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Exploring the relationship of meetings to organizational culture and values

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EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF MEETINGS TO ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND VALUES

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Abstract

This mixed methods study explored the relationship between organizational culture expressed through values and meeting practices. Three organizations were studied using meeting observations, a staff survey and interviews. The study referenced four conceptual frameworks on the role of meetings in business—that they played a *functional* role, represented an *interruption* in the flow of work, were a form of *organizational discourse* and were a component of *organizational culture*. Meetings were one of a number of methods the organizations used to reinforce their values and were a complex reflection of the life of the organization and expressed how it had chosen to work out its context, with the role of the managers surfacing as a critical avenue for values reinforcement. Values awareness proved to be an unreliable indicator of values integration. Studying meetings also emerged as a low-threat entrée for OD practitioners to explore an organization's culture.

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Chapter 1

Background and Introduction

Meetings in organizations are pervasive, with some estimates that they consume 15 percent of an organization's working time (Bain, 2015). Depending on an employee's level in an organization the time spent in meetings can range, with executives spending roughly 18 hours in a 55-hour workweek (Silverman, 2012). A Clarizen/Harris poll determined that employees spend 4.5 hours per week in status meetings and 4.6 hours per week in preparation for those same meetings (Clarizen, 2015). A *Harvard Business Review* study of one large corporation determined that the cumulative time across the organization spent on preparing for a weekly executive committee meeting totaled more than 300,000 hours annually (Mankins, 2014).

Author and speaker, Patrick Lencioni, chronicled his view of the poor quality of meetings in his book, *Death By Meeting*, and in his subsequent book, *The Advantage*, he reprises this idea with a recommendation on the four types of meetings that healthy organizations regularly commit to (Lencioni, 2012). Academic sources also focus on meeting effectiveness and tend to explore attributes of meetings that contribute or detract from effectiveness, such as whether or not a meeting uses a facilitator or not (Niederman & Volkema, 1999). Given the persistence of meetings as a work practice and the volume of time and resources dedicated by groups to this way of working, determining whether they impact organizations positively or negatively shows merit.. Two examples, one positive and one negative, reflect the potential in thinking about meetings in a different light.

In 2003, *The Atlantic Monthly*, published an article on the space shuttle *Columbia* accident, and in it, the author and the accident investigation committee, pointed heavily to the organizational culture of NASA as a major downfall leading up to and in the handling of the accident. In particular, the meeting culture was cited as one oriented around delivering complex analytical data via the simplistic tool of PowerPoint rather than appropriately detailed reports or documents that matched the nature of the problems. Meetings were rooted in hierarchy and open dialogue or problem solving was inhibited (Langewiesche, 2003). Certainly, other factors contributed to this tragic event but one place where they manifested was in NASA's approach to meetings (Edmondson, 2012).

Conversely, meetings can advance and strengthen an organizational culture. Ed Catmull, in his book, *Creativity, Inc*, describes a meeting, called the "brain trust," that Pixar uses in their creative process. Similar to dialogue (Schein, 1999), this meeting is rooted in principles of safety, reduced power thresholds from leadership and a sincere interest in each other's success. Part of its function is to support the creative development process and provide Pixar's creative teams with candid input at times when they might be stuck. Catmull's stated intention of the brain trust meetings is to "institutionalize [candor] by putting mechanisms in place that explicitly say it is valuable" (Catmull, 2014, p. 86)

The purpose of this study is to explore the potential role that meetings may play in the ongoing support or diminishment of organizational culture—specifically as demonstrated through organizational values and meeting norms. Among the elements that Schein believes leaders use to embed and transmit culture, two link to the role of meetings: "What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis" and "rites and rituals of the organization" (Schein, 2004, p. 246). This study seeks to evaluate the opportunity that may exist in a prevalent work behavior that leaders could leverage to strengthen their organizational values and purposes if managed intentionally.

The first question this study explored—to what degree do meetings reflect and represent the values of an organization? Some organizations articulate a strong set of values in how they present themselves publicly while others operate with an internal set of values that are less readily apparent to outsiders. Some espouse one thing and actually operate to an entirely different set of intentions (Schein, 2009). If an organization can articulate a strong affinity with their values did their meeting culture uphold those values?

A second area this study explored is the dominant meeting norms. What are the common behaviors present? What is the group's level of awareness these are present and if they are they able to define the source of those norms? A comparison of the organizational values and meeting norms will be done for areas of alignment and opportunity.

The premise of this paper goes beyond the notion that meetings are simply a way to accomplish a set of functions that supports the operational goals and that they are an overlooked strategic element an organization can leverage for its success. This study is not focused on meeting effectiveness per se but zeroes in on one manifestation of organizational culture that could potentially impact effectiveness. This study does not assume that organizations that have a high level of satisfaction with their approaches to meetings is necessarily defined as "strong cultures," an idea that Saffold (1988) cautioned against. Nor does this study make any assertions about the link between culture and performance, productivity and operationalizing best practices for meetings (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The topic of meetings in the literature aligns with four broad conceptual frameworks. The first and the most highly studied of these, looks at the *functional role* meetings play in the life of an organization. It is from this broad area the topic of meeting effectiveness, which is so pervasive in the mainstream business literature, best connects. A second concept looks at meetings for their episodic qualities and largely as an *interruption* in the flow of work. A third more theoretical framing of meetings characterizes them as a form of *organizational discourse*—how an organization talks and emotes. This research built upon the fourth concept that views meetings as a component of *organizational culture*.

The Functional Role of Meetings

When asked about the value of meetings, C-suite members described the most important types of meetings as employee training and corporate board meetings, followed closely by annual meetings, trade shows, sales meetings and consumer/marketing events (Northstar, 2013). This list reflects a strong purpose-orientation for the function of meetings—they are a way to do work and accomplish a set of activities. Allen, Beck, Scott, and Rogelberg (2013, p. 800) developed this idea with their research, which produced a taxonomy of 16 primary functions, with two surfacing as most common—"to discuss ongoing projects" and "to routinely discuss the state of business." Their research looked at meeting purposes across publicly traded, privately held, non-profit and government groups, each reflecting a slightly different focus, in keeping with their primary organizational purposes (see Table 1 for a summary of their findings).

Other researchers have identified the role meetings play in supporting knowledge management and information exchange within organizations (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2013). Further, meetings can play a significant role in building or destroying trust within groups. As a practical method for creating ingroup and outgroup behavior, meetings provide a platform for evaluating "perceptions of others' ability, benevolence and integrity" (Williams, 2001, p. 379), three characteristics identified as critical to trust formation. When used for information sharing, failure to include team members in meetings may create an "out of the loop" situation where the lack of perceived relevant information limits a team member's participation. Being out of the loop has been shown to negatively impact team member trust (Jones, Carter-Sowell, Kelly, & Williams, 2009).

From the functional perspective of meetings, the discussion naturally turns to what contributes to effective meetings. Comaford (2013) distilled the functions of meetings to five general categories (info sharing, promises, requests, debating/decision-making/point proving and sharing oneself). Comaford contends that the most effective meetings place the highest volume of time on promises and requests, rather than info sharing and sharing oneself, which is where she believes the majority of meetings tend to default.

Meeting effectiveness literature covers a range of elements from use of agenda and minutes (Leach, Rogelberg, Warr, & Burfield, 2009), to pre-meeting activities such as the impact of informal conversations before a meeting begins (Allen, Willenbrock, & Landowski, 2013), and the more formal elements of meeting structure, such as opening and closing comments from meeting hosts (Nielsen, 2013).

What defines an “effective” meeting is yet another component of this topic landscape as well as understanding the impact that generational and national culture play in how participants feel about the meetings they attend (Fenich, Scott-Halsell, Ogbeide, & Hashimoto, 2014). What becomes particularly challenging in assembling a rational point of view from this body of material is the lack of shared meaning of the term “meeting” and what it may or may not include. In some research, the term is used to describe large events and in others it captures the smaller routine conversations that occur in the course of doing business. Whereas mainstream content on this topic tends to be broad, academic literature on the topic tends to assess narrow elements of the meeting environment such as lateness to meetings (Rogelberg et al., 2013) or how facilitation skills impact meeting quality (Niederman & Volkema, 1999). Within mainstream business literature there is a tendency to offer prescriptive, broad-brush assessments of what makes for “an effective meeting,” which too often is reduced to truisms and “top 5” lists of no-fail solutions. Addressing this subject absent careful thought to the purpose behind the meetings or the type of gathering muddies an already diffuse topic.

As technology has become increasingly prevalent in the mix of how meetings are held, new issues in communication and meeting effectiveness have emerged, from virtual meetings, presentation formats, multi-tasking and multi-communicating in meetings (Stephens & Davis, 2009). The use of PowerPoint, and in particular its role in the *Columbia* accident, opened a body of work lead by Edmund Tufte on the understanding how presentation content is best understood by its end audience (Langewiesche, 2003). The debate about effective use of this communication tool persists in the meeting literature as clearer distinctions are being made about adapting its use depending on the intended purpose of its final output (Schoeneborn, 2013).

Virtual meetings and a mixture of computer-supported meetings further challenge a comprehensive understanding of what supports the highest meeting effectiveness. Work done by Kennedy, Vozdolska, and McComb (2010) found that work outputs from strictly computer-mediated teams did not match face-to-face teams and members had lower satisfaction ratings and higher cost performance. Finding a balance of when to meet in person and virtually is yet another element adding to the complexity of this topic (Kennedy et al., 2010).

Meetings as Interruption

In a second perspective to studying meetings, Rogelberg, Warr, and Burnfield (2006) explored the impact of meetings on employee well-being from the standpoint that meetings cause an interruption in the normal course of work. This premise would seem to create distinctions around work behaviors, defining some is being more or less supportive of work accomplishment. As such, looking at meetings from the "interruption" point of view may not have a broad application and is in conflict with the current reported meeting volumes experienced by the average worker as noted earlier. This perspective may be most useful in evaluating the effect of meetings in organizations with job designs that are traditional and employee interactions are scheduled and uncertainty is low (Cummings & Worley, 2015). The premise of "meetings as an interruption," however, would support achieving a high level of quality and effectiveness for the limited number of meetings that exist in these designs.

Meetings as Discourse

A third perspective on meetings comes from the work of those interested in understanding how organizations communicate. The theoretical underpinnings of this perspective are rooted in anthropology and organizational discourse (Cooren, 2015). Early authors on this topic included Boden and Schwartzman, distilling this to the essential idea that “Organizations are people. When people come together in organizations to get things done, they talk” (Boden, 1994, p. 8). Contemporary studies by Ketan et al. (2013) describe 20 of the most frequently used communication behaviors in the workplace, the top five of which occur regularly in meetings (listening, asking questions, discussing, sharing information and agreeing.)

The quality of communication behaviors also plays a significant role in perceived meetings effectiveness and can support organizational success up to 2.5 years after a meeting (Kaufefeld & Willenbrock, 2012). Negative behaviors such as surface acting were linked to emotional exhaustion and intent to quit (Shanrock et al., 2013) Laughter in meetings “increases feelings of closeness and collegiality” and will “diminish tension and stress in conjunction with demanding task assignments” (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009, p. 114). Forgiveness plays a significant role in mitigating negative meeting behaviors (Schulte, Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2011).

What this perspective offers that a purely functional view lacks is a sense of humanity. Meetings are essentially conversations between individuals and as such, meetings are places where the people within organizations act out their feelings, and where the organization as a whole emotes (Cooren, 2015). This perspective retains the organic qualities of an open system, whereas the functional view tends to reinforce the long-held mechanistic view of organizations (Morgan, 2006).

A related idea of the role of meetings in groups is that of "convening" and using gatherings of people around a common purpose to advance intentions including hard business objectives as well as fueling deeper relational connection. Embedded in the concept of convening is a belief that by gathering a group of people there is a fundamental spiritual element present, and depending on the level of intentionality, convened groups can achieve greater or lesser amounts of their shared goals (Neal & Neal, 2011). Jorgensen (2010) believes leaders are responsible for shaping a "conversational leadership" style of conducting meetings. Neal and Neal (2011) place the meeting facilitator in the center of this approach and offer an 8-stage model to achieve consequential conversations.

Meetings as Manifestation of Culture

A fourth perspective looks at meetings as a manifestation of organizational culture. Morgan (2006) describes the strength of assessing organizations through a culture metaphor as "direct[ing] attention to the symbolic significance of almost every aspect of organizational life…Meetings are more than just meetings. They carry important aspects of organizational culture" (p. 141-142). Viewing meetings through the culture lens opens an opportunity to look into the deeper inner workings of an organization.

This fourth perspective requires, first, a deeper look at the ideas embedded in organizational culture and definitions of the term in the literature. In the broadest sense, organizational culture is the sum of the mission, vision and values, the processes and systems, the habits, behaviors and expectations that an enterprise and its members hold (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Morgan, 2006; Schein, 2009). Schein (2004) describes it as the underlying assumptions, espoused beliefs and values, and artifacts an organization holds, all of which have an integrated and influential role on each other.

Other authors offer helpful ways to understand what culture is, particularly practitioners who wrestled with this concept in the 1980s and '90s when it was emerging as a broad topic of discussion in the field. Ott (1989) distinguishes between two possible understandings of the term culture—one that defines it as something that exists within the organization but also as a way of understanding the behavior of the organization. Weick (1985, p. 388) aptly distilled these two understandings into a matter of whether or not an organization's culture is something it "has" or is something that defines its essence. As the literature on meetings demonstrates, viewing organizations *as* a culture favors exploring meetings as a way to understand organizational discourse. From the view that organizations *have* a culture, explorations in the various ways and means that culture is embodied opens for review. As Morgan (2006, p. 143) notes, "corporate culture is not a simple phenomenon…It is a living, evolving, self-organizing reality that can be shaped and reshaped but not in an absolute way."

Another way of viewing culture is that it "gives form and meaning to human values" (Frederick, 1995, p. 84) Values are defined as "what is important to people" and they believe in (Ott, 1989, p. 39) or "a standard or yardstick to guide actions, comparisons, evaluations and justifications of self and others" (Rokeach, 1968, p. 160). Values provide the rationale for why organizations behave the way they do and make the choices they make (Ott, 1989). Along with vision, values serve as a way for the individuals within the organization to embody the intention and challenge of the enterprise (Morgan, 2006). They are also a filter or framework that organizations may use to define valued behaviors and ways of reinforcing those behaviors—what is described as “activating their cultures” (Arthur W. Page Society, 2015, p. 16)

Not unlike the argument about whether organizations have or are cultures, values tread a similar fine line and can be an active component of organizational strategy and design or they may be viewed as static elements. For the more than fifty companies found plagiarizing other organizations corporate values (Roth, 2013), one might question the perspective held by these organizations on the value of values. Conversely, participants in a study of Chief Communication’s Officers at twenty-five, large national and multi-national organizations reported that organizational values were actively being applied to key business elements such as strategy, redefining customer relationships, and “elevating employees’ value and collaboration” (Arthur Page Society, 2015, p. 8). This contemporary example reflects the role that values can play in organizational leadership as a critical foundation for effectiveness (Byrtek & Dickerson, 2013; Hogan & Coote, 2013; Lencioni, 2012). In increasingly complex business environments prone to rapid change, values are elevated as an essential organizational element for the role they play in anchoring decision-making and disrupting disorder (Dolan, Garcia, & Auerbach, 2003; Keene, 2000).

When actively applied, values will have an impact on operating norms (Hogan & Coote, 2013). Norms have been defined as “prescriptions for behavior,” “expected or allowed behavior and speech” (Ott, 1989, p. 37) or patterns of behavior that form interactions within the organization and are reinforced by those same social interactions

(Nee, 1998). Hogan et al. (2014, p. 1611) distinguish between the role of values and norms, with values laying the broad foundation for cultural expectations, and "norms providing explicit guidance to desired behaviors." As a result, evaluating norms becomes a meaningful and supported way to look at organizational culture (Balthazard, Cooke, & Potter, 2006; Chatman, Caldwell, O'Reilly, & Doerr, 2014; Gonzalez-Mule, DeGeest, Seong, McCormick, & Brown, 2014)

Depending on their nature, norms can play a constructive or a destructive role in organizations. Constructive norms were associated with "greater role clarity, quality of communication, job satisfaction" as well as reduced turnover, whereas negative behavior norms were tied to lower product quality and service standards and a stronger intention to leave a position (Balthazard et al., 2006, p. 722). Positive group norms were also associated with the prevalence of organizational helping behaviors (DeGeest, Seong, McCormick, & Brown, 2014; Jacobson, Jacobson, & Hood, 2013).

The power of norms lies in their ability to impact the functioning of the organization. For example, greater financial performance was also associated with organizations that supported a norm of adaptability (Chatman et al., 2014). An empirical link was supported between individual reticence to deliver negative information depending on the operating norms of the organization (Marler, McKee, Cox, Simmering, & Allen, 2012). The tendency of employees to match their behavior to the norms of organizations has been demonstrated as well as manager assessment of employee performance was linked to how well employees adopted norms (Turner, Grube, Tinsley, Lee, & O'Pell, 2006). When there is congruency between the expressed values of an organization and its unexpressed values, norm performance is impacted. "The close coupling of informal norms and formal rules is what promotes high performance in organizations and economies. When the informal and formal rules of the game are closely coupled, they are mutually reinforcing" (Nee, 1998, p. 87).

Schein (2009, p. 27) offers a formal definition of culture that further aids our understanding of the topic and also the exploration around meetings as a component of culture:

> A pattern of shared tacit assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Embedded in Schein's definition is the idea that groups have implicitly or explicitly made choices. Those choices have an effect their approach to meetings—from what they meet about and who participates to the problems they choose to address through meetings and what behaviors are considered acceptable or not. Meetings represent one of the forms an organization adopts to work out its strategy, the systems and processes it puts in play (Schein, 2009) and a functional way to look at the tacit assumptions it is making about how best to work through its problems. Tacit assumptions consist of the "understandings [and] difficult-to-detect negotiations" the group may have made and as a result can be difficult to detect easily (Louis, 1985, p. 91).

In seeking to discover the patterns of behavior and belief in an organization, meetings represent an example where they may exist. The meeting patterns form a body of habits and in some cases ritual behavior that unfold and shape organizational culture (Koschmann & McDonald, 2015). Habits are defined at the individual level both positively and negatively, ranging from conditioned reflexes and addictive behavior to the character of a person and the customs and routines they may deploy (Clark, Sanders, Carlson, Blanche, & Jackson, 2007). Organizations, likewise, manage and adapt by using patterns of behavior (Cohen, Levinthal, & Warglien, 2014). An organizational need to "create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves" (Weick, 2001, p. 11) can be worked out in a number of ways. Allen et al.'s (2014) meeting taxonomy demonstrates the multiplicity of ways that meetings are used (see Table 2 for details). Viewed as a means for sensemaking meetings become a forum where "people attempt to create order," map a sense of the wider reality they are facing, remember and seek meaning, and rationalize what people are doing (Weick, 2001, p. 11).

Organizations also may form subcultures, which may be shaped by job function, working style, geographic location or other factors (Hofstede, 1998; Schein, 2009). Hofstede (1998, p. 11) contends that manager decisions "reflect the subculture of their own professional/managerial group" whether they are aware of the "cultural map of their organization." In a smaller organization, work habits form across functional areas to navigate individual work style differences—they become "functionally familiar" (Schein, 2009, p. 140) whereas the larger organization requires more formal processes.

Understanding an organization's culture opens up into a polarized discussion about how best to assess culture—proponents who advocate the use of specific survey instruments (quantitative approach) and those who lobby for engaging in dialogue with members of the organization (qualitative approach). Jung et al. (2009) conducted a study of the dominant research methods for exploring organizational culture, assessing both their reliability and validity and providing broad categorizations by qualitative or quantitative methodology. Forty-eight measures were included in their study. Denison, Nieminen, and Kotrba (2012) further reduced the potential candidates for inclusion in useful assessment tools to nine. Of particular note within the various survey instruments is the wide range of disparate characteristics to describe the culture of an organization. The lack of overlap between surveys and terminology ranging from metaphorical to descriptive reflects the range of opinions in the field on how best to evaluate this area of study (Jung et al., 2009).

All of this points to a need for a reliable indicator of what the culture consists of—visible and invisible. One such way to evaluate organizational culture is by looking at cultural artifacts, of which meetings are an example (Schein, 2009). Artifacts "include material and nonmaterial objects and patterns that intentionally or unintentionally communicate information about the organization's technology, beliefs, values, assumptions and ways of doing things" (Ott, 1989, p. 37).

Summary

This chapter explored the topic of meetings in the literature and demonstrated that it aligns with four broad conceptual frameworks—meetings play a *functional* role in the life of an organization, represent an *interruption* in the flow of work, are a form of *organizational discourse* and finally, are a component of *organizational culture*. Understanding an organization's culture is a complex endeavor that taps into the values, norms and artifacts of that organization.

Chapter 3: Study Design

Methods

This study explored three primary questions:

1. To what degree do meetings reflect and represent the values of an organization
2. What are the common meeting norms present in the organization and supporting cultural artifacts?
3. How do the norms and stated values align?

Based on a mixed methods approach, this study incorporated:

1. A preliminary conversation with the primary stakeholder to collect articulated values of the organization
2. A survey of the employee populations in each organization about their meeting habits and behaviors
3. Interviews with 3-5 individuals from the organization about their meetings
4. Observations of representative meetings by the author to collect artifacts (3 or more preferred)

The final assessment is based on a compilation of the data collected and patterns and anomalies in the findings between organization values and meeting norms.

Subjects

The primary targets of this study were firms with whom this researcher was familiar from prior client relationships or as colleagues in an organization. Two were creative services firms, one with offices on the East and West Coasts of US, and the other was a US office part of a global holding company. The third was a university. All three organizations are located in major US cities on the East and West coast and have primarily a US-based constituency. The entry point into each organization was through members of the C-suite or president's office. The organizations had 98, 150 and 1,100 employees, which provided an opportunity to test the study's hypotheses at two business sizes. Initially the study had an additional participant organization that was withdrawn due to client anxiety that the study would unsettle a brittle working environment.

Contracting and Study Initiation

This study began with conversations with the primary stakeholders to collect leaders' observations about the organization's values and its meeting culture. These initial meetings also served as contracting conversations to gain agreement to all aspects of the research process, including meeting observations, interviews and the staff survey. In two organizations, an individual was assigned to facilitate the researcher's engagement with the organization, while in the third, a pair of stakeholders acted in that capacity.

These conversations generated an understanding of the leader's assessment of his or her organization's culture and if there are other elements not visible that have impact. Where interviews were held in person, the researcher collected field notes about the environment and tone of the organization (signage, interaction styles, general set-up). Preliminary information about the organization was also assembled from online content, including the mission, vision and stated values of the organization.

The interview protocol with the stakeholders explored foundational information about the organization, from the perspective of the leader:

1. Basic background on the organization, its founder and philosophy of what is valuable.
    a. How would they characterize the values and culture of the organization?

i. Are there additional materials besides the readily available ones that describe the organization's values and culture?
ii. How do they attempt to support or sustain their values and core purpose?
iii. Have they ever considered meetings as a way of doing that?

b. How would they describe their meeting culture?
c. What do they expect is the core focus of their meetings? Are they happy with that or wish to change it? If not, what would they like to change?
d. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being highly aligned, how well do they think their meetings support their values and the organization purpose? Why?

2. Orientation to the staff survey and the data that will be collected, how privacy is protected and how the results will be shared with them.
3. Confirm whether the stakeholder would like to participate in the selection of the names of people for interviews.

As necessary, the interviewer probed certain elements of this interview protocol more or less deeply with the intent of establishing a broad understanding of the organization. This information was captured in notes.

Quantitative Study Elements

This aspect of the study established an understanding of the meeting culture from the employee point of view using a survey tool to collect information. Questions focused on gathering data on the volume and purpose of the meetings in the organization as well as collect a baseline understanding of the employee sense of the organization's core values and capture insights through the open-ended questions about meeting norms. The meeting purposes leveraged the taxonomy produced by the research of Allen et al. (2014).

The survey design was structured as follows:

INQUIRY TOPIC	**QUESTION FORMAT**
Role in the organization	Open comments
Percentage of time spent in meetings	Percentages offered
Purpose of those meetings	Use taxonomy as a basis Check all that apply
How does your time spent in meeting break down across the types of meetings you attend?	Allocate percentages
Awareness of organization's values	Likert scale
Do they factor into what meetings you have or how they are conducted?	Y/N and comment area
Is there anything you do in most or all of your meetings? Why do you think that is?	Open comments
Do you have a favorite meeting? Which one and why?	Open comments
"Around here, in our meetings we ________."	Open comments

The surveys were sent to all staff members with a common link that allowed for the greatest anonymity and also enabled the survey to be sent from someone within the organization, with the express goal of increasing survey participation.

Given the subjects of this study, the researcher anticipated the breakdown of meetings would likely have a strong focus on supporting a client or constituent need and may follow the percentage breakdowns of Allen et al., in their study of private firms.

Qualitative Study Elements

In this aspect of the research, the focus was to discover internal perspectives on meetings through staff interviews and meeting norms and presence of values through observation. The original intent was to sequence the study so that survey results could inform the interviews but availability of the organization to have the researcher join meetings or engage with the staff drove the timing. In all cases, the survey data collection happened in parallel with the qualitative portions of the study.

Interview subjects were selected to capture a range of employee functions and experiences and were recommended or facilitated by the organization's liaison. Four individuals from each organization were interviewed either in person or over the phone. Interviews with these subjects explored the most common meetings habits as outlined in the interview protocol below. In all cases, the survey data was not included in the interview protocol but where possible the researcher explored a trend from meeting observations, specific to that organization, to validate, explore meaning or deepen understanding.

Interview Protocol

Background on my study and what to expect in our conversation.

Type of meetings and values/goal inclusion:

- Provide some high-level insights about the survey results on the types of meetings that organization tends to have; gather a reaction to that.
  - What do you think is the primary driver in those meetings?
  - Do you ever refer to your [service credo, mission statement, values] in those meetings? How often do you think that happens? What prompts it?

- Are there any things that tend to happen in every meeting?
- How are client meetings similar or different to internal meetings?
  - If different, how does that feel?

Communication behaviors in meetings:

- How are decisions typically made in meetings? Do the decisions stick?
- Would you say meetings are a place where you experience conflict? What typically happens?
- Do you use meetings as a way to celebrate successes? What do those meetings look like? How do people respond typically when this happens?
- Is multi-tasking common in your meetings? How do people handle that?
- Do meetings tend to start on time?

Virtual team members:

- Do you have any team members who call in to meetings? How often does that happen? How do you think that works?
  - Is there anything you do to include them or aide with communication?

Wrap up and thank you:

- Any final insights or comments on meetings?

The qualitative portion of this study incorporated observation of meetings that either showcased the type and range of work done by the organization or a range of departments and points of view. A worksheet incorporating the categories listed in the following table (see Table 1) was developed to maintain consistency in how data was captured and tallied by organization and across organizations.

Table 1

Observation Categories Tied to Literature

Observational element	Conceptual tie to literature
Room set-up and how the group arranges itself in the space	● Morgan, G., *Images of Organization* ● Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*
Use of meeting supports or structures (agenda, technology, materials, presentations)	● Morgan, G., *Images of Organization* ● Schoeneborn, D., *The Pervasive Power of PowerPoint: How a Genre of Professional Communication Permeates Organization Communication*
Formality of interactions (formal or informal, including virtual members)	● Stephens/Davis; *Social Influences of Multitasking in Meetings* ● Kennedy et al.; *Team Decision Making in Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*
Observable inclusion or exclusion	● Jones et al.; *"I'm Out of the Loop": Ostracism through Information Exclusion*
Communication behaviors observable	● Keyton et al.; *Investigating Verbal Workplace Communication Behaviors* ● Will use 20 most frequently identified behaviors, see Appendix
How humor, conflict, decisions, cooperation behaviors manifest	● Kangansharju/Nikko; *Emotions in Organizations* ● Gonzalez et al.; *Can We Get Some Cooperation around Here? The Mediating Role of Group Norms on the Relationship Between Team Personality and Individual Helping Behaviors* ● Schulte et al., *Age, Forgiveness and meeting behavior: A Multilevel Study* ● Shanock et al.; *Less Acting, more doing: How surface acting relates to perceived meeting effectiveness and other employee outcomes* ● Jacobsen et al.: *Social Norm perceptions predict citizenship behaviors*
Presence or absence of organizational values/goals in meeting	● Kauffeld/Lehman-Willenbrock; *Meetings Matter: Effects of Team Meetings on Team and Organizational Success*

Allen, et al.'s taxonomy of meeting types, Keyton's list of common communication behaviors and Lacey's table of cooperation behaviors (2012) were used as reference tools during observations to maintain consistency (see Appendix). By observing a range of meeting types, confidence in the patterns and norms observed increased and provided a window into norm behaviors that may or may not have been verbalized in the survey or interviews.

Data Analysis

This study generated a sizable volume of data about the organizations, their values and in particular meeting cultures. Interviews were documented and transcribed, evaluated and coded by common themes or attributes and assessed by what is common or uncommon in the data (Creswell, 2009). A spreadsheet for each question was developed to track responses to the interview protocol questions and to allow response similarities and differences to surface.

The study purpose has previously been stated as exploring the potential role that meetings may play in the ongoing support or diminishment of intended organizational culture as demonstrated through organizational values and meeting norms. As a result, congruence and alignment were primary elements of evaluation of the results, looking for areas of strong and weak alignment.

Further, sentiment within the organization on whether or not meetings are a positive or negative organizational element was considered as well as whether certain meetings reinforce the organization’s values more than others.

Chapter 4

Data and Results

As noted in the literature review, evaluation of an organizations normative behaviors and artifacts about its way of working provides insights into the culture of the organization. This study also explored the awareness of the organizational values. The study results, both numeric and non-numeric, created a snapshot of meeting behaviors common to all study subjects as well as those unique to the individual organizations evaluated. This chapter will first explore the results common across the study and then reveal organization-specific findings relative to the proposed hypotheses linking values awareness and meeting behavior.

Results Across All Organizations

Surveys were sent to each organization and their response rates are listed in Table 2. In Organization A and B, the survey link was sent to all employees and in Organization C, it was sent to a subset of the employee population that overlapped with the groups observed during the study.

Table 2

Survey Response Rates by Organization

Organization	*N*	Number of employees surveyed	Response rate
A	33	150	22%
B	31	98	32%
C	111	220	50%

Time spent in meetings. Survey results provided an insight into the amount of time that each organization's employees spend in meetings. The following graph (see Figure 1) reflects differences in patterns for each organization, with two of the three spiking at the 5-7 hours/week of meetings. Time spent in meetings showed a distinct decrease at the 8-10 hour/week point, with a slight rise at the 'More than 10 hours" for all organizations.

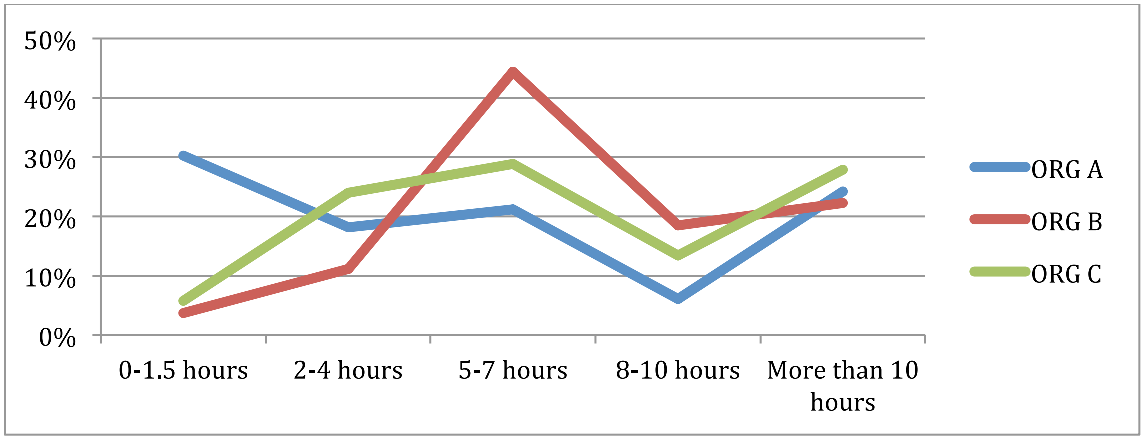


Figure 1

Normalized Graph of Hours Spent in Meetings

Time spent in meetings when broken out by role shows differences between the organizations, with no consistent pattern evident across roles. Whether executive time spent in meetings, aligns with industry reports of executives spending 18 hours per week in meetings is inconclusive due to the tight definition of the response (more than 10 hours; Silverman, 2012). Graphs mapping the time spent in meetings for each of the three organizations studied follow in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

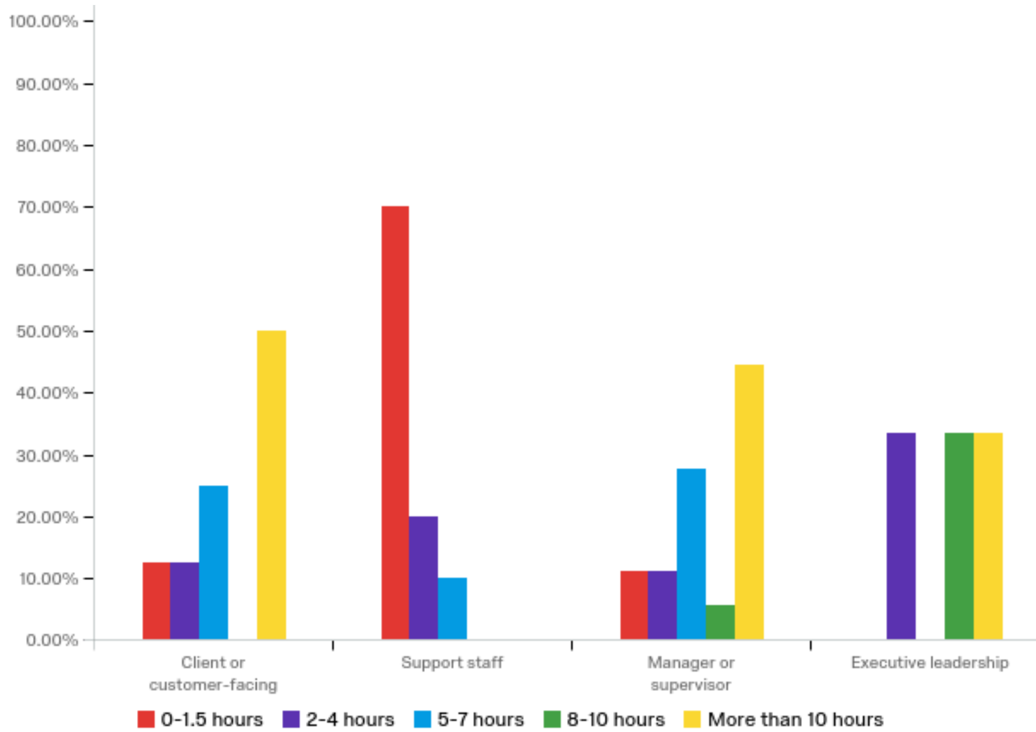


Figure 2

Organization A--Hours Spent in Meetings by Role

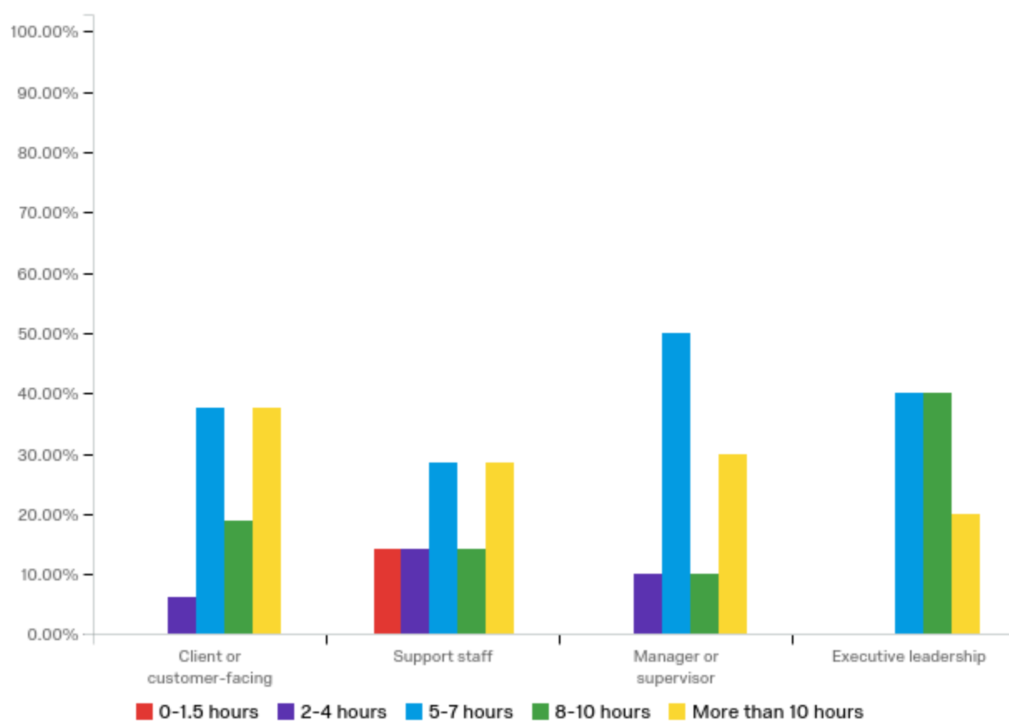


Figure 3

Organization B--Hours Spent in Meetings by Role

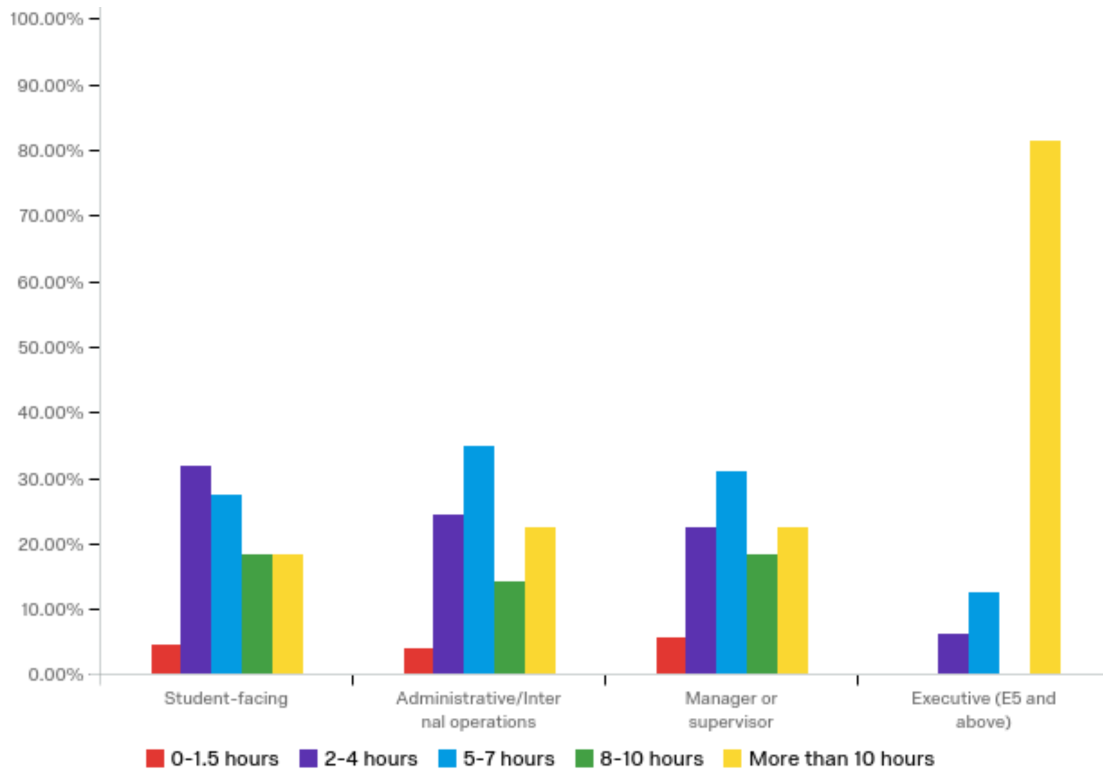


Figure 4

Organization C--Hours Spent in Meetings by Role

Employee sentiment about the time spent in meetings points to a dissatisfaction with their time in meetings or the result of those meetings:

- “Have a lot of them, but they don't solve any issues.”
- “Spend too much time in meetings.”
- “Are in them a TON.”
- “Seem to have a lot of them!”
- “Always have them.”
- “Meet too much.”
- “Have too many and no one is ever on the same page, even afterwards.”

- “Have too many meetings.”
- “Only meet when we really have to.”
- “Are always in them.”
- “Try to have fewer of them when possible.”
- “Need to make them shorter.”
- “Talk too much and do too little.”
- “Are passive and don’t get to the point.”

Types and kinds of meetings attended. The survey inquired about the amount of time each week that employees spent in certain types of meetings. The list of meeting types was based on Allen et al..’s taxonomy of common meeting purposes but was reordered slightly to align with what the researcher perceived would be most familiar to the subjects and capped at 14 meeting types to eliminate likely low performers and shorten the list to encourage completion. Table 3 lays out the self-reported data of how employees in the three organizations assessed the purposes of the meetings they attend cross-referenced with the literature’s identified top five meeting purposes.

Table 3

Meeting Types Summary

	Self-reported survey data (mean hours spent)				
	Org A	Org B	Org C	Survey rank	Literature top 5 purposes
To discuss a client's/student’s needs or wants	3.58	3.52	1.76	2	4
To discuss an ongoing project	3.44	3.19	2.47	1	1
To routinely discuss the state of the business	2.19	1.67	2.28	3	2
To brainstorm for ideas or solutions	2.58	1.8	1.72	4	
To identify problems or propose solutions	2.75	2.05	2.00	4	5

Table 3 (*continued*)

	Self-reported survey data (mean hours spent)				
	Org A	Org B	Org C	Survey rank	Literature top 5 purposes
To discuss firm financial matters	2.27	1.07	1.50		
To discuss productivity and efficiencies	2.26	1.53	1.60		
To discuss new products or services being introduced	2.08	1.3	1.46		
To discuss quality, policy and compliance	1.47	1.46	1.71		3
To discuss an employee's performance	2	0.91	1.04		
To educate or train associates	1.95	1.75	1.24		

Table 4 shows the time spent by organization catalogued by the prevalence of topics discussed or content shared in the observed meetings. Of the 30 meetings observed, 10 reflected a single purpose where the balance served two or more purposes.

Table 4

Observed Meetings Purposes

	Researcher-observed meeting purpose *N = 30*
To discuss a constituent's needs or wants	8
To discuss an ongoing project	20
To routinely discuss the state of the business	11
To brainstorm for ideas or solutions	2
To identify problems or propose solutions	2
To discuss firm financial matters	3
To discuss productivity and efficiencies	2
To discuss new products or services being introduced	1
To discuss quality, policy and compliance	1
To discuss capacity and workload issues	4
To discuss technology or system concerns	2
To discuss a change in process	1
To discuss an employee's performance	1
To educate or train associates	1
To discuss employee benefits	1
To discuss employment contract issues	0

Consistent with Allen et al..'s study of meeting purposes, both self-reported survey data and observational data collected across the three organizations identify the single most prevalent purpose for meetings was to discuss an ongoing project. Ranking of the secondary and tertiary meeting purposes varied from the literature but study data reflected a strong overlap in the top five purposes.

When asked what the primary drivers were for meeting, responses reinforced this focus on managing a body of work and the need for communication.

- "I would say the primary driver would be communicating information…"
- "Meetings are all about the content"
- "My meetings…the primary driver is problem solving. The vast majority—or the reason I attend them or call into them is to solve a problem."
- "There's a sense we ought to connect for communication and collaboration. To get information."
- "There's a great deal of information sharing."
- "So a good meeting for me is where there is some course of action, big or small, that's decided upon that provides the direction to act upon."

Values awareness. Survey subjects were asked to rate their familiarity with their organization's values using a Likert scale where the definitions were supplied for each rating category. Table 5 summarizes awareness levels by role and reflects differences by role as well as across the three organizations, as would be expected. Of the three organizations, Org B was the only one to report a lack of values awareness generally and spread across roles. Frontline staff (constituent and support staff) at Org C also reflected a limited awareness.

Table 5

Values Awareness by Role

	Constituent-facing	**Support staff**	**Manager or supervisor**	**Executive leadership**
ORG A				
Extremely aware. Our values drive what we do.	16.67%	8.33%	50.00%	25.00%
I have a working understanding of our values.	22.22%	22.22%	55.56%	0.00%
Somewhat aware. It comes up occasionally.	28.57%	42.86%	28.57%	0.00%
Not aware.	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
ORG B				
Extremely aware. Our values drive what we do.	27.27%	18.18%	18.18%	36.36%
I have a working understanding of our values.	41.67%	16.67%	41.67%	0.00%
Somewhat aware. It comes up occasionally.	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%
Not aware.	40.00%	20.00%	40.00%	0.00%
ORG C				
Extremely aware. Our values drive what we do.	11.70%	30.85%	44.68%	12.77%
I have a working understanding of our values.	14.58%	31.25%	50.00%	4.17%
Somewhat aware. It comes up occasionally.	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
Not aware.	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Executive leadership affirmed their awareness and utilization of company values to lead the work and also believed that values were influential in how meetings were conducted. Manager-level views on the role of values in meetings varied across the three organizations. The nearly flat response that values do, might or don't play a role in meetings in Organization C is noteworthy (see Table 6).

Table 6

Manager-Level Views on the Role of Values in Meetings

ORG A	Yes	Maybe	No
Constituent-facing	25.00%	50.00%	25.00%
Support staff	55.56%	33.33%	11.11%
Manager or supervisor	22.22%	33.33%	44.44%
Executive leadership	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%
ORG B	Yes	Maybe	No
Constituent-facing	30.00%	50.00%	36.36%
Support staff	10.00%	30.00%	9.09%
Manager or supervisor	30.00%	10.00%	54.55%
Executive leadership	30.00%	10.00%	0.00%
ORG C	Yes	Maybe	No
Constituent-facing	9.09%	17.86%	25.00%
Support staff	28.57%	33.93%	33.33%
Manager or supervisor	46.75%	44.64%	41.67%
Executive leadership	15.58%	3.57%	0.00%

Manager or supervisory staff expressed a strong negative belief that values impacted what meetings were held or how they were conducted in Organizations A and B. Observation of manager's in meetings, however, reflected a champion function they performed of the values. For example, one holds an aspirational value of curiosity to push themselves to innovate and grow, and the managers in the meetings challenged or asked questions to lead junior team members to think in new ways. This same pattern was evident in the second organization where a newer employee described his second meeting on the job where he heard that pushing the envelope was "the agency we want to be" and that "we punch above our weight." While two of the organizations had clear articulation of their values, the third's value set was less clear and the mission of the organization was the most commonly cited as the central, guiding expression.

When asked about awareness of their organizations' values, responses ranged from describing them as playing an intrinsic role, "Values are underlying; they're what we think about" to being something that had no direct reference in the organization. Values were also described as being something that was shared specifically at all-hands meetings as a way to talk about "what values we're trying to live by." Similarly, one interviewee was responsible for supporting how to help staff deepen their understanding and experience of one of the organization's values and leveraged all-staff events to do so.

Observed meetings at all three organizations included one all-hands event and at all three, values or value-laden content was included. In all three organizations, specific, explicit language was used to showcase work and employee performance that fit within the organizations' values. Individuals were recognized for their work and alignment with company goals and values, and the CEOs in all cases made specific comments of appreciation and described what the good work was and how it fit within the values or priorities.

Common communication norms. Keyton et al. (2013) identified twenty of the most frequently identified communication behaviors in the workplace. This list of behaviors was incorporated into the observation criteria and tracked. Due to the somewhat subjective nature of the collection method, the following data provides some broad understanding of the types of interactions in the observed meetings. Keyton cites listening as the dominant communication behavior, and this study likewise observed listening as the prevailing behavior in meetings. As a result, the other behaviors were catalogued as they presented themselves and hash marks were used to track evidence of them in meetings.

In addition to listening, the top five prevalent communication behaviors observed were sharing information, briefing others, discussing, and asking and answering questions. These align with four of Keyton's top four communication behaviors. Employee comments about these communication behaviors further highlight the role these behaviors play in their meetings:

- "Listen a lot, think about my point of view on the issue, and then propose my idea or way to approach the given issue. Above all, I try to add value to any meeting I am in. I feel it's a part of doing the job well, to bring value to the group or the issue at hand. There is no value added if I simply sit and listen and say nothing."
- "Listen attentively. I don't always contribute to meetings, only when I have something meaningful to add."
- "It feels like most meetings go in a circle, without any clear direction to next steps. There's multiple teams involved and everyone has a different takeaway, but after the meeting is over, there is no clear follow up or next steps that are communicated across the teams that were present."
- "Listening to people takes a long time to explain simple things."
- "I like our company's monthly meetings. It's good to hear what's going on. I also don't need to speak very often in these, so I can relax."
- "(Meetings) can have a tendency to waste people's time, either by not discussing things that need to be discussed or spending time on details and matters that feel trivial."
- "I enjoy my internal status meeting because our team recaps the biggest highlights of the previous week and talk about upcoming projects."

- "At higher levels, meetings tend to be 'sharing what I did and even presenting.' People don't ask questions—there's no inquiry."
- "I realized that that meeting was the only place where all the senior leaders were in one room… We're all trying to create and run a successful (organization). We become aware of each other's problems and challenges."

The role of humor in meetings, while not present often, surfaced primarily in the form of laughter and jokes about challenges, overload or difficulty a team was facing or describing. This behavior was evident in all three organizations and supports Kangasharju and Nikko's (2009) study of workplace laughter in meetings. In a few instances, laughter was in response to collegial comments or inside information, also in keeping with Kangasharju and Nikko's research.

Results by Organization

Two of the hypotheses of this study were to identify the common meeting norms present in an organization and to assess if those norms aligned with its stated values. As noted in chapter three, specific categories of meeting norms were explored through interviews and observation: How the group arranges itself in the space where it's meeting, use of meeting supports or structures (agenda, technology, materials, presentations), formality of interactions (formal or informal, including virtual members), observable inclusion or exclusion within the group behavior, common communication behaviors, how humor, conflict, decisions, cooperation behaviors manifest, and overt presence or absence of organizational values/goals in meeting. In addition, employees were queried in the survey on what was common in their meetings.

Using a sliding scale, meeting formality, degree of inclusiveness, presence of humor and conflict in the observed meetings were observed. While this information provides a general sense of the tone of the meetings, clearer definitions would be useful for future studies.

Meetings were scored high in formality if the format was highly structured and the forms of address included use of title or rank. Inclusivity was rated by observing both language and body language of the participants and the degree to which all members of the meeting were addressed, or participated. Humor was noted where laughter, jokes or teasing were present. Conflict, as with inclusivity, was observed by both language and body language of the participants.

Organization A.

Background and context. This organization was originally started by two entrepreneurs and had hired a new CEO within the year to help it grow. Part of the CEO's work included defining the company values with the leadership team. The value statements were divided into core and aspirational values and included a key word with a first-person descriptive statement that explained the key word.

- "We went thru an exercise in last year to identify our values. It hadn't been done formally before. It required soul searching. We just rolled them out recently."
- "We always had informal values. The company was started by two entrepreneurs and that colors what we do. It's a double-edge sword. You can make your own way and that's terrific but still has a lack of structure."

- “Where we came from as an entrepreneurial shop we were quick to adjust. We’re a partnership extension of our clients’ businesses and sometimes we act like a department.”

***Norms and artifacts*.** Organization A’s meetings are a mix of in-person and phone participation, with 4-6 attendees observed in the room and two or more on the phone. Meetings have printed documents that are discussed or reviewed, generally emailed prior to the meeting to participants. Hand-written notes are made either on documents or in notebooks. Staff reflected on note taking as a behavior that happened in every meeting:

- “I make sure to take notes during my meetings that I can reference for emails/calls later.”
- [Common to all meetings] “Take notes - just need to do it to help keep everything straight.”

With the exception of all-hands meetings, Organization A uses conference rooms for meetings. Meeting space availability was both observed and noted in staff survey comments when asked the broad question, when it comes to meetings, we… “Do not have enough conference rooms,” and “people use conference rooms for 2 or 3-person meetings instead of their offices.” Meeting participants tend to arrange themselves around the phone if there are call-in participants and around the conference table when they don’t.

One interviewee described a soft start to meetings. “Soft starts are common to all meetings. We chat about what’s going on. It takes a minute to get into gear. There are side conversations or social talk and then we go.” Another described meetings as beginning, “Fairly fluid. We start pretty much on time. People float in 5-7 minute late but pretty good." Lateness was called out once in an interview as a problem, but not observed.

Some multi-tasking was observed during meetings as quick phone checks or looking up items on a laptop. When asked about it, one interview subject noted that those who multi-task manage it "surprisingly well and are able to phase back in." Another noted that, "It's a generational thing. I don't mind. There's a fair amount of it among a lot of the younger folks. As long as they can focus on the topic at hand. I would never stand for it if the multitasking took us off topic. They're pretty good about staying engaged. A third commented that, "Multitasking is natural to people here."

Observed behaviors.

Most common communication behaviors	1. Sharing information, 2. Briefing others 3. Explaining
Cooperation behaviors	<u>Task-focused:</u> Initiating, clarifying, info source, reality testing, summarizing, <u>Maintenance:</u> Harmonizing, compromising <u>Ineffective:</u> Stonewalling, dominating

Formality of meetings.

Field notations from these observations described a discrepancy between formality of address and meeting structure in Organization A. "Even in client meetings, the formality of the tone was high but the actual structure of the meeting lacked any agenda or recap or time management. Presentation documents served the role of meeting agenda."

Inclusivity in meetings.

Presence of humor in meetings.

Presence of conflict in meetings.

In the observed meetings, Organization A demonstrated a low amount of conflict among the participants. There were discussions about the work itself where different opinions were shared and the group reached a decision. Interpersonal conflict and the challenge of the work were segregated.

- "Meetings tend to be conflict free."
- "If there was a case where something was getting out of hand, I'd move it to a different place."
- (Conflict is) "more stuff on the side. Meetings are fine."

- “Alpha character comes up in all meetings and runs things through the end. Depends on the tension in the room how big this feels.”

Decision-making in meetings. Organization A’s approach to decision making generated some differences in opinions among interview subjects:

- “Decisions aren’t actually made. They’re thrown to the next level. Or the biggest voice in the room (VP level) will make a decision.”
- “We try for consensus. People make a case until the discussion rolls to one side. We discuss until one case bubbles to the top.”
- “There’s a lot of respect as a rule among the parties. We want to hear everyone’s point of view. There’s openness to hearing about everything. It goes back to (being started by) entrepreneurs. ‘All employees are in this together.’”
- “I may disagree with your opinion but appreciate your thinking.”

Additional observations. Comments also surfaced in the research that point to a concern about the number of people attending meetings. The CEO initially commented on this issue as something that she observed. This, among other issues, led to eliminating a department whose business practice was to bring everyone to meetings “even if their job didn’t require it.” Whether these comments reflect a residual or present state of the organization is unclear:

- “Everybody has their own style and expectations but personally I feel like we shouldn’t have anybody in a meeting who shouldn’t be there. If they’re there it should be to learn or to add value. It’d be a problem if someone on my team came to a meeting and never said a word. You better have an idea to push the pea forward… we’re not that big.”

- [When it comes to meetings, we…] "bring too many people."
- "Too slow, too many cooks in the kitchen, too many people need their voice heard every time!"

Comments from staff articulated a discrepancy in view on the role of meetings in their work, with some holding positive points of view:

- "There's a clear reason why we're getting together. We have a familiar cadence: why we're here; discussion; next steps. There's a clear beginning, middle and end."
- "We really desire strong outcomes - they must be purposeful or else they will be canceled."
- "We collaborate and agree on solutions for our clients."
- "We try to solve problems or come up with solutions, in a professional, smart way."

While others' perspectives described less positive attributes of their meetings:

- "People are late because they don't see it as important. They aren't clear what it's going to be about because we don't give the goal of the meeting. When people are late it pushes out the timing."
- [When it comes to meetings, we…] "Don't take them seriously. Directors don't always show up and people do not come with enthusiasm or care to participate. I feel like the agenda isn't clear. Maybe we should set expectations and share planned discussion topics."

Values observed. In six out of the ten meetings observed, one or more of the organization's values were observed. Table 7 breaks down the observed values and provides field note evidence for the value.

Table 7

Values Observed in Organization A

Meeting no.	Core value	Aspirational value	Evidence/field notes
1	Pride, nimbleness	Conviction	Language and body language during presentation of work to a client; response to feedback/challenge
2	Pride	Conviction	Language and body language during presentation of work to a client
3	Partnership		Comments during status update of support for clients' goals/needs
4	Partnership		Discussion of how best to accomplish work and meet client needs/goals
5		Accountability	Internal meeting to balance workload and meet varying client needs
6	Pride, partnership	Accountability	Comments from CEO and other leaders specifically calling out good work, individual accomplishments, describing performance expectations

Alignment of values and meeting culture. Partial/clear alignment

Organization B.

Background and context. Organization B is part of an industry that is structured under holding companies, which allows it to tap into a common pool of employee talent to serve clients that it would not otherwise be able to serve because of non-compete clauses. Organization B merged with one other organization in the holding company in the past six months and a portion of its staff were located onsite, however their work was separate. This merger represented the third rebranding of the organization since 2014.

In addition, Organization B had been growing at the time of the research by as much as 75 percent according to the CEO. He called out this rapid rate of growth at an all-hands meeting when he said to the staff that it had been "seven days of someone new not starting." As a result the company was expanding into the floor above them and had taken on temporary meeting space on a lower floor and borrowed meeting space from a sister organization located in the building. The CEO was slow to add meeting space and held a philosophy of meetings—"Avoid them if you can. And if you really need them, make them really clear and start with an agenda. Make sure actions are done."

Organization B holds three core values and also has a purpose statement, which is posted on the walls, of its business intent. Posted over printers, in conference rooms and on pillars throughout the office floor is a document with simple phrases that describes the ways to work, collaborate and create beautiful work. One member of the leadership team noted that they hire new staff based on their fit with the organization's values.

Norms and artifacts. Organization B is arranged in an open floor plan, with all staff sitting at rows of facing tables, including the CEO and leadership team. There are no offices; there is one large conference room, two smaller conference rooms and a large kitchen area with an over-sized counter that takes up a third of the office area. The company keeps a fully stocked refrigerator and kitchen for the staff to eat breakfasts and lunches, and holds weekly cocktail hours tied to an all-hands meeting. They also host lunch-and-learns and bring in vendors or industry experts and also will do "pencils down" impromptu outings. Cited as one of an employee's favorite meetings, "It feels educational and nice to be able to eat a free lunch while they speak, also it's a nice break from the day to learn something new especially within my industry."

Meetings ranged from in-person working sessions to meetings with clients or vendors on the phone. Working with meeting participants on the phone was not cited as a challenge nor observed to be an issue: "Figuring out how to connect or engage folks who call in isn't an issue because if they call in they have something to contribute; never just sit and listen…We will use technology to help us keep team members integrated and engaged."

Staff commented about the limited meeting space as a challenge: "...can never find a room" or "have a hard time evicting people who took over our room despite us having booked it in advance. They described dislike of the temporary meeting facilities, either because they were ugly or because they felt uncomfortable using the conference rooms of their sister organization. "This is our office," and they described feeling like a "guest" on that floor, even though they are part of the larger family of companies. "If you don't collaborate with anyone up there, you don't feel like it's part of the company."

Meetings were held in the various conference spaces and also around the kitchen counter, standing around a laptop, or around someone's workstation. During my time onsite with Organization B, I sat at the kitchen counter and observed a pattern of 2-3 individuals pulling together to discuss work for 10-15 minutes and breaking apart. At times all open edges of the oversized counter were taken with these cluster meetings. This pattern continued throughout the time I was onsite. One member of the management team commented on this work habit as a general sense that "if they can stop by and talk to someone (it's) more useful than to have a formal meeting" and that there was a certain amount of time spent "working with people, some of which is done in meetings and some if which is done standing around a computer or pulling up to chat with someone." Another individual noted that meetings tend to be "compact" and have the right people there.

Lateness. When asked if meetings started on time, the responses were:

- “Generally. All have laptops so it’s easy to pick up what we’re doing and take it with us.”
- “People are 1-2 min late typically; but that happens with other meetings running late.”
- “People generally are good at updating the group about their schedule--if need to leave early or are back-to-back.”

Multi-tasking. As the first comment above noted, Organization B utilizes laptops in its meetings. Observations noted few printed documents or handouts, with most materials emailed ahead or projected during the meeting; all had laptops. Multi-tasking was observed and commented on as a norm for Organization B and sentiments about it varied. When asked if multi-tasking happened, the responses were affirmative:

- “Oh yeah. It doesn’t get in the way; we all have so much to do that we need to be contributing.”
- “Oh yeah. We all bring laptops, which is a good and a bad. You can pull up materials to share but it can be distracting when people are typing. Some type harder than others.”
- [When it comes to meetings, we…] “all have our laptops, so who knows whose really paying attention.”

When asked about what motivates an interview subject to multi-task, the response was that “because I spend a lot of times in meetings, and if I don't respond to them (emails, Slack) then, I don't have time to do it later.” She multi-tasks to get the easy things off her list, which she described as “all little flies” to take care of.

Observed behaviors. Most common communication behaviors

1. Sharing information,
2. Discussing

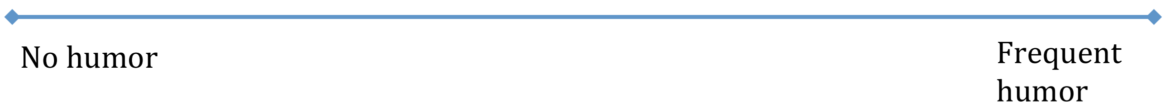
	3. Asking questions and giving feedback (tie)
Cooperation behaviors	<u>Task-focused:</u> Initiating, clarifying, info source, reality testing, summarizing, paraphrasing <u>Maintenance:</u> Harmonizing, compromising <u>Ineffective:</u> Stonewalling

Formality of meetings.

The informality of the approach to meeting came up in an unstructured conversation with three members of the leadership team that was not part of the interview protocol. All of them spoke of the merits of more formal meetings to help junior staff practice at "having their shit together" for client meetings. However, they saw the benefits of the informal meetings for those who are less secure so they can get mentoring from their manager in a less formal setting, with the downside that informality "doesn't help younger employees when it's time to talk to clients."

Inclusivity in meetings.

Presence of humor in meetings.



Presence of conflict in meetings.

Organization B displayed a low amount of conflict in the observed meetings. In three instances areas of disagreement or mild conflict surfaced and the individuals responded in several ways: Explaining, reiterating the goals and returning to the core strategy or overarching value, and asking clarifying questions. In one of these instances the group was standing at the kitchen counter around a laptop and after the tension/conflict surfaced they physically pulled tighter together to finish the conversation.

When asked about conflict, one individual remarked that it was "not so much conflict as different points of view and needs." Her approach was to ask questions and "try to figure it out and go from there." Another individual noted that conflict arose around timing of work. "But everyone generally understands the nature of the conflict and so after an initial venting they move to being constructive," which he described as thinking through implications and options.

Decision making. Interview participants described decision-making as consensus-driven, with the exception of the leadership meetings, which were described as "more of a punch list" that brought the "best voices at the table" where one of the leaders "tends to make the call." During observed meetings, decision-making occurred throughout the discussion and the group reached consensus on next steps.

Additional observations. During my time onsite, I observed a pattern of fluidity in meeting scheduling. Meetings that I was to attend and had arranged my travel to participate in canceled, including a meeting with the CEO, which rescheduled three times and eventually did not occur. The shifts in the CEOs schedule were driven from meetings with outside participants or clients whose schedules were also shifting.
As the shifting was unfolding, my liaison at Organization B confirmed that fluidity is a characteristic of their organization and connected me with one individual to interview who is directly impacted by this trait. She described the result for the admin staff is the need to shuffle appointments, meeting room reservations and to address the frustration of those being moved. She “tries to stay a step ahead” and described satisfaction at “the result when I’m able to affect connection.” Another effect of the dynamic meeting environment, another individual described, is that “Meetings don’t have the people included who are important to make a decision to move forward so groups don’t decide anything and reschedule or they may talk about other things.” One member of the leadership team observed, “I don’t think anyone has the full view” of the work the organization is doing and its status, “except maybe the client, which is risky.” One interviewee described the timing challenges that came up with clients and that “getting everything to come together is tricky. There’s a lot of jockeying for position.”

For Organization B, meetings serve several functions and illuminate varying expectations: “Meetings in (this industry) aren’t just a part of the process, but so much of what we do culminates in meetings. There’s certainly an interesting tension between ‘having a good meeting’ and ‘delivering good work,’ and where these two goals overlap and conflict. Not least because those two, differing goals are typically owned by different individuals: Account and Creative."

Values expressed. The following table (Table 8) describes the values expressed as observed and is followed by employee comments on their perspectives of values activation in Organization B.

Table 8

Values Observed in Organization B

Meeting no.	Value portrayed	Evidence/field notes
1	Idea-led; unexpected value; works in every channel* *This language is specifically used by Org B to describe its goals.	Specific comments from leadership celebrating serving client's well; commented and demonstrated that each program was unique and didn't reflect a 'house design'
2	Bias to action	Strong focus on solutioning; best use of money for client goal; seeking options to help
3	Bias to action	Client meeting that included feedback and compromising and helping displayed in seeking a solution
4	Bias to action	Discussion of how best to accomplish work and meet client needs/goals in time constraints

Employee comments describing values in play. In response to the question, "Is there anything that happens in every meeting," employees offered these statements that align with the organization value of holding a bias toward action:

- "Follow the agenda and follow up with meeting notes and action items. Do this to make sure the meetings are productive, and move things forward."
- "Take notes, discuss topic of meeting, confirm next steps."
- "I tend to chair the meetings. Set up a goal and encourage participation. I prefer short tight meetings."

- "I try to take notes for myself to make sure I'm tracking all the items in the agenda and can have a good follow up email back to the team after (when applicable)."
- "Try and be effective."
- "Make them productive."
- "Solve problems and create ideas."

However, not all responses demonstrated this affirmative view when asked the question, "When it comes to meetings, we…"are not organized enough and too stretched out. We need to get better and more formal at mtg culture and clarity, " and "are inefficient - take too long to get everyone on the phone, connection issues, a lot of 'can you hear me." Rarely is there a clear agenda and next steps, so people wander out not knowing what to do."

Organization B also holds values of collaboration and global curiosity, which these employees describe in response to the question which meetings were his/her favorite:

- "Working with my direct boss to discuss solutions for our clients because he is very open to my ideas and it gives me a chance to learn from his knowledge and experience."
- "We have a collaborative weekly meeting to discuss industry news and updates that I enjoy very much. It is part presentation and part group discussion where we brainstorm how certain updates can benefit our industry and our clients."
- "Global client meeting, because we have all of our internal teams from all regions with the client. Its a great opportunity to hear the status of the business on a very high level global point of view."

Alignment of values and meeting culture. Partial/clear alignment.

Organization C.

Background and context. This organization is a Christian university with multiple schools and centers focused on a range of specializations and degree programs from undergraduate through doctoral studies. The current president has been at the university for nine years after his predecessor who had a long-standing tenure with the university. Since his arrival, the school has been in a major development program to build new buildings to support new centers and schools and extend capacity on their land-locked campus.

The university, which is over 100 years old, has 1,100 faculty and staff. All are required to agree to a statement of faith when they are hired, with faculty screened at a more exhaustive level. Student admission, likewise, is tied to a set of doctrinal statements.

Given the size of the organization, this study sought out individuals or meetings to observe that covered a cross section of the functions of the institution. Meetings were observed that included faculty, faculty and staff, and just staff with purposes ranging from routine operations to specific initiatives. In order to do so and because meetings were scheduled on a monthly or bi-weekly frequency, the research time frame spanned nearly four months. Some meetings were not available to observe until the academic year started.

Norms and artifacts. Meetings at Organization C demonstrated a strong status, information sharing quality. When asked what the primary drivers of holding meetings are, one interviewee observed, "I do believe that most often it's just a sharing of information." Staff comments echoed this sentiment,

- "Discuss the status of projects. My job centers around coordinating people, information and resources to launch programs."
- "Give up-dates so everyone stays on the same page."
- "Most meetings contain some form of brief update of critical work being completed. This is done to keep the team connected with the larger work of the division and with each other's work."
- "Meetings are simply for the purpose of exchanging information, perspective, and ideas. The topics and the people vary depending on need."

Problem solving also surfaced as a primary function of meetings. "My meetings…the primary driver is problem solving. The vast majority—or the reason I attend them or call into them is to solve a problem. Now, there are certain meetings related to problem solving that are primarily information gathering. But it's always with the telos of solving a problem." When asked what their favorite meetings where, staff comments reflected a preference for problem-solving meetings:

- "Favorite meetings are those where a solution is decided upon, policy made, and concrete plans for implementation made."
- "Meetings with customers/clients. Because I love working with people problem solving and serving them."
- "Just meetings that stay on topic and have expected, clear outcomes."
- "Planning with client. I love helping people solve problems and bring dreams to fruition."

- “I like meetings where we have a problem to solve, and we work together to solve it.”
- “Group working sessions in my office that result in realistic action plans.”

Observed meetings as well as survey comments described prayer as a common behavior to open or close meetings.

- “Prayer - we pray a lot and seek God's guidance in everything we do as an institution.”
- “Prayer is normally at the start of each meeting. I think it puts people in a good mental state before starting.”
- “We pray for God's guidance before most of our meetings. This is a positive part of our heritage and our values. We try to speak with courtesy and respect for all, even when there are strong differences of opinion.”

Meeting locations varied in the observed meetings, from conference rooms located in work areas to classrooms or common areas depending on the group size. The university lawn was used for an all faculty/staff event and a patio area for a department meeting because of space constraints.

In observed meetings where agendas were used, they were emailed to the group ahead of time. Meeting support materials predominantly were distributed in the meeting as hard copy handouts. Projected content was used in one of the 13 meetings observed and a white board was used in one.

Lateness. When asked if meetings start on time, the responses ranged from “I would say the majority—90% do” to “No. Oh, it varies with the meeting. Each seems to have its own culture….maybe 5 min.” Another observed that 80-90% are on time and there is “always a straggler that slides in.” On the flip side, staff noted that meetings might not end on time. When asked, around here, when it comes to meetings, we… "Tend to take longer than we need to" or we "Always go over time." "Mostly have to listen to the boss talk and talk and talk. He almost always drags meetings on past their scheduled end time. It is frustrating for all."

Multi-tasking. Multi-tasking did not emerge as a norm in Organization C's meetings. Neither observed meetings nor staff comments reflected this behavior as a norm and in most observed meetings laptops were absent. "No, that's really frowned on…I would think that was considered rude here. If we pull out our phones, we're all looking for dates." Another interviewee observed that he tends to be in "really dead serious meetings. I'd say there's not a lot of distracting things." One leader observed, "So that just fries me when people are distracted. So we work very hard for it to be a no technology environment when we're together."

Decision-making. Decision-making in meetings varies by type of meeting and participants in Organization C. Decision-making in meetings was called out as a challenge for staff members. "It can happen…typically a decision has been made and is being shared or why it was made. (They're) not seeking to make one in the meeting." Another individual observed that when there's "really consequential decisions we're paralyzed or abdicate it. We tend to punt it up." Staff comments reflected similar sentiment:

- (We) "Are so nice to each other that it takes awhile to get to the main issues and resolutions."
- (We) "Do a lot of talking, but not necessarily a lot of solid decision making."

- (We) "Tend to talk about without coming distinct action points for which parties will be held accountable."
- (We) "Eventually get to a decision."

At the executive level, meetings reflected a tiered format. A larger advisory council (PAC) to the president met twice a month to collect information on issues or topics affecting the university and provided a perspective to the president. The president's direct reports formed a decision-making body (PACEX) that discussed this information as well as other topics and the president made final decisions or deferred to the board. "And at the PAC level, there would be a mixture of decisions that are being made… there's a higher degree of accountability there. Here's where we're going as an institution. Those sitting on PAC own elements of that vision. They're doing their work with their folks. There's some collaboration with other PAC members. But when PAC is coming together there's a lot of accountability." One leader noted that there was a "a lot of decision making at the PACEX level" and "then a lot of delegated authority to the VPs." When describing his meetings, he said, "So, in my meetings…it's all about decision-making, and taking action on specific tasks or specific things" related to his primary accountabilities.

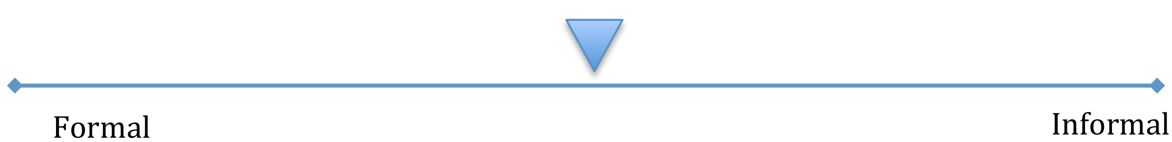
Informal conversations over the course of the research reflected a distinction between smaller working meetings among university members to accomplish work. As one interviewee noted, in working meetings, "decisions are common." One VP noted that his interactions with his staff tended to be in 1:1s or in large department gatherings and in the 1:1s decisions and guidance were prevalent. Another individual described a similar approach. "Most meetings are with direct reports. We go over ongoing projects, touch base on progress toward annual objectives, address development issues. I don't have many other regular meetings, just those with staff."

In one meeting, a noted difference between "in meeting" and "out of meeting" behavior was evident. The meeting was a status update with minimal discussion or interaction among participants, and several individuals were observed fighting sleep. At the conclusion of the meeting the energy level and volume of the group shifted significantly higher and the participants clustered into groups of two or three to discuss specific work matters and then walked as a group out of the room.

Observed behaviors.

Most common communication behaviors	1. Briefing others 2. Sharing information 3. Asking questions/Discussing (tied)
Cooperation behaviors	<u>Task-focused:</u> Initiating, clarifying, info source, reality testing, summarizing, paraphrasing <u>Maintenance:</u> Harmonizing, consensus testing, compromising, encouraging, compromising, helping <u>Ineffective:</u> Aggressive, stonewalling, dominating

Formality of meetings.



Organization C's meeting formality varied depending on the participants involved, with members of campus safety and faculty exhibiting the highest use of formality. In observed meetings of those groups, the use of titles was prevalent or raising of hands to request permission to speak and the use of meeting minutes.

Use of meeting structures, such as agendas and minutes, varied by observed meeting groups. One interviewee observed that meetings tend to be "scheduled but not agenda'd." There's "not a lot of documentation of what's decided or discussed." Another shared, "Many meetings are called by supervisors without an agenda being distributed in advance. The meeting time is primarily consumed by making announcements that could have been made via email. Thus time to handle questions and address the details is limited."

However this perspective was countered by others who described their meeting experience differently. "I also leave with a clear understanding of next steps and calendarize them before the meeting ends - other wise I tend to forget about it as more pressing needs arise." Another shared, "I try to make sure there are decisions made and action points to be accomplished."

Inclusivity in meetings.

Organization C's meetings demonstrated high inclusivity often evidenced by the leader addressing each participant by name or through a group activity such as prayer, asking an opening question for everyone to respond to or eye contact during the meeting. One leader in framing the work ahead of his group expressed "We need to support one another." Further, the president remarked in an address to the faculty and staff after describing the challenges ahead for the university, "We're in this together." Some groups referred to themselves as families, "We're the most dysfunctional group but we love each other."

Organization members described their experiences this way: "Everybody tries to be friendly. It does include small talk you know for the non-agenda items…Everybody's nice so if you make a critical statement you don't get dumped on." "We often 'go around the table' and everyone shares something" or when asked what was common to all meetings one said, we "listen to the needs of others." In response to the same questions, another observed, "Because we're so relational, often times we go off topic." Some staff expressed frustration with this higher relational mode of working:

- (We) "Tend to spend too much time "catching up" on personal life before getting to business."
- (We) "Talk fluffy emotional stuff before getting to the point of the meeting."

Presence of humor in meetings.

Presence of conflict in meetings:

The organization displayed a limited amount of conflict in its meetings and when it was present, the responses included raising other perspectives, asking questions or explaining.

As with decision-making, conflict or disagreement in meetings varied by type of meeting and who the participants were. “When there’s comfort in a group there will be friendly banter.“ VPs described discussions at the PAC and PACEX levels as one where disagreement was welcome.

> “At the PACX level I wouldn’t say there’s conflict. What I would say is there’s tremendous freedom that the group feels to disagree.
>
> What I find that the further down into the org chart you go, uh, the more challenging this can become. People who have a real issue with a person or with an issue itself but are afraid to speak up.
>
> At certain levels there’s some fear… I also think that in an Christian organization I don’t’ think that people know how to do this well. So sometimes it can be clunky. Sometimes it can be way too confrontational where people are never this way and when they finally are, they are out of control.”

Staff described conflict as something that tended to be addressed outside the room, if at all. Issues are addressed in the third person or will be talked about on the side. Individuals may raise concerns after a meeting but won’t do it in the group. “Even if it’s just an uncomfortable or somewhat negative topic, people don’t like to talk about that here. It tends to happen more in private or more side conversation or not, say, in big group meetings.” Another individual observed, “It’s a big deal to make a critical statement.” Those who express a criticism preface their commetns with a disclaimer “I don’t mean to be negative…” An interviewee also observed that individuals with “more abrasive natures shut down discussion” and then they “think they’ve won the argument” but tend to be excluded from future conversation.

One interviewee described this behavior as “false politeness.” Yet another individual observed, “I don't think we're fully honest. There is typically someone that is leading and desires a particular outcome. Even if people don't agree, we know we need to get behind the idea and make it happen. Fortunately, the reality of this is starting to surface and the recognition of honesty and transparency is getting better.”

“We don’t have a way to walk through a resolution process.” Unless there’s consensus at the start, one interviewee observed, “we don’t have a way for two ideas bumping into each other” to resolve. “When you’re in a meeting and need to bring clear definition, in solvable chunks, we don’t do that.”

Additional observations. Observations of Organization C reflected a common challenge to come to grips with what was happening on a given topic or issue. Considerable time was spent in discussing what was known or impressions of leadership direction. In some cases, initiative teams were formed and commissioned but with minimal guidance on output or success and the meetings reflected this in the discussion. One interviewee had these observations:

- “It doesn’t take much to form a team here.”
- “We’re working on a lot of stuff that doesn’t have a precedent or has big implications.”
- “Success isn’t always too crystal clear”

Another observed, “Some of the confusion is sort of in a category. It has a life of its own. We have so few processes and ways to vet, control that things have a life of their own. The other is…there’s a lot that ‘just happens.’ “

Values expressed. The university has a set of values on its website; however, interviews with several vice presidents did not validate these as the core values of the university. “Those three words don’t resonate. They’re not part of, ya know, when we’re trying to think through an issue, they’re not the words we’re putting forth.“ When asked if there was a central document or set of guiding principles for the organization, the answers varied from the doctrinal statement, the mission, a set of relational agreements at the executive level, or a set of behaviors and principles generated by faculty and staff, which are included in performance reviews. In addition, one group provided hard copies of department level mission, vision and values, which they described as a common practice across the university.

A short phrase, “firm center, soft edges” was heard both in meetings, by individuals and from the president in an address to the full faculty and staff, as well as featured in the university publication. Used in the context of describing desired behavior for the university, one interviewee believed the use of this phrase as not for the employee and are more for the organization.” When asked about the various documents, one leader provided this observation: “I think there’s, I don’t know if confusion is the word. Maybe oversaturation. There’s a lot this stuff out there and the typical employee…do they know the difference between cornerstones, and Decalogue and seven aspirations and a vision statement that is probably a little too long? (The three values)…yeah that’s like a remnant from the past but it’s not really talked about. That language isn’t used anymore. It needs to be cleaned up." Another individual interpreted the presence of value statements that are used as a reflection of how the organization handles ending things. "If it's not causing trouble…" becomes a reason why things don't get pulled down or ended.

In addition to these messages and documents, Organization C also utilized promotional branding messages as well as 'themes' for the academic year which were printed on cards shared at the opening gathering of students. Branding messages and campaign slogans were visible on signage and the website.

Given the multitude of messages, the presence of values in meetings was indeterminate. The most dominant qualities present in all meetings were a Christian orientation, friendliness and concern for students.

Alignment of values and meeting culture. Inconclusive.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This thesis study was partially borne out of an observation I had made of the disparity between stated core values of a prior employer and several of our standing meetings. What I noticed was that in those meetings, other values and behaviors were accepted that ran counter to the organization's stated core values. It was the tenor of those meetings that seemed to drive behavior in daily interactions more so than core values. If meetings had that much potency in that organization, could they be playing a similar role in other organizations or could they be used proactively to reinforce and lead an organization?

Meetings Reflections

Meetings are a complex aspect of organizational life. What I discovered over the course of the study was an increasing awareness of the complexity of meeting dynamics and their role in organizations. As the data section illuminates, there are a large number of factors at play in the span of a meeting time. From how a group choses to set itself up in its space, the availability of space, to how the group communicates and cooperates or its habits of being on time, multi-tasking or use of technology. The truisms expounded upon in the business media about "easy steps to good meetings" fail to factor in these and other variables. After observing thirty different meetings across three organizations, I could not identify generalized tips that I would apply broadly for meeting quality or effectiveness.

The complexity of meetings is in keeping with the premise of this study that meetings are a reflection of organizational culture, and that culture shows up in a diverse set of values, behaviors, norms and artifacts. The literature also reflects the challenge of assessing organizational culture and meetings mirror that complexity. While this study captured a sizable set of communication and cooperation behaviors and a core set of behavioral norms, I was keenly aware of the limitations of that data set as I interviewed individuals and observed meetings. At times it seemed other factors in the organizations were animating meeting behavior and what was valued. For example, Organization A was in a transition between the leadership styles of its entrepreneur founders to a new CEO, and what was acceptable in the past was shifting, particularly in relationship to client relations. The new CEO was encouraging boldness and thought-leading client work yet one individual described the role the agency played with clients as rooted in fear. These psycho-emotional dynamics were not part of the study protocol but certainly may have played a role in the overall tenor of some meeting behavior if others shared this sentiment.

Given that there may be more factors at play than readily apparent, the assertion by Morgan (2006) and Schein (2006, 2009) that meetings reflect at a symbolic level the nature of the organization was supported by this study. Several themes emerged on the nature of meetings:

Meetings reflect strategies an organization is using to work out its context. Schein (2006) described organizational culture as "A pattern of shared tacit assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid." An example of this idea of adaptation was evident in a note-taking norm at Organization A, which aligned with their view of seeing themselves as an extension of their clients' businesses and a technique to manage work volume.

The individual choices each organization made to work out its context also was evident in the disparity of results across roles and the amount of time spent in meetings. Considering that Organizations A and B are creative agencies more similarity might be expected, but their operating structures are starkly different, with one part of a holding company and the other not. Both work with clients and provide deliverables on deadlines yet the overall amount of time spent in meetings also varied, which further points to individual approaches to navigating their environments. With Organization B's CEO setting a tone of "meeting only if you have to" the fact that their peak meeting time was at the 5-7 hours/week mark was internally congruent.

How the three organizations used meetings surfaced a difference in work styles and response to their environments. Organizations A and B largely used their meetings as a venue for *doing work* whereas Organization C used meetings as a place to *talk about work* that was happening elsewhere, often in smaller gatherings of individuals or in 1:1s. This distinction is noteworthy and may be a byproduct of the business size difference between Org C and the other two organizations. It also reflects Organization C's hierarchal work structure and tendency toward formality in its meetings. In this context, if meetings are places to talk about work happening elsewhere, the premise in the literature of meetings as an interruption is logical.

Organization B's response to its context stood out from the other two organizations as evidenced by its fluid working style and a pattern of clustering to meet. It chose to work with the complexity of its work context by joining that complexity and adapting to the shifts. Being in its office conveyed many of the qualities of a beehive, with a semi-constant sense of movement between groups and individuals. While active, it lacked franticness and was calm and purposeful. Meetings were one way of doing work, on an equal footing with other methods such as a conversation around a desk or at the kitchen counter. Except for the larger gatherings of all staff, which were part celebration and part education, meetings became a tool for accomplishing work. As meetings take on a "tool" function, the idea of them being an interruption is challenged.

Weick (2001) described an organization's need to "create order and make retrospective sense of the situations they find themselves in." All three organizations used meetings to varying degree in this way but Org C did so the most. In part because of its size and the structure of its decision-making, a great deal of observed meeting time was spent in this form of sense making.

Meetings are a confluence of priorities and purposes. As noted in the data, the majority of observed meetings had a multiplicity of purposes they fulfilled, which seemed to be in response to leveraging the opportunity when a select group of people were gathered. This "while you're here…" approach also surfaced at the close of meetings or before a meeting "officially" started when individuals would discuss some other topic or piece of work. While this work practice may be prevalent or support efficiency, a question for further study would be if multiplicities of meeting purposes undermine a sense of focus or accomplishment for meeting participants? Organization C demonstrated both a high propensity for status/multi-focus meetings and staff survey comments surfaced a strong desire or appreciation for focused and outcome oriented meetings. Whether there is a correlation between these two tendencies is inconclusive but worth exploration.

Meetings are affected by the individual roles or functions. Some of the distinctly different responses throughout the study are likely rooted in Hofstede's (1998) idea that roles will impact expectations and behaviors across an organization. In organizations A and B, as one interviewee noted, roles impacted meeting goals and behaviors. While subtle and hard to track, my observations noted those with client-facing roles targeted clear next steps or decisions with clients, while creative staff sought affirmation of a creative execution or feedback to make adjustments. In organization C, the differences in roles and function were more apparent across the departments in the degree of formality present in meetings and survey responses preferring or disliking how relational meetings were.

Meetings reflect patterns of relating. The study surfaced organization-specific patterns to their work styles, such as Org C's preference for in-person meetings with multi-tasking frowned upon to Org B's reliance on laptops in its meetings. Decision-making and conflict surfaced as particular areas of relational challenge for Org C. While conflict was nearly absent in Org C, that very absence pointed to a growth area that was called out in interviews. What is worth noting is that these organizational insights surfaced through studying meetings as a way to learn about an organization. Comments such as, "(My) favorite meetings are those where a solution is decided upon, policy made, and concrete plans for implementation made" provide an insight into this individual's preferred way to work. Feedback about meetings is worth taking on face value, to a point. For example, if meeting lateness is affecting a group's ability to accomplish its goals for meeting, the lateness itself is worth addressing. However, meeting lateness as a pattern presents an opportunity for leaders and OD practitioners is to explore underlying cultural issues or individual employee performance factors at play.

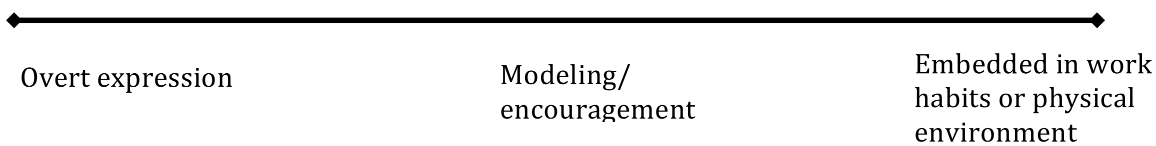
One observable pattern of relating that was present in the meetings with low formality was a tendency to just start. Often after a quick scan to determine if the critical participants were there meetings seemed to launch. Particularly meetings that lacked agendas seemed to rely on some prior knowledge or commitment for individuals to know what the meeting was about and the goals for the discussion. In this way, the organizations lived out the work habit Schein (2009) described as being "functionally familiar."

Meetings are the things people love to hate. Meetings may play a surrogate role for individuals to articulate dissatisfaction with work styles or climate or may use negative language to describe a desired state rather than strictly providing direct comments about their preferences. Casual conversations with individuals about meetings quickly turn to comments about their displeasure with most meetings or a story about a meeting "gone bad." Likewise, this study captured negative comments from organization members about how meetings were conducted or the amount of time in an average workweek they were in meetings. A closer look at comments from leaders and staff reflects an organizational practice that meetings illuminate or put a focus on.

Study Hypotheses

One of the central questions of this study was whether or not an organization's values were represented or reflected in its meetings. Organizations A and B demonstrated clear links between their meetings and values in some but not all of their meetings. Organization C was indeterminate because they lacked agreement on which of their orienting documents should represent their values (Org C's volume of leadership documents and ideas cautions on the potential to oversaturate staff with messages and muddy organizational intent.)

A continuum of values-reinforcing behavior was evident in the study subjects. The continuum ranged from overt expression of values and values enactment during meetings to values reinforcement in embedded work behaviors.



This continuum of behaviors was not anticipated at the onset of the study rather the presence or absence of a more structured approach to value dissemination or enactment was expected. Meeting observations surfaced these approaches and likely would have been missed if the study were limited to interviews and survey data only.

All-staff events at the three organizations were used as a form of overt expression whereas routine or smaller meetings where values were evident, manager modeling was frequently present. In others, such as Org B, where a bias to action was one of their values, their general way of working in short/focused meeting bursts and the limitations of their physical environment reinforced a way of working that leadership valued.

Managers have a key role in values demonstration and reinforcement. The fact that managers in both organization A and B did not show strong belief that values were drivers or part of their meetings is noteworthy considering in many instances managers acted as a carrier of organizational values. One factor impacting manager perception may be tied to the number of hours per week each one spends in meetings. Another factor may be a lack of recognition on the part of managers of the key role they play in values reinforcement or they may take for granted their individual impact.

Several opportunities lie in recognizing the role managers can play in values demonstration and reinforcement for organization leadership. If an organization wants to reinforce its values, meetings represent a forum for staff to practice values and get feedback from managers in the form of teachable moments. If managers are the front line of reinforcement then their knowledge and internalization of organizational values is essential. However, overt expression of values, given the amount of time spent in meetings across roles, may be tiresome and lose impact. Reserving overt expression for larger gatherings creates a shared understanding of organizational values and common vocabulary that can be applied in the balance of the work time.

Values Reflections

Values integration versus values awareness. One of the measures this study used to assess values in an organization was to inquire about individual awareness of values, but this measure has proven to be inadequate in capturing a clear view on the values integration into meetings. Despite a lack of agreement in Org C on what their values were, managers expressed extreme awareness or a working understanding of their values. This somewhat baffling response hints at a set of unarticulated or undocumented values that the organization members work from, and puts in question whether awareness translates into language and behavior norms the organization desires. Another explanation for Org C's strong response on values awareness may be tied to its hiring practices of screening faculty and staff against a doctrinal statement. Agreement with this set of ideology creates a common starting point for new hires and establishes a baseline to build on later. Alternatively, what this group of managers was so keenly aware of may be a self-defined set of values or a complete disparity in a shared definition of the term “values.”

One of the questions this study raises is if an organization has embedded their values into their work practices, could they also have a low awareness level of those values? Organization B, in particular, presents a challenging case in favor of a reduced awareness of values but high value integration. Org B’s values (*e.g.,* a bias to action, global curiosity) could easily blend into a sense of “this is how we work together” without a clear recognition of their roles guiding hiring and work practices. If so, these factors could account for the low awareness scores collected from Org B. This premise is rooted in Hogan and Coote’s (2013) work that says that values will have an impact on operating norms when actively applied. If those values have become thoroughly embedded, is there a point where they may become transparent?

Study Limitations

In keeping with the literature that recognizes meetings as a way for organizations to hold discourse, this study specifically monitored the range of communication behaviors common to workplaces. As a tool for understanding the meeting dynamics, this list provided limited value because the terms were generalized and offered no sense of texture or tone. More or less presence of one communication behavior or another offered little insight into the study hypotheses on the relationship between meetings and organization values. The cooperation behaviors outlined by Lacey (2016) offered deeper insight into the relational dynamics of the groups.

As noted in the data section, some aspects of the study were difficult to quantify and were subject to the impressions of the researcher. Sidebar conversations after meeting observations at times were essential to fully understand the workings of the group. For example one meeting observation on face value appeared to have an individual who was facilitating the discussion but appeared somewhat under-empowered. In a follow-up conversation with a leader from that meeting, I learned the "facilitator" was assuming a role in reaction to a previously unstructured, unproductive meeting and was not at all empowered by the group to play that function. That information provided wider context to meeting dynamics even if it had limited value for the study protocol.

The term "meeting" at times proved problematic to lock in a shared definition among study participants. In Org C for example, there seemed to be a distinction by participants that 1:1s were a separate category of "meeting." In this organization, only the larger, more formal meetings were offered up for observation, but individuals also verbalized use of meetings in smaller groups. Across the three organizations, the larger, scheduled meetings were included in the study and smaller ones avoided so interpersonal relationships didn't conflate with group dynamics.

Meeting Observation as an OD Practitioner Tool

In addition to these themes, over the course of the study, I observed that studying an organization's meetings is a fairly low threat entrée into working with an organization. Meetings observation can be an engagement tool for the OD practitioner. Because meetings seem to be a thing that people love to hate, starting a conversation with a new group of people on their meeting experiences is relatively easy. I observed that individuals were more than happy to share about their perceptions and at times seem appreciative at being able to express their views to someone.

Observing meetings required introduction or advanced agreement by meeting leaders. In several instances a formal, private conversation was held to decide if groups were comfortable with being observed. Aside from the one organization that expressed concern about the impact of the research and ultimately was not studied, only one group declined observation because of discomfort.

When used in combination, a staff survey, interviews and observation are a self-balancing set of tools for engaging an organization. While the intent of this study was not to produce organizational culture profiles, the data collected on the three organizations offers a window into each of them and a snapshot of one way they work. This snapshot offers a starting point for engaging with the organization.

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Appendix

Supporting Materials

Table A1

Summary of Study Approach

Study question	Assessment method	Indicators/Success metrics
To what degree do meetings reflect and represent the values of an organization?	– Interview comments from leadership on their perspective – Staff survey responses – Observational data – Comments from staff in interviews	– Expectations or evaluations of presence of values – Responses to questions on awareness of values and if they factor into meetings – Language or behavior in meetings that aligns or conflicts with values – Specific staff comments on their observations
What are the common meeting norms present in the organization and supporting cultural artifacts?	– Interview comments from leadership on their perspective – Staff survey responses – Observational data – Interview comments	– Survey Question: What happens in every meeting
What is the alignment between the values and meetings?	– Evaluate the survey results in comparison to the observed behavior, interview comments and leadership expectations	
	FOUNDATIONAL CONTENT TO SUPPORT ASSESSMENT	
What kinds of meetings does this organization have?	Use a simple survey to poll the staff to assemble a list of the top meetings the group holds (using the meeting taxonomy as a reference) and incorporate questions that reference when organization values are present.	Will have a clear list of the top 3-5 meetings the organization holds, their purpose and a measure of how often core values are demonstrated
What are the articulated values of the organization?	Collect what is in promotional material or on-site signage Interview leadership for their perspectives	Will include words such as "our values" or "we believe" or similar language
What are the common communication and cooperation behaviors in the group?	Observational worksheet used to collect prevalence of behaviors in meetings	Tallies

Table A2

Allen et al. Summary of Meeting Purposes

Organization type	Meeting purpose	%
Publicly traded firm	Discuss the state of business	15.9%
	Discuss ongoing projects	11.4%
Private firm	Discuss ongoing projects	14.3%
	Discuss a client's needs or wants	10.7%
Non-profit firm	Discuss the state of business	14.5%
	Discuss quality, policy, and compliance	10.9%
Government	Discuss quality, policy and compliance	17.8%
	Educate or train associates	12.3%

Table A3

Taxonomy of Meeting Purpose Categories

1. To discuss new products or services being introduced
2. To discuss firm financial matters
3. To discuss a client's needs or wants
4. To routinely discuss the state of the business
5. To discuss productivity and efficiencies
6. To discuss an ongoing project
7. To discuss employee benefits
8. To discuss quality, policy and compliance
9. To discuss capacity and workload issues
10. To discuss technology or system concerns
11. To discuss a change in process
12. To discuss employment contract issues
13. To discuss an employee's performance
14. To educate or train associates
15. To identify problems and propose solutions
16. To brainstorm for ideas or solutions

Excerpted from: Understanding Workplace Meetings: A Qualitative Taxonomy of Meeting Purposes, *Management Research Review,* Vol 37. No. 9, 794-814

Table A4

Keyton's 20 Most Frequently Identified Communication Behaviors

1. Listening
2. Asking questions
3. Discussing
4. Sharing information
5. Agreeing
6. Suggesting
7. Getting feedback
8. Seeking feedback
9. Answering questions
10. Explaining
11. Cooperating
12. Creating small talk
13. Offering help
14. Revealing information
15. Making decisions
16. Seeking information
17. Showing respect
18. Giving feedback
19. Briefing others
20. Planning

Role-related Behaviors in Groups

Effective and Helpful		Dysfunctional
TASK Behaviors	**MAINTAINENCE Behaviors**	**INEFFECTIVE Behaviors**
Initiating: Proposes goals or actions; defines problems; suggests procedures and structure.	***Harmonizing***: Tries to reconcile differences and reduce tension; honors and explores differences. Seeks peaceful discourse.	***Aggressive***: displays a win/lose or right/wrong approach to the discussion. May attack members or the group's values; sarcasm and barbed jokes of disdain.
Information source: Strives to offer facts; makes own opinions known. Considers how best to tap into information sources.	***Gate keeping***: Facilitates member participation. Suggests procedures to help the sharing of ideas and relevant emotions. Overtly includes others.	***Stonewalling***: Prevents group from moving forward; stuck in own agenda. May disagree with process, procedural or task issues.
Paraphrases: Seeks confirmation of understanding by stating the positions of others clearly; requests feedback on accuracy of shared perceptions.	***Consensus testing***: Timely interruption of discussion to bring the group to closure. Tests for closure and general agreement. Ensures members are comfortable enough they "agree to support the decision."	***Dominating***: Adopts air of superiority or authority to manipulate group members. Diminishes and hides the contributions of others. Uses flattery or other patronizing behavior as a means of control.
Clarifying: Defines terms; interprets ideas or recommendations. Attempts to create focus in the discussion.	***Encouraging***: Actively listens and asks questions to elicit the participations of all. Friendly and warm. Demonstrates personal acceptance of others.	***Clowning***: Displays a lack of involvement; abandons the group while still in attendance. Seeks recognition in ways not useful to the group task.
Summarizing: Gathers relevant data to create an understandable summation. Provides conclusions or offers recommendations for the group to consider.	***Compromising***: Offers hybrid ideas to combine the best of diverse opinions. Yields on points of contention to keep the group moving forward.	***Avoiding***: Distracts members into non-relevant discussions to sidestep commitment. Prevents the group from addressing controversy. Fears displays of emotion.
Reality testing: Conducts critical analysis of thoughts and plans. May play "devil's advocate," seeking to find the weak link and determine the strength of a decision.	***Helping***: Takes on duties with enthusiasm. Offers help to others without removing responsibility. Cooperates and can be considered a "solid citizen."	***Tap-dancing***: Reluctant to express a true opinion; difficult to pin down. Tries to placate everyone. Goes with the flow—always on the "caboose" of decision making. Agreeable all the time.