

## Essay 8: Meetings, Texts, and emails: Oh My!

I hate show-and-tell meetings almost as much as I hate sitting in a lecture. A show-and-tell meeting is one where each person, especially the chair, gets up and gives a progress report on their area. If they had a project in their area which needed to be coordinated with my area, then someone from my area should have been on that project team doing the coordination—not me! If the project did not influence my area, why am I sitting in this meeting listening? (Pardon my arrogance.)

Please note that I distinguish between show-and-tell meetings and meetings with an action agenda. Project team meetings are clearly those where actions must be taken. These meetings end with the development of an agenda for the next meeting, followed by a quick assessment of the meeting by all team members.

Meetings of presidents' cabinets and vice presidents' staffs are reasonable if they have something to do. In too many cases, they have no project and no agency as a group, however. They get together to compete for resources and the attention of their fearless leader. A good leader, however, must find something for the group to do if that group is to be little more than a bunch of people griping about the conduct of others and laughing carelessly at the boss's jokes.

Research topic: Does the amount of sin in the world vary in inverse proportion to the number of sermons given?

A strong team will spend most of its time developing principles to guide the project. This is the phase where the concerns of team members, often representing strong constituents, like faculty and offices outside the leader's area, are dealt with and satisfied with principles that build protections to assuage concerns, if possible. If this seems impossible, then the team must devise a rationale for overriding the concerns that the team member brings back to the constituents to help them see how the overall result of the project will be of benefit.

A strong team will also develop a rough assessment methodology early in their work, as well as a strategy detailing how the project will affect the target constituents. They will generally not develop the details of the project, but will form sub-teams, guided by team members, to develop the implementation plan and then to implement it.

After the implementation, the team will assess the success of the project and the process, as well as, in the audit stage, review the beliefs, values, and principles that the team used to guide the project.

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Unlike most of my readers, I have little experience with Zoom-type meetings. I was already confined to my home (meaning “retired”) when the pandemic hit. I understand that it is much easier to “multitask” during a Zoom-type meeting. This is a blessing, I imagine, although the number of meetings probably went up since casual encounters were eliminated (but only now reduced, since many places allow some working-from-home). With an increase in remote work the volume of email has probably gone up as well.

I don’t mind reading an email update on my colleagues’ projects. I read much faster than I go to meetings and listen. If I have questions, I can reply to the email or call, but there must also be rules about email.

Rule for Written Communication: Make it Dull! That is, do not allow any humor or emotion or otherwise colorful language to enter your missives. I begin all emails with “Dear ” and use their title and last name, unless they are a friend. With friends it is still “Dear ” not “Hi” or “Joe.” It’s “Dear Joe,.”. If the person is not a friend, I use a colon, as though I were still in eleventh grade in 1964, learning how to write letters. I sign using “Best wishes, Nathan Dickmeyer” for business and “Best wishes, Nate” for friends. I do not do this for their pleasure or even their bafflement. I do it to remind myself to be boring. Few people understand my humor, and no one understands my humor when it is written. My humor and my emotion have been taken wrong often enough that I now regret ever having put either into written, email form.

If you have never lost your temper and have never been tempted to add a dash of humor to your notes, you may ignore my advice. Otherwise, figure out some discipline like mine that will remind you to keep it dull.

If I receive an email or text message with evident emotion at work, I rise from my desk, walk to the sender’s office or call, if they are off campus, walk past any guarding subalterns, and knock on their door. “May I talk with you.” They then regret their emotion and speak nicely about what concerns them. In this way, most people stop sending me emotional messages. A person feeling emotion should neither write nor call. A person feeling emotion should think about the issue and then speak face to face to the person at whose feet they wish to throw the issue.

Nevertheless, many people do not write well. You may receive a long email that seems to be about a problem, but you can’t figure out what the problem is. If they work for you (and you can write reasonably well), you can help them, asking them to come to you so you can draft something together. If they do not work for you,

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you must do what you probably already do: you pick up the phone, call them and say, "Hey, what's this all about?"

I also teach subordinates not to come to me with a problem. All I ever do is listen and say, "Well, how would you solve that problem?" I don't mind them coming up with an unworkable idea. Let them try it. Maybe we both will learn something. If they need my support, I'll see what I can do.

In finance we say that the budget director always says, "No," the president always says, "Yes," and the vice president then must say, "Well, let's see what we can do." That's one way that I have been able to deal with silos.

The most precious resource at a college or university is staff time. Do not waste it!

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