

## Meet in Harmony

I am reminded about an incident I witnessed on a train some time ago. An elderly lady got on the train with a bag overflowing with the results of a day's shopping. As there were no seats available, she stood in the aisle, hanging on grimly to a bar. After a few minutes, a kindly gentleman of similar vintage, stood up and asked if she would like to sit down. Chivalry isn't dead after all, I thought to myself. The lady refused the kind offer. However, the man was determined, took hold of her arm and insisted that she take his seat.

Then a very interesting thing happened. The lady's response took me by complete surprise. She pulled away from the man quite forcefully and said in a strong clear voice, "I said no thanks, do I look like I need a seat"? And then the knock-out punch, "sure you need it much more than me". The man sat down nodding his head and looking like he had been hit in the face by a wet fish.

The relevance of the story for project meetings is clear. Misunderstandings, false assumptions, lack of commitment, force, hurt, and showing off were all part of what was on display and so it is also for many project meetings.

When people ask me about project management, I compare it to an orchestra. Just like the conductor conducts the performance of the orchestra, a project manager conducts the performance of the team. And nowhere is this approach more needed than in project meetings.

Think of the time spent in project meetings? Are meetings always good use of project time? Many people would say that most of them are a waste of time. Are meetings always productive, creative and achieve their objectives? Again, many people would answer in the negative. The problem for projects is that what happens in project meetings is one of the key determinants of project success.

The conductor cannot facilitate optimum performance unless all of the pieces, woodwind, brass, percussion and strings etc. are in place and working to the same music sheets. Likewise, the project manager cannot achieve optimum performance in the meeting unless all of the key people are in attendance.

Depending on the piece of music, and what music sheet they are on, different sections of the orchestra take the lead and contribute most. And depending on the agenda for the meeting, and the item on the agenda, different team members take the lead and contribute more than others. But generally everyone gets to play a part and sometimes the smallest part can be the most important.

So how does the project manager conduct the orchestra? I have put together my top tips below.

- Prepare and circulate a structured agenda well in advance. This is akin to the conductor telling the orchestra what music will be played.
- Keep the meeting as small as possible by inviting only those that are necessary to achieve the agenda. If the wind section is not required for this particular piece of music, don't have them hanging around cluttering up the room!
- Set the stage. Reiterate the desired outcomes of the meeting at the start. Clarify any ambiguity and get everyone on the same sheet of music. Lay out the ground rules and tell them how long each item and the whole meeting will take – and stick to the timescales.

- Ensure a smooth flow through the meeting. Conduct in a light but firm way and stick to the score! Your job is to interpret how the meeting will be played (style, tempo, dynamics, feel, articulation) and to convey this to the team members.
- Control the meeting by managing both the content and the process. Conduct in a way that ensures that all the team stick to the music and timing, and that transitions from one contribution to another, and from one agenda item to another, happen in an orderly way.
  - Watch the timing and move things along as per the agenda.
  - If an impasse is reached, it may be necessary to move on and assign the issue to another meeting or a sub-meeting off-line.
  - Clarify confusing statements.
  - Keep to the point.
  - Identify common ground and areas of agreement rather than getting too hung up on differences.
  - Summarise and organise ideas / decisions.
  - Test for consensus as decisions appear to be emerging.
  - Maintain order – one voice only.
  - Give everyone a chance to participate.
  - Indicate appreciation of contributions.
  - Ensure that decisions are clear and ownership is accepted
- Do not abuse your role of conductor. On their own, the conductor can sway the baton wildly but nothing will be achieved. The players must be heard. And finally, and most important in a project,
- Ensure a record is kept of decisions made and action items assigned. Record the music, or at least the highlights, and circulate for review.
- End the meeting as something of a social event. Thank all for their time, participation and contribution. If a meeting is stormy, smooth ruffled feathers and do some maintenance on damaged relationships.

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