Strategies of handling a working meeting when dealing with difficult situations

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Abstract: - The working meetings represent a management instrument that has to be organized and conducted in accordance with specific rules and regulations in order for the meeting to be successful. But sometimes difficult situations occur during these meetings and these are the key moments that the managers should know to manipulate and coordinate in order to achieve the initial goals. For this purpose this article presents various situations in which the meeting could be put in jeopardy and strategies he has to adopt in order to make everything run smoothly.

Key-Words: - working meeting, difficult situations, employees, managerial strategies, communication techniques

1. The role of the working meetings
Few of the instruments of management are looked at with such despite as the working meetings. Still being part of a society means belonging to groups. From birth until death we take part at the activities of groups and we participate at meetings. From recent studies it turns out that the frequency and importance of meetings increases together with the evolution on the hierarchical scale. An executive manager spends 20 hours per week in meetings.

In the specialized literature it is considered that meetings represent an important manner of highlighting the individual talent and of creating a product more important than the sum of elements that make up the whole. This is the theory. Unfortunately the realities that we have to deal with rarely come to support this theory. We spend a lot of time during meetings but for many of us it is a waste of time. Actually one survey demonstrated that a quarter of the US workers would rather go to the dentist than attend a working meeting [Guffey, 2010]. Each and every one of us has had to deal with at least one of the following problems: ambivalence, domination, hostility, hesitation, conformism and selfish independence. These factors lead, eventually to a total low consideration of meetings. In reality, meetings can outclass the level of the formulated” theories”. They shouldn’t be a waste of time, actually they can be considered as opportunities to develop different ideas.

Still, in order for the reality to sustain the theory there must be accepted a basic premise: a meeting is nothing more than an instrument of management and as any instrument the meeting should be used with the scope that it was destined and in a correct manner in order to achieve the wanted goal. A meeting is based on three characters principle and these are that in a meeting there should be announced something, decided something or discussed something [Hurtley, Bruckman, 2003].

When an instrument is used efficiently then it is used adequately. The screwdriver won’t be used to hammer a nail and the hammer won’t be used to tighten a screw. In this manner, there won’t be used a group of persons to accomplish a task which could be better accomplished by the manager himself. When an instrument is used efficiently than time and energy are gained. When the meetings are conducted efficiently there is a gain regarding all the resources that the managerial process implies: time, energy, money, material facilities and the employees’ effort. Successful meetings don’t just happen; they rather they occur by design [Lehman, 2008].

Any meeting has an internal process of development, in various stages.
1. Orientation
In this stage, the employees expect that the manager reads the daily issues and defines the rules of the game [Guffey, 2010]. Each and every one of us has had to deal with at least one of the following problems: ambivalence, domination, hostility, hesitation, conformism and selfish independence. These factors lead, eventually to a total low consideration of meetings. In reality, meetings can outclass the level of the formulated theory’s”. They shouldn’t be a waste of time, actually they can be considered as opportunities to develop different ideas.

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When the interpersonal conflicts related to feelings and expectations are about to disappear, the employees must start feeling as a member of a group who has a problem to solve and they start changing opinions and ideas and the relationship between them consolidates as a consequence of a the common problem that needs to be solved.

4. The personal commitment
In this stage the objective is well defined and accepted so everyone commits in solving the problem.
Overall meetings must be constructive and if they are they will be stimulating. It is true that good meetings don’t just happen but they are made to happen when this occurs only benefits can be driven out of it [Forsyth, Kay, 2008].

2. The typology of difficult situations within the working meetings
Meetings have the advantage that the information can be questioned, examined, verified and confirmed, on one side [Pierce, 2008]. But on the other side, thanks to its open character, during the meeting the manager may confront with difficult situations, from which he should get out wisely and with patience. These situations may be:
- the systematic contradiction of the manager by one or more employees;
- personal attacks at the manager’s person;
- bad will coming from the employees;
- the manifestation of exaggerated demands from the employees side.

2.1 The systematic contradiction of the manager
The manager must keep his calm attitude and he must begin complimenting the person that contradicted him by telling him that he is dynamic and active because he has quickly observed his deficiencies (real or supposed) in argumentation and that he really wants him to participate actively at solving the problem discussed. The manager must take advantage of this dynamism in order to orientate his responder towards a constructive discussion by using the following manners:
- accepting the subordinate’s reaction;
- valuing the elements that seem positive and ignoring the others;
- recognizing his own limits; the subordinate will be pleasantly surprised by this attitude;
- staying calm and if it is possible using humor;
- avoiding the counter attack; the more the manager counter attacks, the greater importance he gives to his subordinate and places himself in an inferior position;
- soliciting the other participants’ opinion; in this manner the manager will gain a reflection period;
- reformulating the subordinate’s affirmations in order to make sure of their proper understanding;
- soliciting more precise details, logically argued;
- affirming the subordinate’s right to have a different opinion than his own; this fact will ensure the manager a better position, by making him look less aggressive;
- if the subordinate brings supplementary arguments the manager should first contradict the weakest;
- using phrases such as „I agree with your argument, but...”
- formulating the answer to the subordinate’s arguments should be made most of the times by addressing the subordinate a question, based upon his scope;
- implicating the subordinate in solving the problem by addressing him the question „What do you suggest us?”
- without justifying the past actions and by reformulating the question in terms that involve the action „How would like for us to action in the future?”
The manager should have permanently in sight that the best mean of respecting himself is by being respected and by respecting the others even though they have opposite interests.

2.2 Personal attacks at the manager’s address
The personal attack may have different aspects:
- the systematic refuse of listening to the manager; the employees discuss among them while the manager exposes the problem’s data;
- explicit attacks such as „You refuse to increase our salary with x% while you walk around with a Mercedes and spend your holidays abroad”; The solution is only one: the manager should act as if he didn’t hear anything, by staying calm and by continuing the discussion. His response to the attack will only lead to a new one. Still, in the case of a violent insult or of repeated attacks, the manager should calmly affirm that he can not tolerate such a behavior and that he will continue the discussion when the employees will act accordingly.

2.3 The manifestation of an obvious bad will coming from the employees
The bad will is being translated by the refuse of getting involved in a dialogue with the manager or by a systematic non argued opposition. It can also be translated by presenting wrong or manipulated information or by a total refuse to discuss concrete situations.
The manager can react in the following manners:
- by trying to understand what elements from his attitude or behavior have determined such a reaction;
- by reflecting on the scopes followed by the employees when adopting such an attitude;
- by staying calm;
- if these recommendations do not have any result than the manager should simply ignore the respective behavior.

2.4 The manifestation of exaggerated demands from the employees

In general, the employees may start the discussion by requesting very high demands in order to accept in the end the level they actually want. The manager should not renounce to his credibility by asking a counter proposal but he should ask his respondent to expose the element on which his demand is based.

Also the manager could be manipulated through two different attitudes. For example, one of the employees could manifest an extreme exigency such as „We want an increase of the salary with x% or nothing” while another could be more conciliated and could propose, in the end, a lower percentage then the first one. The manager should not be tempted by this last proposal and he must again require the employee to sustain his proposal.

During the working meeting there can appear situations of blocking/impasse which seem without a way out because they stop the discussion to advance. In this case, the manager has many possibilities of action:
- staying calm;
- self- investigating his attitude and analyzing the reactions that it may provoke by addressing questions like: “Do I have a too aggressive or condescending attitude?”, „Have I determined an adequate participation of the employees into discussion”;
- by trying maneuvers such as: taking a break, suspending the meeting, reprogramming the meeting with the scope of gathering more information, presenting more detailed information;
- if the previous recommendations do not lead to unblocking the dialogue, than the manager should interrogate the employees regarding their feelings, desires and expectations. By making them talk, actually means getting out of the impasse.

- the manager may decide to make different concessions by taking into account the following aspects:
  - the concessions must not be offered if the manager is on a very strong position because he will lose a part of it;
  - the manager must know exactly what these concessions mean for the company (in financial terms);
  -it is mandatory to announce the rules of the game: the limits of the concession, the conditions and reciprocity.

3. The principles of consensual practices

Such as the employees, the managers participate at discussions. Moreover, he must be a good animator which means that he should know how to expose correctly the problem before solving it and to create and permanently sustain the dialogue and not to manipulate his employees. The flexibility in thinking and in action, and also the honesty does not reduce the power of decision such as some managers may consider.

Practice has demonstrated that, in most of the case, the manager can not detach himself from his hierarchical behavior for adopting an animator-participator behavior. It has been noticed that the time that the manager gives for speaking (80% of the total time) it is superior to that given to all his partners of dialogue (20%). Moreover, most of the discussions have informative role with a descendant character followed by a number of “questions and answers” phases. The debates almost lack and such as the solving of the vital problems. In general, the manager tends to consider the advice and suggestions of the employees as personal attacks and that is why he permanently has a defensive attitude. He formulates value judgments by placing in front of everything the organization’s welfare, without giving explanations of what this means. His interventions are in general authoritarian.

If the manager does not give up to these practices his respondents will transform in passive auditors and will probably become adversaries.

Some key principles must be respected by the manager:
- avoiding to mix the problems or to pass from one to another, without solving the first problem; the problems must be exposed and solved one at a time;
- exercising a certain pressure over the entire conversation, which shouldn’t be very strong (it can develop aggressiveness and threatening) nor very weak (reduces exchange of ideas, laissez-faire);
- structuring by the manger of the employees thinking so that it can be placed into value, valuing their ideas in comparison with the manager’s.

For the employees to be encouraged to talk it is necessary that the manager handle very well the art of addressing questions. The questions must be formulated in accordance with the proposed objective, such as:
- in order to begin solving a problem: „which is in your opinion the possible solutions?” This question will allow a free answer from everybody;
- to provoke discussions or to awake the interest of a less participative employee, the addressed question may be followed by a name, a wondering look towards the respective person: „Which is in your opinion the possible solution Mr. X?” addressed with a calm voice or a gentle smile;
- to get out of a difficult position it may be addressed a direct question to an employee or the question of the
person who addressed it may be returned; this return will take him by surprise and force him to explain his point of view;
- in order to force the employee develop his point of view there must be addressed opened questions „Which may be the solution to our problem?”;
- in order to give a clear orientation regarding the own point of view, it is imposed to address a direct question:” Don’t you think that it would be better to create a committee to analyze the problem?”
- to suggest the desired options it is mandatory to address an alternative question „Should we create a committee to solve this problem or should we leave for the Human Resources manager to solve?’;
- in order to obtain useful advice and to avoid the tendency of generalization starting from an isolated phenomenon, it is useful to address explanatory questions:” How many times did this happen? Where? How?”. Moreover, these questions allow earning time for reflection and of an eventual reorientation.

In accordance with the analyzed problem, the manager’s objectives, with the context the manager may choose either a direct discussion with every participant or a free discussion during which it is allowed the exchange of opinions between employees.

4. Consensual practices for difficult employees

The different personalities of the employees will determine different behaviors in their relationship with the manager.

4.1 The talkative employee

Even though he irritates the manager, he should not exteriorize, but he should rather interrupt him at regular intervals and reformulate his phrases, by making him attentive, with diplomacy, that the time is up and he should let his colleagues speak as well. If this manner fails, the manager will tell him this time firmly that the time meant for expressing the opinions is equally distributed to all the participants.

4.2 The silent and attentive employee

This employee can not be forced to get out of his mood but he can be stimulated by addressing questions to which he would probably answer.

4.3 The obedient employee

This is the employee who begins his phrases with strong declarations which are meant to impress the manager and his colleagues:
- „I am ready to use all means to...”;
- „The employees will never accept to...”;

The manager under no circumstance will let himself drawn into this game, but he will respond calmly, with no irony, starting fro the fact that these manifestations are rather the result of intranquility than of force.

4.4 The aggressive employee

This role of the manager is in this situation to unwind the situation by:
- maintaining a calm behavior;
- understanding the reasons the provoked the employee’s reaction;
- by reformulating the phrase” If I understood well, you mean that...”
- waiting calmly the employee’s answer;
- if the employee persists in his behavior, the manager may tell him that he disagrees because the debate can not advance;
- if the insults repeat themselves than the manager may suspend the meeting. Often, at the beginning of the discussion the atmosphere may be much tensioned and may generate less normal behaviors and sometimes virulent explosions. These relieves may be sometimes impossible to be avoided but they are unpleasant for their author and not for their manager.

4.5 The declarative employee

This is the employee who begins his phrases with strong declarations which are meant to impress the manager and his colleagues:
- „I am ready to use all means to...”;
- „The employees will never accept to...”;

In order to discourage these kinds of attitudes the manager should:
- not negatively comment the subordinate’s attitude but, on the contrary, to encourage them in expressing their own points of view;
- to expressly demand different points of view and putting into doubt his own ideas and decisions;
- in extreme situations he just directly address to the adulator by telling him that he doesn’t appreciate his behavior.
5. Conclusions
The manager has very demanding positions in working meetings. Confronting with difficult situations and employees within working meetings need for him to take action in such a manner that these elements are transformed into constructive ones by leading to the achievement of the initial goal. The art of management is once again questioned when a manager has to deal with such cases. By dealing every situation in particular with calm, patience and without undermining his own authority it is made up a communication strategy for these particular situations.

References: