Using Outcome-Directed Thinking to Achieve Effective and Efficient Meetings

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“I don’t know how we functioned in meetings before we discovered Outcome-directed thinking...actually, now I know why we haven’t functioned in meetings!!!”

Note: This paper assumes you have read our outcome-directed thinking (ODT) model paper or have gone through ODT training.

One of the most relevant and powerful business applications of Outcome-Directed Thinking (ODT) is the design and running of meetings. The problem with many meetings, as expressed in the sentiment of the quote above, is that much time and money are spent on irrelevant discussion. People tend to get off target because there is no target, or the target is not stated clearly or they haven’t all agreed on their target! ODT can solve these problems! The ODT questions are easily modified to address both the design and running of meetings.

We consistently get very positive feedback from those that use ODT in meetings that ODT can have a major impact on efficiency and effectiveness of meetings. 30-60% time savings, higher quality outputs, and higher participant satisfaction and commitment are typical improvements when ODT is applied to meetings. This paper will explore the application of ODT to meetings. It assumes you are familiar with ODT thinking patterns. (Read our paper “Outcome-Directed Thinking: The Questions that Turn Things Around” before reading this paper if you are not familiar with ODT.)

Developing Meeting Outcomes

When developing outcomes for meetings, the basic outcome-directed thinking questions can be easily adapted to this context. Because of the versatility of ODT patterns, it is simply a matter of asking the same or similar questions from a meeting frame of reference. For example, when developing a personal outcome, we would ask "What do you want?" or "What do you want instead?" When eliciting a meeting outcome, a facilitator might ask "What do we want to accomplish as a result of this meeting?" (Outcome question) and "How will we know that we have accomplished our meeting outcome?" (Evidence question).

A full set of outcome questions adapted for the meeting context is shown in Table 1.
### Table 1

**Outcome-Directed Thinking Applied to Meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHECKS</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
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</table>
| **1) OUTCOME** | • What do we ultimately want to achieve by this meeting?  
• What specifically has to be accomplished by the end of this meeting? |
| **2) POSITIVE** | • Is the meeting outcome stated in positive terms?                        |
| **3) CONTROL**  | • Is the outcome under the group's control? Can we change or influence the outcome? Can we get the right people involved to accomplish outcome? |
| **4) EVIDENCE** | • When the meeting is over, how will the group know whether the meeting was a success?  
• What will we see, hear, and feel to know the meeting is successful? |
| **5) WORTHWHILE** | • What will happen if the group gets this outcome?  
• What do we stand to gain? Will we lose anything? |
| • Resources    | • Can we get the "right" people to this meeting?  
• Can we get the people who are necessary to accomplish this outcome to the meeting?  
• What will it take (resources) to get this meeting outcome? |
| • Lead to higher-level outcomes | • What will having this meeting outcome do for us? Will the meeting outcome lead to these higher-level outcomes? |
| • Time         | • Can we accomplish the outcome within the meeting time frame?            |
| **6) WHERE TO TAP** | • Larger  
• Smaller |
|               | • What will having that do for group/organization?  
• What stops us from achieving this outcome? What do we want instead? |
A Business Example: Mapping the Outcome Space

As we introduced in our earlier article, outcome-directed thinkers tend to ask both **up and down** questions in order to have a better idea of which outcome is the right outcome or to find the leverage or movement in the system. Figure 1 depicts an example of using these questions to **map** the **outcome space** around a business issue.

**The Example: Background**

The example problem is presenting in Figure 1. In this real life example, there was infighting between two work groups serving the same client base. One work group sells and services new computer applications; the other group sells and maintains existing software applications. Their constant bickering and lack of cooperation was getting in the way of serving the customer. There were numerous customer complaints and even loss of some customers.

The initial meeting outcome created by the manager of this group was "We want our two groups to work well together". Since this is a real example, it is important to know that a meeting was held in an attempt to accomplish this outcome in 2 hours!! Needless to say this meeting was a facilitator's nightmare and did not accomplish the outcome. As a matter of fact, the original problem became worse. Thus, in hindsight, we asked the facilitator to rethink this meeting using the outcome model and questions. This is what he learned!

Mapping the outcome space before the meeting helps the group to identify the "right" meeting outcome, or the outcome that provides the most leverage and movement within the system. However, sometimes, like in this example, that does not happen.

Remember mapping the outcome space is simply asking the "up and down" questions and documenting these responses on an outcome map. Looking back at the example in Figure 1, we begin by asking the up question and building the upper half for the map.

**The Up Question: "What will having the two groups working well together do for us?"**

The response to that question is the larger frame outcome of "**Improved interactions with customers**". When we ask the "up" question on this larger outcome: "**What will having improved interactions with customers do for us?**" we get an even larger frame outcome: "Best Customer Service Possible." (We could continue to ask the up question which would get us to even higher level outcomes--what's most important.)
Figure 1: OUTCOME MAP:
A BUSINESS EXAMPLE

Best Customer Service Possible

Problem:
Infighting between two groups:
New vs. available applications

Improved Interactions with Customers

[Do for us?]

Want Two Groups to Work Well Together

[Do for us?]

Initial Outcome

No definite roles or conflicting roles

Lack of information on each other’s products

Not able to handle conflict

Establish clear roles and expectations

Clear, concise information on products

Conflict management skills

[What stops us?]

[What do we want instead?]
When we ask the “down” questions -- "What stops us (obstacles or problems) from having two group who work well together?" and "What do we want instead?" (based on the initial outcome)--we get at least three obstacles (e.g., no roles, lack of information, no conflict skills). We also get three new smaller frame outcomes: Clear roles, concise information and conflict management skills. (In reality, there were many more obstacles and smaller outcomes elicited! We are just using a few representative ones to illustrate the situation.)

We have just demonstrated how to map an outcome space using this business example. We have used both up and down questions to get the larger and smaller frame outcomes "on the table" so we can identify where we might run the most appropriate meeting. Now looking back at the outcome map in Figure 1, if you were the facilitator for this meeting, what meeting outcome would you select or at what level in the map would you focus on for your meeting? For example, would it be a meeting to "establish clear roles" between and in the groups or would it be a meeting to "improve interactions"? Circle the place on the map in Figure 1 where you think you might choose to focus the meeting.

In actuality, for this example the point of greatest leverage for this two group system was to run the meeting at the highest level outcome in order to: “Define the Best Customer Service Possible.” This would be the best place to run the initial meeting since the groups did not have agreement on their overall mission of best customer service.

This example illustrates a general rule of facilitation: unless there is an agreement frame -- a place of common ground and higher level commitment -- a group will not be able to achieve their desired state or they will have great difficulty moving toward it. By using the up questions the group was able to explore their highest level common ground (their most important outcomes). This highest level is generally the point of agreement (movement). Once this leverage point is reached, the group can deal with any of their lower level issues/outcomes within the framework of their agreed upon common ground.

Going back to our example in Figure 1, once the two groups decide on what the "best customer service possible" for their Division/Department will be, it will be a lot easier to identify their roles, discuss product lines, and deal with the conflict in their relationship within the larger "vision" of where they want to be. Without this larger context, it is impossible to know what is relevant and/or important. For example, how would the groups know they had developed the best role definitions? The best roles would be the ones that led to the best customer service. However, without the “best customer service” defined, it would be very difficult to agree on role definitions.
Without having the larger perspective, confusion and conflict can arise readily. This is why the up question is critical to managing conflict and dealing with negative emotions. By simply asking two people in conflict the question, “What will having that do for you?” about each person’s position, you are able to reveal their higher level outcomes or what is most important to each of them. Once you have higher level outcomes participants agree on, you can explore many options for obtaining them.

This example also demonstrates the importance of mapping the outcome space in an effort to find the right outcome. Remember the outcome drives everything in any interaction or meeting. If the outcome is wrong, individuals and groups will have a very difficult time arriving at their overall desired state or results. Developing and charting an outcome map is one way to think through and "see" the right outcome more easily.

When used to investigate a meeting outcome, an outcome map is useful for other things as well. Figure 2 illustrates how an outcome map is useful for the identification of motivation and agenda (contents) for a meeting or presentation. The higher level outcomes that meeting outcomes lead to are the motivation for the meeting. We often review these higher level outcomes at the start of meeting to remind people of the importance of the meeting. The outcomes below the current meeting outcome are usually items that need to be addressed in the meeting agenda.
Well-formed and Worthwhile Checks

Once the "right" meeting outcome is selected, it is important to make sure the outcome is well formed and worthwhile. The processes for performing these checks are the same as those we outlined in our ODT model paper. The only differences are that you would use the reworded questions for meetings outlined in Table 1.

The well-formed checks, especially developing good evidence, are really critical to meeting outcomes. Developing concrete evidence for the meeting outcome is critical because it gives people concrete proof that they have completed the meeting. Evidence lets them know when the
meeting is done -- when they have accomplished what they set out to do. Going back to our example in Figure 1, we have selected the "Best Customer Service Possible" as the place to focus the first meeting(s). So the meeting outcome and evidence might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEETING OUTCOME</th>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To develop a first draft list of criteria for determining best customer service for this division.</td>
<td>• First draft list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agreement on draft criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- verbal response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;yes, I agree&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- head nods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the meeting will be done and the meeting outcome accomplished, when the draft list is written on the flip chart and the group has each individually said "Yes, I agree" and nods their heads.

The key resource in a meeting is the people you invite. How well you accomplish the meeting outcome is based on whether you have the right people in the room. The control well-formed check and meeting outcome are related to the people you invite. If your meeting outcome is to make a decision, then you must have the decision-makers in the room, otherwise you would violate the control well-formed check. If you cannot get the decision-makers in the room, only support staff, then your meeting outcome would change to something like developing a recommendation, not actually making a decision.

**Running Meetings**

The outcome questions in Table 1 are for designing a meeting. We also use ODT questions within a meeting. For example when someone starts talking about a problem, we would ask **"What do you want instead of that [problem]?"** When you are running meetings you want to keep people focused on outcomes because people are more resourceful when they are focusing on outcomes. The focus in many meetings is to come up with outcomes for a team, project, plan, etc. In these situations, you would use the entire ODT model and questions to help you accomplish these meeting outcomes.

**Big Payoffs from Outcome-directed Thinking**

Research has shown the two major problems with meetings are poor meeting outcomes and participants getting off-track. Both of these problems can be addressed with ODT. We have trained thousands of people in ODT. They report major benefits from applying ODT to meetings such as 30%-60% time savings, higher quality meeting results, and higher participant satisfaction a higher commitment. The typical business professional spends 40-60% of their time in meetings, costing organizations billions of dollars! Outcome-Directed Thinking is a powerful and learnable set of skills that can deliver big payoffs both inside and outside the meeting room!