

Time for Reflection and Slack

PMM5 Postscript[™] Number 30

Background Information: In chapter 19, Program Design and Development, *Professional Meeting Management*[®], fifth edition, Wanda Johnson talks about the need for breaks. She presents the following guideline “provide at least a 10-minute break for every 50 minutes of instruction.” (Johnson, 2006, p. 269)

PMM5 Postscript[™] Use: Breaks are the unsung heroes of meetings allowing participants the opportunity to refresh, recharge and network informally with colleagues.

This PMM5 Postscript[™] addresses the need to have breaks or slack time in a meeting agenda. It addresses the need for slack in three areas:

- During the meeting agenda
- During a specific presentation
- After a meeting

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This PMM5 Postscript[™] also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Describe the concept of slack.
- Identify strategies to build slack into meetings.
- Describe the benefits of slack for meeting participants.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 19, Program Design and Development
Author: Wanda Johnson, CMP



Value of Slack

In Tom DeMarco's book, *Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork, and the Myth of Total Efficiency*, he proposes a counterintuitive principle about efficient companies. He argues that typical efficiency improvements in the form of reduced headcounts, "stretch" goals and matrix management (among others) may result in slower, less efficient organizations. He proposes that what organizations need is not more efficiency but more slack (DeMarco, 2002).

DeMarco states that slack allows:

- A company to change
- High priced talent to think, to make key decisions
- People to renew themselves professionally and personally
- Organizations to confront risk rather than run away from it
- Creativity to flourish

Meetings Need Slack

When meetings are held, there is the unsaid (or sometimes stated) idea that everyone's time must be fully utilized. Meeting managers are pushed to maximize the time allocated to the agenda.

Yet meeting agendas benefit from slack time for the following reasons:

- **Shifting focus takes time (DeMarco calls it Task Switching Penalties)** — Gathering people in a meeting requires time to "switch" to the new task and focus on the business at hand. Plan for a period of time to allow that focus. Incorporate it into the opening speech/introduction.
- **Changing pace through multiple presentations takes time** — Every change in topic requires people to shift tasks at hand. This requires time and energy.
- **The lack of slack leads to burn out** — In a time pressed world in every-day work life, most people don't experience much slack. To the contrary, people feel stress. Meetings are often a way to re-charge people's energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the organization. Meetings can serve as a time of recognition, renewal and reconnecting.

Ian Percy, author of *Going Deep: Exploring Spirituality in Life and Leadership*, offers this insight: Efficiency at the expense of human spirit isn't efficiency at all. He writes, "When you need the energy, devotion, creativity and cohesion of your people, don't remove from them the very things that stimulate energy, devotion, creativity and cohesion." He cites example of organizations that "shoot themselves in the heart".

- **Slack is necessary for learning** — "Content that is new and complex, no matter how well presented, does not immediately insert itself in the adult learner's mind" (Borovoy, 2007). Slack can take the form of self-reflection or dialoguing with others.
- **Slack promotes creativity and reinvention in organizations** — DeMarco laments the loss of middle management which was the "layer" that allowed an organization to "reinvent" itself. "This is where the dynamic of today's organizational function is examined, taken apart, analyzed, re-synthesized, and assembled back into new organization modes that allows us to move forward." De Marco writes that what was cut out of organizations was the "capacity to change."

If meeting participants need to be creative during a meeting — to brainstorm, to ponder — then a meeting agenda should include slack time. Creativity does not adhere to a time clock. Allow the informal time to think, the time to experiment and to float ideas. This also suggests that problem-solving efforts could be more efficient if people are presented with the “problem” and then given time (including down time) to think about the problem before trying to arrive at the solution.

- **“Over improved” is not always better** — The most efficient meeting agenda may not serve an organization’s long-term purposes. Allowing downtime in the agenda allows for people to mingle, share ideas, and swap stories. In conferences, the term “the hallway track” is often used to refer to the benefit of informal conversation that occurs outside the break-out sessions in the hallways.
- **Physical comfort** — The most traditional reason for a break is as a time to refresh and take care of physical needs. Participants can not pay attention or be involved if they are uncomfortable – whether they need food, drink, movement or simply a change in scenery.

Building Slack into Presentations

When participants are “learning” — hearing about a new product, receiving a message about a management direction or assimilating new information, it takes time to synthesize the new information. Meeting mangers should allocate time in the agenda for meeting participants the “time” to take it all in.

Though people learn by doing, constructing, building, talking and writing, they also learn by thinking about events, activities and experiences. Learning is both an active and a reflective process. Meeting participants make sense of new information by assimilating, accommodating, or rejecting information. Reflection is an essential component of effective learning allowing meeting participants to analyze, understand, and gain meaning from professional development. Reflection also helps build self-awareness, strengthen personal and team growth, improve future actions and feel empowered.

However, reflection is often relegated to a last-minute effort or completely ignored. Activities to promote reflection include:

- Visualizing
- Journaling
- Action planning
- Contracting
- Guided learning discussions/activities

These general activities can take the form of :

- **Really Quick Resume** — Participants create a brief resume listing the skills developed or improved as a result of the meeting
- **What?/So What?/Now What?** — Participants individually answer these questions about the information from the meeting.
- **Quotes Exercise** — Participants initiate their reflection based on quotes. Quotes can be a useful way to reflection because there is an ample supply of them, they are often brief yet inspiring, and they can sometimes be interpreted in multiple ways.
- **Sentence Stems** — Participants begin to think about perceptions after concluding the experience. Sentence stems can begin:

"I hope..."
"I am most anxious about..."
"Today I felt..."
"I was surprised by..."

This convergence of experiences (action) and thought (reflection) combines to create new knowledge. Both action and reflection are essential ingredients for meeting participants to return from a meeting ready to apply and implement the information acquired at a meeting.

Finally, meeting managers can create slack by scheduling an unusual, non-business program or topic during a meeting or conference offers participants some slack. Unconventional seminars can complement the usual agenda and provide a welcome change and a creativity boost to participants.

Building Slack into Meetings

Borovoy clearly outlines the need for breaks and networking time. He differentiates between "on-grid" and "off-grid" learning. On-grid learning occurs during the structured meeting. "Off-grid learning occurs with attendees after a session. It takes place during 'free time' between trusted peers in private conversations. It happens in a hallway between sessions, during a cocktail party, on the plane ride home. Off-grid dialogue is unstructured and often addresses the personal validity, usefulness and the implications of the ideas generated in an on-grid session." Borovoy expands on the value of reflection and slack:

"An idea needs to be processed — compared to long-held beliefs and other knowledge — before it can influence a person's perspective. Often, the give-and-take of discussing and knocking around new concepts with people you respect and trust clarifies thoughts, making new content more concrete, applicable, and memorable. In short learning does not completely take place during a presentation. The period after the session — when attendees candidly and openly dialogue with each other — is critical to learning."

He summarizes, "Meeting sponsors and planners often pack as much content as possible into the shortest amount of time...In reality, it is during such 'white spaces' [networking, receptions, breaks] that new ideas presented at the session are often successfully integrated into learning" (Borovoy, 2007).

Building Slack into the Return to Work

Back on the job, implementation of anything new takes time also. Allow people a bit of slack to do something new. Borovoy writes, "Content that is new and complex, no matter how well presented, does not immediately insert itself in the adult learner's mind" (Borovoy, 2007). The expectation should be that if during a meeting people are trained people on using a new system, when they are back on the job expect it to take longer to use the new system until they are accustomed to it. An analogy: Think about driving a manual car, at first it is difficult and requires total concentration. After some experience it becomes second nature. While not under the auspices of meeting planning, anyone involved in meetings should realize that application of new skills requires additional time.

Summary

Tom DeMarco argues that organizations should invest in slack, calling it “an investment the company makes in itself.” To make meetings pay dividends, organizations should also invest in slack. Slack in meetings can take the form of breaks, time for reflection, time for transition and, simply, down-time. The notion that a packed agenda is optimal decries the need to absorb, apply and reflect on the information received. De Marco argues that busyness can only do long-term harm. Meeting managers can apply the concept of slack to meetings so that information is absorbed and processed for the long-term benefit of the participant and organization.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. What type of atmosphere will contribute to reflection and slack? How can a meeting planner create that type of atmosphere?
2. What persuasive arguments can a meeting planner advance when a stakeholder wants to pack the agenda?
3. What other examples of reflection experiences can be incorporated into meetings? Have you experienced any such experiences? How did you react?

References

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