



4 Levels of Communication in a meeting

There are four levels of communication that play a significant role in the effectiveness of meetings. Sometimes meetings are ineffective, not because the subject on the agenda is too problematic, but because communication is not working well on all levels. It has been said that when you can't reach an agreement on the first level, that of the content, you should look to a level below and solve the problems on that level. And so on for all the other levels. Having said that, we believe that it is wise to look at all the levels anyway to make sure that the meeting is effective and contributes to a pleasant working atmosphere.

1. CONTENT

This is the level that is clear and most important to everyone. It is about the subjects at hand and the reason the meeting is held. Ideas, arguments, and positions are discussed. It is often the only level which is taken into account, to such an extent that other levels may be overlooked.

2. PROCEDURE

This level refers to the way the meeting is held. It is about the agenda, roles of the chair and minute taker and the way decisions are made (consensus, voting, veto). In academia it might feel artificial, but it is best to agree on the agenda and roles of participants explicitly beforehand, because the effectiveness of the meeting is to a large extent dependent on the procedure.

3. INTERACTION

This level is always present in a meeting, but never openly addressed. It deals with the style of interaction, the roles participants take on and the power distribution amongst them. In an existing group of people these roles are often fixed. When someone plays an influential and positive role in the meeting, you might want to compliment this person on that.

When the relation/interaction seems to be problematic it influences the content of the discussions, the effectiveness of the meeting and the emotions of the participants in a bad way and it needs to be addressed.

4. EMOTIONS

This level refers to the personal emotions participants experience during the interaction. Just like the interaction, they affect the success of the meeting. In academia people often are not used to expressing a lot of emotion explicitly during meetings, but they can be inferred from their tone of voice, facial expression and overall body-language. It helps to establish a meeting climate where positive as well as negative emotions regarding the content of the subjects or the way the meeting unfolds, are addressed. This will help to ensure a pleasant and effective working climate in the long run.