

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TIME TO MEET: MEETINGS AS SITES OF ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY

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SUMMARY

Meetings are regularly treated as the backdrop of time-sensitive activities, but rarely considered as an important socio-temporal structure in their own right. Through positioning organizational activities in a timeframe, their decision making function links members to a socially constructed past that resides in their collective memory and simultaneously shapes their present and future. In the present examination, we illustrate our argument drawing examples from the very meeting of which this paper was a part. As central communication structures drawn on regularly to effect a variety of goals, meetings are at the heart of organizational communication and temporality which accounts for their vitality in establishing, debating, and reflecting a group's collective memory.

From the afternoon of Sunday July 25th to the morning of Saturday July 31st 2004, members of the International Society for the Study of Time (ISST) gathered at Clare College in Cambridge, England for the purpose of sharing research and ideas and developing (and maintaining) collegial ties. The conference opened on Monday morning with a brilliant and moving Founder's Address in which J. T. Fraser took great care to situate this meeting within the collective memory of the group. This, the twelfth triennial conference, was the largest such Society meeting in the history of the organization and represented a critical turning point in the "timing" of previous conference traditions. At previous gatherings, the membership was small enough so as to avoid the need for concurrent paper presentation sessions. However, the growing size of the membership and corresponding number of conference attendees in Cambridge gave way to concurrent paper sessions for the first time in the organization's history. This meeting, centered on the theme of Time and Memory, offers excellent occasion to consider its very focus.

As central communication structures drawn on regularly to effect a variety of goals, meetings are at the heart of organizational communication and temporality which accounts for their vitality in establishing, debating, and reflecting a group's collective memory (Gheradi & Strati, 1988). Following

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Weick's (1979) notion of communication cycles, meetings are held to manage equivocality in the environment—i.e., to construct knowledge or learn information not easily gleaned from other sources. This may range from a daily staff update—designed to effect continuous process improvement—to a triennial meeting of scholars committed to the interdisciplinary study of time—designed to facilitate the exchange of new ideas via formal and informal discussions. As Cooren (2006) describes, meetings essentially “talk” an organization into being. Time is also a critical aspect of the very substance of a meeting. As one example, the frequency of a meeting shapes its character. The purpose of a triennial versus daily meeting is starkly different—conveyed, in part, by the amount of time elapsed between gatherings. While both may be equally important, a daily staff update will reflect a greater focus on the present where a triennial meeting will be more focused on the future and past, reflected each by their periodicity.

These two features—communication and temporality—underlie the centrality of memory to the business of meeting. The notion of meeting “minutes,” a record of group communication bound by time (i.e., organizational memory), provides insight into this characterization. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a minute as, “an official memorandum, especially one authorizing or recommending a course of action” where *memorandum* is defined as “a note to help the memory; a record of events, or of observations on a particular subject, esp. for future consideration or use” (Simpson, 2005). Thus, Weick's (1979) notion of retention, where organizational members reflect on past actions in order to chart future directions, is a central activity of meeting. This process is facilitated through minutes, as they allow members to consider the successes and failures of the past as a guide for actions in the future based upon their understanding of the environment in the present. The common practice of approving the meeting minutes highlights the social nature of memory (Zerubavel, 2003), as it provides for member discussion about the perceived accuracy of the organization's memory. Even in the absence of a formal record, members still invoke the past as a reference for current decision-making (Oswick, 2006), and contested memories of that past are similarly common.

Despite their potential richness for understanding members' social constructions of the past, present, and future as well as the processes through which these temporal foci are shaped, meetings are overlooked in current conversations regarding organizational temporality. They are regularly treated as the backdrop of time-sensitive activities (Gersick, 1988), but rarely considered as an important socio-temporal structure in their own right (see Cooren, 2006, for a notable exception). Key aspects of the meeting make it

an ideal unit of analysis to consider issues of time and memory. Meetings focus our attention at the meso level of analysis—i.e., organizational events, or routines, that link multiple units and levels of analysis (Ballard & Seibold, 2003). A key assumption guiding Ballard and Seibold's (2003) model of organizational temporality is that members' temporal experiences are best understood through their link to the practical demands of the institution (Bourdieu, 1977). Among the practical demands (referred to as communication structures) identified in the model are coordination methods and feedback cycles (Ballard & Seibold, 2003, 2004a). The use of meetings as both a coordinative tool and feedback signpost for members' tasks make them a relevant structure to explore in analyses of organizational temporality. Additionally, meetings introduce a new dimension of time, past time focus, into this framework (Ballard & Seibold, 2004b) by identifying a mechanism through which this dimension is shaped.

In the following pages we consider the ways in which meetings are important sources of information about organizational and group communication processes—specifically, the ways in which organizational memory both shapes and is shaped by these processes. We begin below with a synthesis of disparate literatures in order to develop our argument that through positioning organizational activities in a timeframe, the decision making function of meetings draws members into a past that resides in their collective memory. We turn next to Schwartzman's (1986) theoretical framework of meetings and offer a socio-temporal perspective to consider the practical implications of the role of meetings in shaping organizational memory. Finally, we conclude with a summary and point to directions for future research. Throughout we reflect on a meta-meeting, held at the twelfth triennial conference of the ISST, in which organizational members drew on a collective memory in order to make sense of their future in the present.

MEETINGS IN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE: ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY IN THE MAKING

The open council meeting of the ISST on Thursday evening was characterized by extended sense-making (including retrospective sense-making) about the appropriate course of action to manage the present change in their environment (i.e., marked growth in membership) and its impact on past traditions and routines. Having enacted a vision of the future in which the number of conference attendees would only continue to increase, an important agenda item concerned members' feelings about the success of

the concurrent session format “tried out” in Cambridge and suggestions for managing the growing membership vis-à-vis the logistics of paper sessions at future conference sites. It was not a decision-making activity per se, but initial input was sought for decisions to be made in the near future. New and old members alike were present for this sense-making activity.

While the time “of” meetings, such as their periodicity, referenced earlier is a relevant aspect of organizational temporality—such as how a triennial meeting typically has the effect of making interaction more hallowed and precious than a daily event, contributing to a stronger orientation to the past and future—it is the time “in” meetings that shapes and is shaped by members’ collective memory. Time “in” meetings (i.e., interaction time) shapes the whole organization (McPhee, Corman, & Iverson, 2006). While this is the case for every activity in an extended meeting like a conference in Cambridge, the structured nature of decision making directly casts light on the interconnections among an organization’s past, present, and future as it places organizational members and their activities in a timeframe (Butler, 1995).

Butler (1995) observes: “We experience time in the present, but only by relating ourselves to a past and to a future.... The present is preceded by a whole series of events and decisions which become sedimented into some kind of order codifying our experience.... Codes signify (Giddens, 1984: 31; Clark, 1990: 144) states learned from past action (Cyert and March 1992: 174) and enable communication about those states to actors in the present.... Codes contain the history of an organization, but as March (1988: 13) says, history is notoriously ambiguous” (pp. 928–929). In terms of the present discussion, collective memories constitute these codes, but they are not faithful reproductions of the past: memories are social constructions in the present (Zerubavel, 2003). For example, meetings are the communicative events wherein organizational history and knowledge becomes codified and where the meaning of those codes gets debated. Codes determine what gets attended to in discussion vis-à-vis the agenda or impromptu contributions—they are used to define and draw attention to a problem (and to ignore others) as well as signal that a decision must be made to address it. This decision is based on members’ retrospective enactment of their environments (Weick, 1979).

The open council meeting illustrates these issues. The organization’s “attention” codes (Butler, 1995) defined the growing size of the organization as an issue about which decisions needed to be made. While the issue was consistently described as “a good problem to have,” it necessitated a decision,

nonetheless, as it represented a departure in the organization's history. In order to move forward effectively, it had to be made sense of in terms of and integrated into existing codes. Members experienced this issue in the present (as they were in the midst of the largest conference in the history of the organization), by drawing on the past (i.e., previous ISST, and other scholarly, conferences) and relating it (i.e., the feasibility of this new size and corresponding format) to the future. Organizational codes, described below, were drawn upon to frame the discussion as well as to opine upon it.

The history of the organization, founded in 1966, is of a small, close knit cadre of scholars. Over the years, this size has enabled them to develop a tradition of gathering for a full week of plenary sessions at intimate, exotic locales consistent with the conference theme and in unique accommodations that afford once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. However, traditions such as this are dependent upon a small membership, and the scholarly interest concerning issues of time across a number of disciplines has increased exponentially since the turn of the century. For example, organizational and group scholars have witnessed a rise in the popularity of studies of workplace temporality. Within the past five years alone, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organizational Studies*, *Small Group Research*, *Work & Occupations*, *Culture and Organization*, and *Organization* have all held special journal issues dedicated to this very topic. This does not even take into account all of the myriad individually located articles on the subject that have been published in about the same time period. What once was an overlooked, understudied aspect of organizational and group life (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988), has become a fertile ground of scholarly inquiry.

While membership in the ISST is applied for and selectively granted, if organizational and group studies offer any indication, the number of people who might satisfy these criteria has grown. If this trend continues, then it is reasonable to expect the number of qualified persons applying for and gaining membership to increase as well. Extant codes indicate that an expanding membership jeopardizes critical organizational traditions, and it had already impacted at least one: the tradition of all non-overlapping, or plenary, sessions. Officers wanted to know how members—old and new—felt about this change so that they could use this feedback to plan future conferences. For old members, this sensemaking revolved around comparing their present experience to past ISST conferences. For new members, this involved comparing their present experience to other conferences they had attended and even, paradoxically, how they imagined past ISST experiences (based on what old members described during the meeting). The latter observation

supports Zerubavel's (2003) claim that through shared narratives members are able to experience a past, a set of collective memories, which precedes their actual existence as part of the group.

This is consistent with Gheradi and Strati's (1988) findings that members negotiate shared truths about the group's history and social identity through meetings. They assert that meetings "may be regarded as representing the moment of *present* time that ensures coherence and continuity between *past* and *future*—whether the decision is regulative of the course of action or whether it introduces change" (p. 151, italics added). Thus, through positioning organizational activities in a timeframe, the decision making function of meetings draws members into a past that resides in their collective memory. Below we examine the practical implications of this line of argument.

INTEGRATING TEMPORALITY INTO SCHWARTZMAN'S THEORY OF MEETINGS

Schwartzman (1986) describes the various ways in which meetings are so often maligned both by group members and organizational practitioners as useless, poorly ran, and ineffective. Instead of refuting these complaints, she suggests that serious consideration of the ways in which these characterizations are true can lead scholars to a deeper understanding of what purposes meetings really do serve for social collectives. Schwartzman considers three images of meetings that suggest how scholars might reconsider the function meetings serve for organizational members—meetings as *homeostats*, *rituals*, and *social metaphors*. Below we apply a socio-temporal perspective to this framework and consider the implications of these three images for organizational memory.

MEETINGS AS HOMEOSTATS

One image of meetings suggested by Schwartzman (1986) is that of meetings as homeostats that validate the current social structure and maintain the status quo. Schwartzman even suggests that meetings organized in order to promote change in organizations fail due to their homeostatic function in upholding current structure. Because members have developed a collective memory, or code, through prior meetings and interactions, meetings reinforce existing codes through their "tradition-celebrating" role.

Applied from a temporal perspective, organizations and groups that are pleased with their past decisions and shared history are less likely to embrace changes in their meeting routines. For instance, they are more likely to maintain a regular set of meeting times consistent with past practices and to resist changes that are inconsistent with their history. This is consistent with Ancona, Okhuysen, and Perlow's (2001) proposition that activities, like meetings, in the category of *repeated activity mapping* help to preserve an organization's social system.

Additionally, the periodicity of recurrent scheduled meetings can serve as a source of entrainment (Ancona & Chong, 1996; McGrath & Kelly, 1986) for organizational temporality. For example, regular daily, weekly, monthly, or annual meetings can serve as *zeitgebers* (Bluedorn, 2002) that direct members' attention toward particular temporal signposts, or feedback cycles, as more central to the group than others. Schwartzman (1989) found that this pace, or cycle, is then used to construct collective memories through the kind of temporal grids (of key meetings) that groups use to interpret their shared history. While irregular meetings may punctuate a group's history in important ways, the entrainment that regular meetings permit has the unique position as a tradition-celebrating structure. In contrast, irregular or unscheduled meetings are more likely to carry the capacity to change existing organizational cultural values or policies.

During the open council meeting in Cambridge, the homeostatic function of meetings emerged most strongly as ISST members old and new bemoaned the loss of close intimacy afforded by non-overlapping sessions—despite that fact that “overlapping” meant “dual,” not the standard multiples of many conference meetings. New members complimented the wonderfully deliberate, pleasant pace of a conference with no concurrent sessions and were aghast at the idea of abandoning the Wednesday “free day” reserved for touring the city (in order to assist in returning to non-overlapping sessions). So it was not simply synchronicity, but pace, that they wanted to preserve. The new membership saw both temporal features as part of the unique charm and closeness of Society meetings and wanted to maintain the original vision of the founder. Alas, a sense of collective memory had been borne all too quickly for some eager scholars, as Dr. Fraser congenially informed the group that the Wednesday “free day” was never his idea and had evolved over the years through the desires of the membership. At this point, as part of that group of “eager beavers,” the first author realized that her strong sense of group identity had led her to create memories of a shared past that not only predated her existence, but did not exist for past members either! Still, the

pride and love that a range of members old and new held for the Society led to clear resistance to part with the past. Nonetheless, everyone continually acknowledged that growth is a good problem to have and resigned to the inevitable change (even if it was not an individually experienced change, but existed as a new development in the shared history of the group).

MEETINGS AS RITUALS

Schwartzman (1986) asserts that, as rituals, meetings have symbolic significance that both structures and reflects members' social reality. Specifically the meeting is a:

...powerful and ongoing symbol for an organization because it assembles a variety of individuals and groups together and labels the assembly as "organizational action." [Thus]... meetings provide participants with a way to both negotiate and interpret their social reality... (p. 250)

From a temporal perspective, because memory consists of judgments about the efficacy of past decisions, meetings represent an ideal opportunity to disagree about past decisions and continue to relive these disagreements through ongoing struggles in the present. In contrast, statements that encourage "leaving the past in the past" or "letting bygones be bygones" characterize an alternate discourse and ritual. In these groups, disagreements are acknowledged as part of the groups' shared history and, in so doing, members attempt to transcend their effects in the present. Putting them "out in the open" is seen as a way of undermining their influence, yet because issues are framed relative to the (forgotten) past, this temporal discourse still serves a ritualistic function.

The image of meetings as rituals is not limited to past conflicts. Similar functions of meetings also regularly draw upon collective memories of success, including organizational heroes and heroines in addition to shared triumphs. These rituals often involve stories and myths (Beyer & Trice, 1987) that allow members' to revel in their history and discuss shared norms and values in relation to present and future concerns. Because meetings highlight the ways in which current interaction is shaped by the past and, in turn, shapes the future, they provide members with an ideal location, or opportunity, to act out on a range of temporal foci (past, present, and future) as well as an array of social issues.

During the conference, the role of meetings as temporal rituals was evident in the open council meeting through the opportunities that members took to

express their feelings about the past, present, and future of the organization. This occurred not only through discussions of the presentation sessions, but also through discussions about both the location and theme of future conferences. Given the inordinately high valuation of the British pound compared with the currency of many conference attendees, discussions about the location of future conferences were made through referencing the shared values and norms found at past conferences. Members told awe-inspiring stories of the tiny Italian village they traversed during the last triennial meeting and the wonderful collegiality and familial environment it inspired as well as the ability to travel with one's family (the latter owed in good measure due to a more favorable exchange rate). While the present conference was also seen as collegial and familial in nature, the importance of these values for future meetings was underscored in members' narratives.

MEETINGS AS SOCIAL METAPHORS

Schwartzman (1986) suggests an image of meetings as social metaphors. Through meetings, she argues,

individuals metaphorically mix their formal and informal relationships and feelings with organizational issues, problems and solutions... because in this context one thing can always be talked about in terms of something else... In this way the meeting allows individuals to engage in a variety of expressive activities while they appear to be engaged in instrumental behavior (p. 251)

The business of meetings—decision making (in a variety of forms)—can be a metaphor for a group's need to establish "memory." Following Weick's (1979) theory of organizing, organizations' evolutionary development follows three stages. In the first stage, enactment, organizations create the environment that faces them. That is, through a variety of ways, they notice certain aspects of their environment and become poised to act on these observations. In the second step, selection, organizations set about to react to their enacted environment, i.e., to make choices that increase their chances of survival. This occurs through a process of sense-making that utilizes both rules (routines, often found in organizational documents and policies) and cycles (communication, which typically require meetings). Finally, in the third stage, retention, organizations reflect on the success of various choices and remember, or retain, what worked and repeat it in the future.

The implication of this theory for considering meetings as social metaphors lays in the fact that sense-making occurs either through rules or

cycles. A prerequisite for the reliance upon rules is that an organizational group must have faced the same environment in the past and formulated an appropriate response. Groups without a shared past, newer groups, will have faced fewer environments together and thus formulated fewer agreed-upon rules. Instead, new groups must rely more often on cycles, or meetings, to determine appropriate responses to their environment. In contrast, groups with more shared history, and a collective memory, will be able to rely on rules in more cases. As a result, the frequency and duration of meetings may be indicative of the “time” of the group. A greater frequency and duration of regularly scheduled meetings implies that more time needs to be spent on establishing shared norms and consensus, respectively. This characterizes both new groups and established groups undergoing a great deal of change. In particular, new groups are likely to hold regular meetings on a frequent basis in order to chart their course and establish a shared vision of the future. Older groups that lack appropriate codes (Butler, 1995) to operate in their current environment also need to meet more often.

This concept of meetings as temporal metaphors was reflected in the position of the ISST as an established group undergoing change. Although, the group has a great deal of history and tradition behind it, the need for alternate meeting practices was apparent. A range of possibilities designed to address the concurrent presentation sessions were generated that could not be easily decided upon within the confines of a single meeting. Several options were taken under advisement, but the group seemed to acknowledge that the changing constituency represented a meaningful challenge for the organization that could not be neatly disposed of within one meeting. The officers committed to further meetings and discussions about the issue in order to devise an appropriate strategy to manage this new development.

CONCLUSION

The socio-temporal aspect of meetings represents an important source of information about group and organizational communication processes. Schwartzman (1986) suggests “meetings are expressive forms that serve expressive functions much better than they serve instrumental ones” (p. 244). A temporal lens to understanding meetings offers a distinct perspective because time lies at the nexus of these (expressive and instrumental) functions. The instrumental function of meetings is explicitly about the business of time—e.g., drawing on collective memories to revisit past decisions, hash out future directions, or celebrate present achievements—and yet the social construction of these “times” is accomplished through

expressive means. Stohl (2006) recognizes this tension between the topic of discussion and the social context in which it takes place. For example, in order to engage in the sense-making needed to effect instrumental goals, like strategic planning or establishing a new policy, members often invoke collective memories (whether real or imagined), such as the founder's original vision or recent developments in the group's history, in order to endorse particular paths of action. Thus, memories (i.e., social constructions of the past) serve expressive functions as they are drawn on through members' discourse to opine, while being used (as "data") to impact instrumental functions concerning the group's present and future directions.

Through positioning organizational activities in a timeframe, the decision making function of meetings links members to a socially constructed past that resides in their collective memory and simultaneously shapes their present and future. In the present examination, we illustrated our argument drawing examples from the very meeting of which this paper was a part. Given their pervasiveness in organizational life, meetings afford researchers regular access to large amounts of data that can be analyzed drawing from a number of different methods and epistemological perspectives. Depending on the scope of the data, it can point to important and practicable insights for organizational scholars, members, and practitioners. For example, in a single organization, future investigations can yield information that helps members to better understand their unique decision making dynamics and assumptions. Across several organizations, relevant analyses might allow generalizations on topics like the role of contested memories and shared memories in shaping group development and decision outcomes. Considering meetings as sites of organizational memory has the potential to inform a variety of literatures—from group communication and decision making, to organizational assimilation, to learning, to strategic planning, to team identity, to name a few. We hope that the issues and arguments raised here can be assistive in this regard.

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