go through the agenda, writing beside each item which function it is intended to fulfill. This exercise helps clarify what is expected from the discussion and helps focus on which people to bring in and what questions to ask them.

People

The value and success of a committee meeting are seriously threatened if too many people are present. Between four and seven is generally ideal, ten is tolerable, and twelve is the outside limit. So the chairman should do everything he can to keep numbers down, consistent with the need to invite everyone with an important contribution to make.

The leader may have to leave out people who expect to come or who have always come. For this job he may need tact; but since people generally preserve a fiction that they are overworked already and dislike serving on committees, it is not usually hard to secure their consent to stay away.

If the leader sees no way of getting the meeting down to a manageable size, he can try the following devices:

- a) analyse the agenda to see whether everyone has to be present for every item (he may be able to structure the agenda so that some people can leave at half-time and others can arrive);
- b) ask himself whether he does not really need two separate, smaller meetings rather than one large one; and
- c) determine whether one or two groups can be asked to thrash some of the topics out in advance so that only one of them needs to come in with its proposals.

Remember, too, that a few words with a member on the day before a meeting can increase the value of the meeting itself, either by ensuring that an important point is raised that comes better from the floor than from the chair or by preventing a time-wasting discussion of a subject that need not be touched on at all.

Papers

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, quoted in *The Law and the Constitution*, in *The Empire and the Century* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1905), 47: "Counsels to which Time hath not been called, Time will not ratify."

The agenda is by far the most important piece of paper. Properly drawn up, it has a power of speeding and clarifying a meeting that every few people understand or harness. The main fault is to make it unnecessarily brief and vague. For example, the phrase “development budget” tells nothing very much, whereas the longer explanation “To discuss the proposal for reduction of the 2015-2016 development budget now that the introduction of our new product has been postponed” helps all committee members to form some view or even just to look up facts and figures in advance.

Thus, the leader should not be afraid of a long agenda, provided that the length is the result of his analysing and defining each item more closely rather than of his adding more items than the meeting can reasonably consider in the time allowed. He should try to include, very briefly, some indication of the reason for each topic to be discussed. If one item is of special interest to the group, it is often a good idea to single it out for special mention in a covering note.

The leader should also bear in mind the useful device of heading each item “For information”, “For discussion”, or “For decision” so that those at the meeting know where they are trying to get to.

And finally, the chairman should not circulate the agenda too far in advance, since the less organised members will forget it or lose it. Two or three days are right unless the supporting papers are voluminous.

Other “paper” considerations

The order of items on the agenda is important. Some aspects are obvious—items that need urgent decision have to come before those that can wait until next time. Equally, the leader should not discuss the budget for the re-equipment programme before discussing whether to put the re-equipment off until next year. But some aspects are not so obvious: consider:

- The early part of a meeting tends to be more lively and creative than the end of it. So if an item needs mental energy, bright ideas, and clear thinking, it may be better to put it high up on the list. Equally, if there is one item of great interest and concern to everyone, it may be a good idea to hold it back for a while and get some other useful work done first. Then the star item can be introduced to carry the meeting over the attention lag that sets in after the first 15 to 20 minutes of the meeting.
- Some items unite the meeting in a common front while others divide the members one from another. The leader may want to start with unity before entering into division, or he may prefer the other way around. The point is to be aware of the choice and to make it consciously because it is likely to make a

difference to the whole atmosphere of the meeting. It is almost always a good idea to find a unifying item with which to end the meeting.

- A common fault is to dwell too long on trivial but urgent items at the expense of subjects of fundamental importance whose significance is long-term rather than immediate. This can be remedied by putting on the agenda the time at which discussion of the important long-term issue will begin and by sticking to it.
- Very few business meetings achieve anything of value after two hours, and an hour and a half is enough time to allocate for most purposes.
- It is often a good idea to put the finishing time of a meeting on the agenda as well as the starting time.
- If meetings have a tendency to go on too long, the chairman should arrange to start them one hour before lunch or one hour before the end of work. Generally, items that ought to be kept brief may be introduced ten minutes from a fixed end point.
- The practice of circulating background or proposal papers along with the minutes is, in principle, a good one. It not only saves time, but it also helps in formulating useful questions and considerations in advance. But the whole idea is sabotaged once the papers get too long; they should be brief or provide a short summary. If they are circulated, obviously the chairman has to read them. (One chairman, more noted for his cunning than his conscientiousness, is said to have spent 30 seconds before each meeting going through all the papers he had not read with a thick red pen, marking lines and question marks in the margins at random, and making sure these were accidentally made visible to the meeting while the subject was being discussed.)

If papers are produced at the meeting for discussion, they should obviously be brief and simple, since everyone has to read them. It is a supreme folly to bring a group of people together to read six pages of closely printed sheets to themselves. The exception is certain kinds of financial and statistical papers whose function is to support and illustrate verbal points as reference documents rather than to be swallowed whole; these are often better tabled at the meeting.

All items should be thought of and considered in advance if they are to be usefully discussed. Listing "Any other business" on the agenda is an invitation to waste time. This does not absolutely preclude the chairman's announcing an extra agenda item at a meeting if something really urgent and unforeseen crops up, or is suggested by a member, provided it

is fairly simple and straightforward. Nor does it preclude leaving time for general unstructured discussion after the close of the meeting.

The chairman, in going through the agenda items in advance, can usefully insert his own brief notes of points he wants to be sure are not omitted from the discussion. A brief marginal scribble of "How much notice?" or "Standby arrangements?" or whatever is all that is necessary.

6. The Chairman's Job

A chairman controls and directs the procedures of the meeting. He has the power to discipline any defaulters.

Let us assume you have just been appointed chairman of the committee. You tell everyone that it is a bore or a chore. You also tell them that you have been appointed "for my sins." But the point is that you tell them. There is no escaping it; some sort of honour or glory attaches to the chairman's role. Almost everyone is in some way pleased and proud to be made chairman of something. That accounts for three-quarters of the challenge.

Master or Servant

Appointments as committee chairman are received differently by people. Some seize the opportunity to impose their will on a group they see themselves licensed to dominate. Their chairmanship becomes a harangue, interspersed with demands for group agreement.

Others resemble scoutmasters, for whom the collective activity of the group is satisfaction enough, with no need for achievement. Their chairmanship is akin to endlessly stoking a campfire that is not cooking anything.

There are also insecure or lazy chairmen who look to the meeting for reassurance and support in their ineffectiveness and inactivity, thereby spreading responsibility for indecision across the group. They seize every expression of disagreement or doubt as justification for avoiding decisions or action.

Even the large majority who do not go to these extremes feel a certain pleasurable tumescence of the ego when they first take their place at the head of the table. This feeling is not sinful; the sin is indulging it or assuming the pleasure is shared by other members of the meeting.

Breth et al.¹¹ stress that: "The chairman's self-indulgence is one of the greatest barriers to meeting success. His first duty is to recognise the temptation and the dangers of yielding to it. A

¹¹ Andrew Breth and Peter Ng, *Effective Leadership in Meetings: Balancing Authority and Facilitation* (London: Routledge, 2020).

clear warning sign is hearing himself talk excessively during discussion."

Evans and Thompson¹² claim: "One of the most effective chairpersons restricts interventions to a single sentence, or at most two. She forbids herself from contributing a paragraph to a meeting she chairs. It is a strict rule, yet attendees rarely find it detrimental."

In fact, the only legitimate source of pleasure in chairmanship is the achievements of the meeting, and this must be shared by all present. Meetings are necessary for many basic human reasons, but they are useful only if all present see progress toward goals they could not have achieved individually.

James and Patel¹³ observe: "If the chairman is to ensure that the meeting achieves valuable objectives, he is more effective seeing himself as servant rather than master. His role is to assist the group toward the best conclusion or decision efficiently: to interpret and clarify, move discussion forward, and bring it to a resolution understood and accepted by all, even if individuals do not fully agree."

A chairman's true authority arises from his perceived commitment to the group's objectives and his skill in guiding them. Control and discipline then become enforcing the group's will on any individual diverting or delaying progress, rather than imposing personal authority.

Once members realise the leader is motivated by commitment to the common objective, strong personality is unnecessary to control the meeting. A sense of urgency and clear desire to reach the best conclusion quickly are far more effective than a gavel. The effective chairman maintains focus by indicating that there is no time to pursue a particular idea.

Hall et al¹⁴ emphasise: "Nonverbal cues such as posture, eye contact, facial expressions, and intonation allow the chairman to manage discussions without overt control. These signals

¹² Laura Evans and Richard Thompson, *Chairing Committees Successfully: Modern Approaches to Meeting Management* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

¹³ Thomas James and Suresh Patel, "Servant Leadership in Corporate Governance," *Journal of Management Studies* 56, no. 4 (2019): 789–805, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12436>.

¹⁴ Karen Hall, Michael Wong, and John Smith, "Nonverbal Communication in Organizational Leadership," *Leadership Quarterly* 33, no. 5 (2022): 101485, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101485>.

teach participants the expected 'meeting behaviour' efficiently."

This servant-leader role is sometimes obscured in large organisations, especially when the chairman is the line manager. The principle, however, remains unchanged. In small groups, such as a neighbourhood action committee, the relevant question is: "Through whose chairmanship do we collectively have the best chance of achieving our goal?"

Joseph and Miller¹⁵ note: "Effective discussions often have two leaders: a 'social' leader managing group dynamics and a 'task' leader advocating specific objectives."

Leskar et al.¹⁶ maintain: "Regardless of whether leadership is singular or dual, the chairman's optimal role is social leadership. If he wants a particular point advocated, someone else should lead the discussion initially, allowing the chairman to summarise and support a preferred position later."

Task advocates might be the chairman's deputy or a different individual for each agenda item. On some topics, the chairman may serve as task advocate, particularly if conflict is minimal. The key is preserving social leadership, even if it means sacrificing task leadership. If the task advocate repeatedly champions a cause, they risk generating antagonism from others, which is less harmful than if directed at the social leader.

Conclusion

This paper identifies factors contributing to ineffective meetings in Nigeria. Meetings occupy a unique place in the nation due to their role in governance and development. Time consciousness poses a challenge, as success is often judged against time.

The chairman's role is formidable, requiring planning, direction, and control. Many factors impede effective meetings, including inadequate preparation, poor attendance, insufficient papers, an un-conducive environment, and leadership style. Institutions must cultivate a positive meeting culture. Effective meetings depend on the chairman's self-management, discipline in decision-making, proactive handling

¹⁵ Richard Joseph and David Miller, "Dual Leadership Roles in Team Meetings: A Case Study," *International Journal of Project Management* 39, no. 7 (2021): 810–823, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.05.003>.

¹⁶ Peter Leskar, Lin Zhang, and Emily O'Connor, "Social vs Task Leadership in Group Decision Making," *Journal of Business Research* 120 (2020): 45–58, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.07.023>.

of time, people, and resources, and robust planning and organisation.

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