

Marina Capizzi, Tiziano Capelli

# SURVIVING MEETINGS

AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR ORGANISING SMART MEETINGS  
THAT WORK WELL FOR PEOPLE AND BUSINESS



FrancoAngeli

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**Marina Capizzi, Tiziano Capelli**

# ***SURVIVING MEETINGS***

**AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR ORGANISING SMART MEETINGS  
THAT WORK WELL FOR PEOPLE AND BUSINESS**

**FrancoAngeli**

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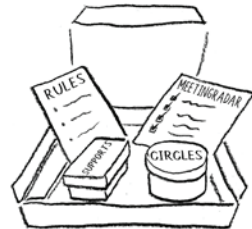
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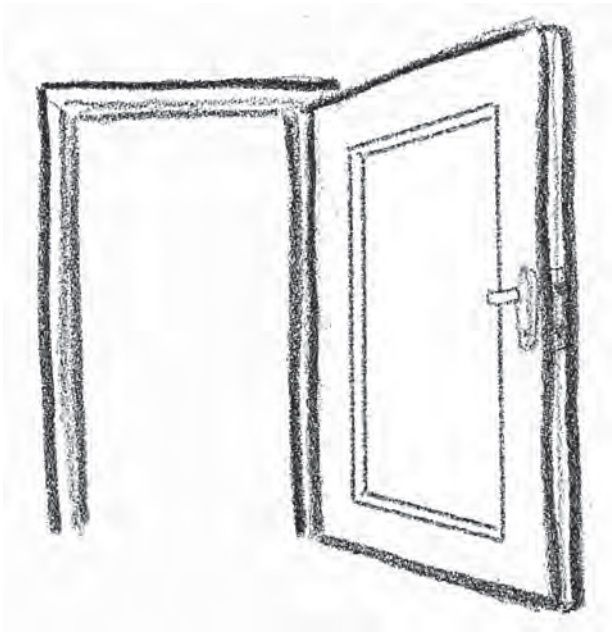
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*To all those working to nurture business  
well-being through human well-being.*

# Introduction



**Are you tired of the same old meetings?  
Do you like to get straight to the point,  
understand issues, solve problems, and go home  
at night with some positive energy left?  
If this is the case, then this is the right book for you.**

In companies and organizations, everyone complains about meetings: too many, too long and inconclusive. Often the difference between pre and post meeting is irrelevant, whereas wasted time and energy are absolutely relevant! Traditional meetings are a tired ritual, which have gradually been emptied of meaning and function. Dozens and dozens of slides turn participants into spectators. Meetings can seem like battlefields. Ill-prepared meetings – whether at a distance or face to face – do nothing except damage to their organizers, participants, and other interested parties. How many of these have you already witnessed?



With smart working, such meetings have increased, even if they tend to be more focused and shorter in length. But without a method, it is difficult to consolidate this improvement.

Unfortunately, meetings only provide a stage to showcase the way we relate to each other and how we work every day in organizations. Even outside meetings. This book was born out of the day-to-day frustration experienced by those caught up in pointless meetings either as an organizer or a participant. Those who are fed up of daily practices that drain personal energy and economic resources, as well as lower results.

**In a nutshell, this is a book for professionals who want to develop their business by finding meaning, growth and well-being in their work. Do you recognize yourself in this category? Then, it's no longer possible to put off the issue of meetings. Why do we keep on doing them the same way?**



TheMeetingCircle (TMC) is a method that **transforms operational meetings into meetings which get things done and generate maximum value**. What do we mean by 'operational meetings'? Those that serve to **inform, find solutions, decide, plan and align**.

By using TheMeetingCircle, meetings change so radically that you can even avoid calling them *meetings* from now on! What's so different? Let's take a few examples.

Every meeting, whether it be face-to-face, at a distance or in a mixed format, has only *one actual objective* and is designed, organized and managed to achieve it. For this reason, *only* those who can contribute something are involved. Each time, participants are selected according to the objective which can also be across the organization, because they fall into one or more of these categories: end-users, decision-makers, implementers, experts and those impacted. Meeting duration is pre-established and varies according to the objective: 10' (standing), or 25', or 55', or 1h25' at the very most. Presentations and discussions are used only when necessary (there are many other more effective and faster ways that can be used in a meeting!). And at the end, participants evaluate the meeting's usefulness.

As you can see from these previews, TheMeetingCircle radically changes the traditional way of holding meetings – before, during and after – for both the organiser and the participant.

By the way, why do we call it TheMeetingCircle?

Because with this method, every meeting is like a *circle* so far that it is considered a perfect geometrical shape. Indeed since ancient times the circle is the symbol of simplicity, continuity, and *symmetry around a central point*.

With TheMeetingCircle, the meeting takes place around that focal point.

At the centre of the circle, there is only one objective at a time: information to be exchanged, problems/opportunities to be investigated together, solutions to be tested, decisions to be made, common activities to be planned, alignment on what we are doing...

*A centre.*

*And centred around people.*

This is a place that we humans know well, because historically there has always been a place with us around a central point. Once, there was fire there and everything began from fire. Not only defending life (just try convincing ferocious animals not to enter the cave and eat you, without fire, ...), but also the development of what distinguishes us from everything else: speech. And with speech, which was warmed and illuminated by the night fire reflections, we began to share our fears. We nurtured our audacity. We pooled our strength. To understand danger, to seize opportunities, to learn from mistakes and successes. And together, we provided for our own well-being. Most of all with small gestures, and continuous decisions, step by step. With setbacks, confirmations and surprises, we have built the future.

With TheMeetingCircle, therefore, every meeting takes place around a *focus point* that illuminates a *piece of work to be immediately moved forward*.

This is why an *operational* meeting is organized.

Inside the circle there are only those who are able to make a contribution: because of their proximity to the problem, competencies and the possibility to decide.

And the rest of it? it stays outside.

It would just be a waste of time. No participants and no themes that could de-focus, distract or obscure the clarity that the centre radiates!

With this method, you will understand, we no longer organize "re-unions" in the traditional sense rather "calls" that allow us to converge towards a common goal, around which we make a brief but sufficient pause to take a step forward together.

How can we define these calls? 'Meeting' is such a worn-out word...

We like **smart meetings**. We find them effervescent. But if you have a nicer name, use yours and propose it to us too! (info@primate.consulting).

And now, let's move on to the practical part.

In this book there is a *kit* containing not only rules and ways of engagement, but also the tools to design, manage and participate in a meeting *in a completely different way*.

However you want to call it, with TheMeetingCircle it will be a meeting organized to move things forward, creating a context that

encourages and stimulates everyone's contribution. Neuroscience will also help us, but let's leave it there for now...

So:

**If you are the Organiser**, TheMeetingCircle helps you first to clarify your objective (the focus!) and, immediately afterwards, to understand whether the meeting you want to call is *really* necessary: if yes, then you will find a tool to eliminate all unnecessary meetings in the *Kit*.

If you decide to go ahead, use the MeetingRadar to organise and build the smart meeting by taking only the pieces you need from the *Kit* (you have to select them from the *Supports* and/or the *Circles*). Each piece is a working phase with its own characteristics and specificities. Take only the parts you need and put them in sequence, one after the other, as if they were the carriages of a train. This is the *flow* you will follow during the meeting. Each piece is an activity that will take you one step closer to achieving the goal of that meeting.

And if only one piece is needed? Great, then away with all the others!

**If you are a Participant**, with TheMeetingCircle you will be involved in short meetings, whose objective will be clear to you from the invitation: you will also immediately know what you will take home at the end. This will allow you to understand if your participation is coherent or not and, in the latter case, you will be able to act in the best way for all: decline the invitation and/or get replaced by another colleague. No unnecessary invitations. This is also because the meeting will follow a flow that provides space for *everyone* to speak. Thanks to this, you will be able to listen, breathe and intervene without interrupting and without struggling to speak or be heard. If, on the other hand, you tend to listen rather than intervene, you will be stimulated to contribute. In the end, you and the other participants will evaluate the meeting with respect to the objective (if you want, you can also evaluate the usefulness of your contribution). Thus, meeting after meeting, you will all become more skilled: organizers, facilitators, participants.

Let's try to synthesize it.

## **TheMeetingCircle favors:**

- **maximum concentration**, because each meeting has only one concrete goal to be achieved in a predefined time frame. This prevents you from wandering off track, stretches the attention span, improves listening and idea generation (just like when you stretch your muscles!);
- **immediate translation into actions**, because it guarantees having the necessary skills. Only the potential contributors participate in the meeting where you are present to give the best of your knowledge and talent;
- **continuous exchange of feedback** before, during and post meeting. Acting without constant feedback is like moving around in an unfamiliar dark room, believing that you know it perfectly... (*good luck*).

Thus... focus, attention, finalization are generated with minimum effort. Effortless attention is powerful because it eliminates unnecessary stress. This is the optimal condition for thinking, listening and concluding.

How is it possible?

The workplace characteristics created by TheMeetingCircle, starting from the meeting convocation, mirror the conditions that activate Flow in people, according to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (yes, an unpronounceable surname... Chik-sent-mee-hi) who studies **the conditions necessary to activate Flow in people**.

Do you know what *Flow* is?

It is the psycho-physical state, which he first identified in 1970, where you are so absorbed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The mind doesn't wander as it is completely absorbed in what you are doing. And everything is very enjoyable. But don't confuse it with relaxation! The Flow state deals with challenges, commitment, control and focus but in a state where everything flows as naturally as possible. There is no performance anxiety, because you fully experience the pleasure of what you are doing. Freedom and a lightness allow you to get the most with the least effort. Amazingly/actually, you even end up with more energy than when you started!



It isn't by chance that the Flow, also called "the zone", was initially studied on the sports field...

Question: do you believe that these moments of grace only happen to a lucky few or need extraordinary events to occur? Absolutely not. As a child you, like everyone else, spent hours and hours in Flow, and you still come back to it now, when you do something you love. But while you're working? Yes, even while working it often happens (if it never happens to you... *'Houston, we have a problem...'*). What's a clue to understanding when you are working in Flow? It's when you say "wow, two hours have already passed and I haven't even noticed!". Wow! You have been very productive and yet you aren't tired. Flow is a natural condition but, thanks to the studies of the last few decades, we know how to conjure it up voluntarily: by creating an externally stimulating environment, whilst practicing internal circular breathing (we see this in the last chapter).

Csikszentmihalyi summarized the Flow in 9 components (in the bibliography you will find references to several books).

We start from **the three prerequisites to activate individual and group Flow**: clear objectives (and common ones for the team), challenge-skills balance, and feedback. Let's link them to the characteristics of smart meetings:

1. **Clear objectives** that present a challenge, in order to direct attention to a task that stretches skills: the smart meeting goal is immediately clear because it's already been communicated in the invitation. If you are in the meeting, it is because you have been called to carry out a piece of work together with the other participants to generate maximum value. And this only happens if you and the others deploy the best of yourselves: the intensity is consistent with the goal.
2. **Challenges-skills balance** to feel "I can do it!": for this reason, TMC helps you to identify all the skills – technical and otherwise – you need to achieve the goal. Fortunately for us, these skills are widespread and can be identified by end users (who better than them to know what they need?), implementers, decision makers, experts and those impacted (a great resource for discovering aspects that you might not otherwise consider).

With the required skills distributed around the focus point, it is easier to feel up to the challenge! But, be careful. Too many skills risk generating boredom and a *useless* meeting; or maybe not, but then you were wrongly invited. If, on the other hand, the skills are insufficient, the meeting goal generates anxiety; therefore, even in this case, either the goal is too high to be reached in the given time (because, 'there are too many cooks in the kitchen') or the wrong participants are present. Achieving the meeting's objectives is very important, because it increases everyone's sense of self-efficacy and makes you want to set more challenging goals!

3. **Feedback** in real time or in a short time to allow you to constantly improve. TMC makes it possible pre, during and post meetings. Thus, step by step, we all improve and the pleasure of the challenge increases (it's a virtuous circle!)

These three conditions favor the activation of the Flow process. And when the Flow is activated, our psycho-physical state changes. Csikszentmihalyi developed numerous research in recent decades in very different fields. **He observed these six Flow results both at individual and team levels (all very pleasant!):**

4. **Effortless focused attention**, free from worries: what must be achieved is clear, the challenge is perceived within reach and the focus is on this.
5. **Merger between action and awareness**: in practice there is no separation between thoughts and actions. Everything flows naturally because mind and body work in unison.
6. **Sense of control**: by stopping thinking about things that are dependent on others, the focus narrows further on the here and now, on what you/we can do and improve using feedback. This gives a feeling of power, confidence and calm. Let's consider how much positive energy is generated when this happens in a team! They can be either key moments where the challenge is very high or equally the precious daily moments when we get together to quickly exchange the information we need!
7. **Loss of self-awareness**: *align what you do and who you are* and then you stop worrying about yourself: the opposite of when

you continue saying or thinking “I’m here”, “I’m there”, “I’m up”, “I’m down”... you know? In short, the Ego settles down! And you feel a strong connection with others, you feed on the circulating energy and you feel part of something bigger.

8. **Destructuring time, so time flies:** “Has it already been an hour ??!”.
9. **Intrinsic motivation or autotelic:** it means that you love that activity and therefore you tend to do it more. And the more you do it, the better and better you become. And the better you get, the more you raise the bar. And when you raise the bar, you are more likely to experience Flow. And this brings us back to the first condition and closes the circle.

The best news?

In the Flow state you free yourself and you get rid of a lot of unnecessary frills. *Let’s focus on the essentials* and get to the point. “It is as if the spark of thought immediately turns into action,” writes Csikszentmihalyi. And this increases well-being and greatly improves individual and team performance.

Because when we are in the Flow we are *light and connected*. The team works in harmony by effortlessly finding the right path. Even in a meeting. This helps to make for very short and smart meetings. And, free from frills and burdens, the gaze rises effortlessly and flies up to see the whole. And a second later, if needed, it quickly drops to the “point”: powerful, precise and bright like a laser.

A few words are enough. The individual thoughts that arise take everyone a step forward. Is it magic?

No. Neuroscience tells us it’s not. It *explains* the Flow to us and gives us the instructions for it to emerge. Let’s talk about it later.

Now the important thing is to recognize that...

**... the three preconditions that favor Flow  
and its results can apply to any work context.  
You just have to want it.**

**TheMeetingCircle facilitates these results starting  
from the old meeting and transforming it into a flow  
that satisfies the three Flow antecedents.**

In other words, TheMeetingCircle creates, in the heart of daily organizational life, a workplace that significantly supports improvement in individual and collective performance: the smart meeting.

And if you use it on a daily basis, the engagement logic and working methods used during the meetings change approaches even *outside of meetings!*

You are probably thinking... What if I arrive at a meeting feeling very stressed? Is it enough for me to enter a smart meeting to be able to concentrate?

So read on, because you will find small techniques that act directly on your Autonomic Nervous System and promote the Flow activation in the Meetings & Neuroscience chapter!

Sure, you have to *want* it.

Csikszentmihalyi writes: "The best moments usually occur when a person's body and mind are pushed to their limits in a *voluntary* effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (reference to Running Flow which you can find in the bibliography).

Ok, so you could say... but what if I want it and the others don't?

Well, someone has to start. Pioneers are indispensable to change. Do you think that everyone was happy when they saw fire for the first time? (This suggestion comes from Oscar Farinetti in his book Serendipity, details of which are in the bibliography). And then we give you a *kit* that helps you to prepare the meeting in this sense.

You could say, again... Yes, but what can I do? You should rather tell my bosses??...

True, they are the ones who should start first, who first of all and most of all should *create the conditions*. But you too can do a lot: propose it to your boss, experiment with TheMeetingCircle with your collaborators, suggest it to your colleagues!

You could say... (you don't give up, do you?)... yes, but what if they say no? Then you keep your meetings as you always have. With their consequences. Including the physical ones. Because meetings also affect health.

You don't believe it?

Come on, you know it's true!

## **In practice, then, what changes with this method?**

- **ENDLESS MEETINGS DISAPPEAR:** meaning those dragging on in time and postponing answers, while problems get bigger and opportunities are lost. Because TheMeetingCircle should be used in this way: operational meetings are held with a specific objective: *only when necessary to keep the business turning*. Even extremely short meetings, which only take a few minutes. And they can be done *at all organization levels and across the board*. Therefore TMC also involves people who aren't usually involved: for example, the front liners in constant contact with customers and, for this reason, have an incredible cognitive and experiential heritage. TMC can also be directly used by them: in shops, offices, branches, departments... (can you feel the power now?). It is also recommended to involve internal and external users: we talk about content that concerns them. You know? The recipients of a report, a software package, a solution. In a nutshell, those who are usually only involved at the end, when the bets are already made. In this way we stimulate an *agile* mental and relational approach, which leads to immediately facing [VF1] questions. And if necessary, the solution or decision is improved along the way. In short: time box, solving/deciding based on what you have, and ongoing improvement. Thus, most problems and decisions are prevented from becoming Big Problems and Decisions. Do you get the advantage now?

And, what if people can't solve the problem or make a decision because it's outside of their sphere of responsibility? Then *upward delegation* starts, which brings the problem/opportunity to the right place. In this way, the whole organization loses costly rigidity, and begins to dance. Instead of being harnessed by a top-down push logic (those on top always tells those below what to do), it also activates a down-top pull logic, where those below, acting as a lively and vigilant sensor, point out problems and opportunities encountered which are outside of their competencies to their superiors. Without this they might never reach the top...).

Thus, whoever stands at the top and has the autonomy to do it, intervenes and allows you to score a goal! In this way, *hierarchy also*

*works better and generates much more value: instead of acting as a bottleneck, it becomes a resource (as it should be).*

What a revolution!

• **ADVANCED INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS** grow, those that lead us to focus on the result, to think in an essential and conclusive way, to listen, to join efforts to find the best way. In short, those that make everyone feel good and favor Flow. In practice, when you establish advanced relationships, you get the best result in the shortest time. Undeveloped relationships, on the other hand, in addition to making us waste a lot of time, drain our energy and make us feel unwell. Examples? When it works like "*mors tua vita mea*" when someone gets offended if you speak up about a sensitive issue, or when you always have to agree with those who occupy the highest position (or when you always pretend to be right because you have the highest role...). In short, that way of relating to each other in organizations that we all know very well!

But what makes relationships "advanced" in an organization?

First of all, *the chain of meaning*. Is it too cryptic? It is the presence of a clear common goal, which makes sense for those involved because they identify with it, and perceive that they can achieve it together with others. Moreover – pay attention, this is the point that makes the difference – *it generates value for the wider community that includes current and potential customers/users*. This is the chain of meaning that allows organizational relationships to evolve. If the goal *makes sense* for you, it's easy to stay focused without strain. And if you can help achieve it and make decisions about it, you want to get involved and learn from others (that's how we did it from the stone age onwards). And if you have continuous feedback that allows you to understand if what you do, directly or indirectly, satisfies and attracts more customers, your desire to improve increases! Excuse me... but it doesn't have anything to do with the Flow, does it? Exactly. It has to do with challenges, well-being and the perception of generating value for the larger structure in which you work. Three elements that stimulate individual and group Flow and advanced relationships.

And what about us? Let's use this virtuous circle to transform meetings into smart meetings!

You will surely say... and what about people who cultivate conflict during meetings, continually devaluing others and always monopolizing them?

At last, with TMC, they discover a good opportunity to *stop it*: because such convoluted behaviors, in addition to stressing others, are especially bad for those who employ them!

• **THE MINDSET EVOLVES AND CHANGES CULTURE THEREBY TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP.** Nowadays, behaviors and methods of interaction between people are not yet based on the speed of response and value for the community. They are too influenced by the fragmentation of tasks, by cross-functional conflict, by the dynamics of roles (which sometimes count more than the actual knowledge of the problem). TMC helps everyone *to shift the focus from the activities to the final result, whilst bearing in mind the benefits to be generated.* Value, accountability. Meetings must achieve what they were called for in the given timeframe, because in this way benefits are created for the stakeholders. Benefits (what, for whom, why) must always be clear! If people clearly know the benefits, they are encouraged to use their skills and take responsibility. In addition to promoting well-being, as we have seen, this approach **develops the mindset and sets in motion a cultural change.**

There are still too few organizations that really work on their own culture. We mean, by instigating dedicated evolutionary projects. This is a pity, because organizational culture is a highly strategic lever: working on culture means working on organizational identity (one of the few things that others cannot copy) and on the ability to generate value over time. Of course, transforming culture is not easy. But it can absolutely be done! TheMeetingCircle represents a possible *gateway* to change the organizational culture.

For example, thanks to TMC **culture becomes less hierarchical**, without affecting the organizational chart nor abandoning the chain of command. Because this method helps to use the hierarchy as a resource to broaden and finalize people's autonomy, as well as creating the conditions for everyone to be able to use their own skills.

Are you the boss? Well, you don't always have to attend meetings... Are you the one closest to the problem? If not, send those who are closer than you. Even when decisions have to be made. When the hierarchy functions as the *single decision-making axis*, it immobilizes organizations by making them slow, rigid and unable to perceive and respond.

TheMeetingCircle, therefore, is also an excellent entry point also for **encouraging manager's leadership to evolve**: because their task is increasingly about creating the conditions that favor the assumption of widespread responsibility. The world is too complex. The managers' leadership alone is no longer sufficient. If you want to *spread* accountability and high standards, you need **widespread leadership**! Initiative, responsibility and the ability to better target everyone's work is needed. In addition, by involving people in meetings based on the required skills, cross-functional integration is promoted *at every level*. A critically important step towards *overcoming silos*. Do you think this is a small thing?

• **ENVIRONMENT AND PERFORMANCE SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE.** Referring to what has already been said, we need to add a very important element. The flow of the meeting, built with TMC, increases **psychological safety**. Organizations are still fearful places. It's the fear of taking *relational* risks which, as shown by the research conducted by Amy Edmondson ("Fearless organization", FrancoAngeli, 2020), creates a negative environment and lowers performance. What is it all about? It is the fear that, for example, "advises" us not to expose ourselves. Think about when you avoid asking questions because you are afraid of seeming incompetent, or you don't make a proposal because it's too innovative? Or when you don't raise issues that you feel are crucial, because no one talks about them? And when you don't say "I don't agree" even though it would be very useful? In short, whenever we privilege the certain advantage of silence over the possible risk of exposing ourselves. If you don't want people to use their intelligence, you have to feed the fear of proposing, of posing uncomfortable questions, of asking for help. For sure, virtually everyone will avoid looking for new ways and will not dare to experiment with anything different.



And what happens when people are wrong? Instead of learning from mistakes, they hide them under the carpet. If that's what you really want, TheMeetingCircle is not for you. You can stop reading right away. On the other hand, if you believe that this represents a huge damage to the business and people's health, then let's proceed, because TMC proposes a work process that constantly improves results by leveraging *psychological safety*. Starting with the meetings. The meeting flow, that we build using the *Kit*, encourages and legitimizes everyone to propose, ask, respond, express reactions, object and review their positions. All of this is necessary. And it leads to a decision. Thus the conditions are created for people to find the courage, pride and responsibility to speak up and to contribute. In this way, engagement and empowerment are stimulated, and Flow and advanced relationships are favored.

### **Where does this method come from?**

It comes from our studies, based on the most innovative international literature, from recent research and from our real experience in the field.

In particular, we are inspired by two frontiers:

1. **New organizational approaches** that make it possible to experiment, often with excellent results, very innovative ways of working.
2. **Neuroscience** studies, which show us that people's well-being and organizational performance are closely linked.

We have reported each used source in the bibliography.

### **1. Transforming meetings to evolve mindset, culture and, subsequently, organization (with the contribution of new organizational approaches)**

Regarding the new organizational approaches, important inspirations mainly came from (but not exclusively) Agile, Holacracy, Sociocracy and Teal organization (in the bibliography you will find several

texts, in particular see Carney B. and Getz I., Charest G., Laloux F., Minaar J. and De Moore P., Mundra S., Robertson B.). What do these new approaches have in common?

All of them...

- shorten the distance between problem-solution-decision and, in this way, favor accountability and widespread decision making;
- involve all the skills needed at all organizational levels as soon as possible, in every activity or project, including those concerning internal and external users;
- continuously stimulate perception and response instead of relying only on planning and control (Sense & Respond versus Planning & Control);
- go beyond the traditional approach linked to roles and hierarchy, putting the focus on problem solving and inviting everyone to collaborate in an authentic and transparent way.

Yes, in organizations that have adopted new logics, the assumption of responsibility by everyone is encouraged, making business cycles much faster. Infinitely faster. In fact, we challenge ourselves to better understand but we plan as little as possible *before* acting. We plan just enough to immediately try out a path and check – if a problem or opportunity has arisen – if it works or not, or if it needs to be partially modified, or alternatively if, by experimenting, something better has already been found.

The next step is established only according to this feedback. Because when you experiment, you better understand a lot of things. You learn. And you can find unexpected opportunities, even by pure chance, that make you change course or take you where you didn't think you were going, towards very important discoveries. In summary: seek, experiment, fail fast, discover, immediately learn... and *go ahead!* And if the solution is scalable, make it the subject of/put it on a larger project. You can apply this agile approach both in routine, when you are looking for small, effective and quick answers (for example when writing a report), and in the management of projects that affect the entire organization: a new software, a new product, organizational changes. The logic is the same.

Summing up, when faced with problems and opportunities:

- immediately involve the necessary interlocutors, in order to understand better and sooner. After that, quickly equip yourself to experiment with what you need: the report (draft it together with its recipient), even the new software. So you and your colleagues understand in an improved way which direction to take. Have you any idea how much time can be saved?
- collect feedback on the experiment through a two-way conversation, favoring dialogue with both internal and external users (“Is the report I sent you okay?”; “How do you find this interface?”);
- identify the next step, based on the results of the experiment (“Ok, then let’s keep this structure”; “This piece of the interface is not clear? Let’s change it together immediately”).

In this way you continuously limit risks, because you can move backwards or forwards in small *continuous* steps, without jeopardizing substantial investment. Myriads of small operational decisions are made exactly where necessary, immediately tested and improved or abandoned along the way. Furthermore, depending on the feedback collected and the discoveries made, you can modify, improve, abandon and discover. *Sense & Respond* (there is a book, with the same title, GueriniNext, 2018, that set out to re-establish managerial logic).

And if you want to build a culture based on agility, then the simplest and most powerful operational tool to start with is exactly smart meetings.

On the other hand, in traditional organizations, management spends a lot of energy and resources *before* taking action, and even *post-pones* action until feasibility studies, plans and complex programs are *completed*. Next, management claims to centrally control implementation, while using unidirectional communication: top/down (inside) and organization/users (outside). But by doing so, you understand less, processes become heavier, times are lengthened, and direct and indirect costs rise. And the risk greatly increases, because many small *missed* decisions become in the long run Big Decisions to make.

The result of *not carrying out* many small opportunities for continuous improvement is to gradually create an avalanche which usually requires activating Big Projects. The issue is that in a Big project or decision, everything is *over-dimensioned*. This is why the stakes rise from month to month, making countless things more and more difficult to do: closing the circle (for fear of making a mistake), going back (for fear of putting one's own signature on it), or executing it (due to complexity of delivery). Ultimately, *if and when* you get to the bottom of it, the costs have enormously risen and you risk doing something that is no longer needed or is already out of date. Why does management follow this logic which, if we stop to think about it, is actually quite absurd? It's because this was the way it was done in the industrial era, when the managerial role was born. Management was formed on this logic. We all originate from that point. In the industrial age it was possible to foresee, plan and control. To increase volumes and sell as many products as possible, thousands of people were needed to perform repetitive activities and therefore managers to organize and control them. For this reason, decision-making power was concentrated in the hands of few. Those at the top of the pyramid decided and then used management, that is, the hierarchy based on command and control, as a means of realizing these decisions taken elsewhere. In short, we can say that managers are used to operating in this way, and it reassures them. They perceive having more control over the situation. But in our current era, which thrives on volatility-uncertainty-complexity-ambiguity (VUCA), there is nothing more dangerous than the illusion of being able to plan and control everything. Even thinking that hierarchy is the only tool that can make things happen is very dangerous. If hierarchical leaders continue to think and act as if they were still in the industrial age, it can quickly turn into a constraint, a waste of energy and a source of costs and fear. By way of example, this happens when the HIPPO (Highest Paid Person's Opinion) logic prevails in meetings... do you know? Weren't we just talking about *psychological safety*? And who has the courage to intervene in this type of context? All this generates a deadly vicious circle that feeds immobility, demotivation and a lack of responsibility. Not only saying goodbye to Flow...but also putting the company's competitiveness itself at risk!

You could say... sorry, but more importantly than changing the method of meetings, shouldn't we revolutionize the underlying logic of the organization? In some ways yes, we believe so. But we also know that organizations, especially large and structured ones, are not yet ready, or at least they think so. Even if such organizations have huge potential, even if there is a great need, they still continue to believe they are not yet ready. In fact, when they intervene on the organizational aspects, what do they usually do? They cut, divide or re-aggregate entire departments, and change the organizational chart. However they fail to significantly redistribute autonomy and radically rethink the function of management (if you have and pay managerial staff, why aren't you demanding maximum value generation?). And finally they don't really address corporate culture.

Meetings, as they have always been done, are nothing more than the mirror of organizations.

In fact, also in meetings, a handful of people continue to decide (often after many comings and goings). The decision makers are typically those higher up, and are often the furthest away from the problems they decide upon as well as from customers and users. But it's not just this. In the current mindset of organizations there is the expectation that only one right decision has to be made: therefore, it is *postponed* to ensure it's *the correct one*. And to avoid making mistakes, the decision makers claim to need all the information, consent, foresight, planning and control. Is it true that, in traditional organizations, meetings contribute above all to lengthening the time dedicated to often unsuccessful analyses, to the construction of long-term plans that imprison research and discovery, and to the postponement of decisions and their implementation...?

So, isn't it surprising that companies (all of them!) declare themselves to be cost-conscious and then don't evaluate the costs and benefits of meetings with the same rigor?

So what should we do?

**If we are not ready to really change the organizational structures to accelerate transformation, we can nonetheless begin to evolve organizational culture and mindset:**

by doing the groundwork, the organizational evolution automatically follows. In the transformative projects that we carry out as a company, we actually see first-hand – irrespective of the group size – **that the organizational culture and people either evolve together or not.** Traditional organizational changes can leave both aspects unchanged (as we know very well); but, if culture and people begin to evolve, the modalities of relationships change and, **thanks to thousands of new interactions in everyday life and to different ways of doing things, unexpected qualities emerge that begin to characterize and qualify the whole. And if this whole is a social system, it can then be termed “culture”.** In the meantime, if what emerges generates value, it can be “formalized” by a step by step evolution of the organizational structure, which, in this case, accompanies and stimulates the cultural change already underway. Organizational evolution neither originates from theory nor from top down communication, instead it comes directly from the life energy which is already present in the new ways of working. Simply said, you have to start somewhere.

**Evolution does not only occur through catastrophes and disruptive changes, but also through small, tiny continuous steps. It is a powerful critical mass made up of millions of small gestures. It doesn't have the effect of “go slow” in the process.**

We start from the topic of meetings because they are the practice that best expresses an organizational culture and, at the same time, nourishes and reinforces it the most. Day by day. Allowing meetings to evolve, therefore, means acting on a strategic junction that lets you engage the leadership skills of every member of the organization, not just those of managers. It starts a transformation process concerning mentality, behavior and practices, that together develop business. In all the organizations in which we operate, we identify people, at all levels, who are ahead of their organizational structure and culture. The conditions must therefore be created to encourage their contribution, allow it to thrive and become a property of the whole (see De Toni A. and others). We previously talked about tons of potential. The “spaces” must be created to let it emerge.

New tools are needed to involve people and help them to decide. Collective intelligence is needed to find new paths and solutions. New approaches, adapted to new generations, are also required. It takes managerial intelligence to go beyond practices that demotivate people and limit business potential. To give breath to the heartbeat that keeps people and organizations healthy.

## **2. Help meetings evolve in order to invest in well-being, which in turn improves performance and the environment (with the contribution of Neuroscience)**

Does it seem impossible for an organization to evolve? If you view it as a *machine*, you are surely right. It is very difficult for a machine to evolve. But if you start to imagine organizations as *living organisms*, then everything changes.

Primarily, living organisms must first of all survive, and in order to survive, they must protect themselves whilst learning.

Fear, courage and pleasure pulsate in human organizations. When these qualities intertwine, we must find the spark that helps us protect ourselves, to learn and to evolve. Both people and organizations. When fear ignites courage, we face danger and, while looking for ways to overcome it, we learn. And the more we learn, the more we feel capable. This feeling reduces fear, feeds passion for challenge and brings forth the pleasure of testing ourselves. This is how we humans move away from fear and approach well-being. And it is how we evolve. Us and organizations together. If we want to favor organizational evolution, as a living organism we must therefore do everything possible to *continuously* stimulate and facilitate this transition.

And here comes the contribution of Neuroscience.

Neuroscience helps us understand how we work. And, starting from this point, it helps us to interpret many organizational phenomena, including that of meetings.

For example, we are told that we are born equipped with two systems, both fundamental for survival: the **Fear System** and the **Seeking System** (see Cable D. in the bibliography).

When we perceive danger that, rightly or wrongly, we do not feel equipped to face, a state of alert is activated within. The amygdala, the part of our brain that governs emotions and in particular fear, activates the Fear System. Thanks to the signals transmitted to the Autonomous Nervous System (ANS), we enter into a *state of stress*. A myriad of reactions are then immediately triggered in our body: more focused attention, increased heartbeat and raised blood pressure, shortened breath, higher blood supply to the muscles in the limbs, which predisposes them to action, adrenaline and cortisol (also called the stress hormone) production... In summary, all of these reactions prepare us to face danger.

Are we afraid when we are stressed? Yes, we are, even though the intensity varies according to the perceived distance between the entity of danger (damage that can result from it) and the perception of our ability to overcome it. If fear is accompanied by the feeling that we can beat it, then it is *good* stress because it allows us to activate the courage to act. Of course, we have to put in an extremely intense physical and mental effort. In short, it is clear that in those moments we are not in Flow; but this natural and taxing response is also positive, vital and coherent.

When, despite the fear, we manage to keep courage alive to look for a way out, we create the conditions necessary to access the Seeking System.

In addition to fear, nature has also endowed us with curiosity and the desire to explore, traits which are connected to the Seeking System. Once activated, it allows us to learn, to seize opportunities and to collaborate with others: all essential survival activities. The latter are so important that nature has correlated them to the production of dopamine, the hormone linked to the sphere of pleasure, reward and motivation. When dopamine is combined with a challenge, it generates an impulse to know more and learn. Furthermore, it allows us to find the right motivation to achieve the goals we set for ourselves, and to maintain high concentration and attention...

In summary, it's an indispensable hormone that guarantees our survival and development not through fear but through *pleasure*! Unlike the Fear System, the Seeking System is an "optimistic system" because it knows, from experience, that if it seeks it will find it.



And therefore, it nourishes our courage and audacity with positive emotions: those related to discovery, interest, enthusiasm, the desire to engage in rewarding activities in an authentic way (intrinsic motivation). They are all aspects through which we can express and develop our skills. We are not on this earth to stay in caves and hide. Even the expression and development of our talents are powerful activators of the Seeking System: we don't have to go through fear to access it. The Seeking System is also activated by the purpose, the aspiration to find *a broader meaning* in what we do, *to contribute to build something bigger*. This is why it nourishes trust and collaboration and raises our gaze, leading us to consider the benefits for the environment and the community as a whole. All of this makes us feel good and promotes Flow. Conclusion? Fear and Seeking Systems are both necessary and vital. And it is healthy and useful that the transition between the two remains fluid and consistent with the context in which it operates.

But what happens when we are *permanently* stressed?

Do we stay in this state because it makes us more efficient?

No, we don't.

Actually, we are able to distinguish **good stress (Eustress)** and **negative stress (Distress)**.

We have already talked about good stress: it is the body and mind's natural reaction to danger. This potentially detrimental state of alert is only good if it allows us to balance the consumption of physical and mental resources' by recovering energy and finding the best strategies to deal with danger. In summary: we are in a state of stress, during the day we have experiences from which we can learn, and in the evening we disconnect, we relax, we have fun and we sleep. And when everything goes well (for example after a public speech, when we close a project, etc.) we celebrate! *Stress however becomes negative* – and this is the point – *when the state of alert does not stop when the danger ceases; or, if the danger is prolonged, we remain on alert, without being able to recover the necessary energy to face it*. Being constantly on guard risks becoming the main ingredient of our professional lives.

And there is also the risk of very serious health consequences (in the bibliography you can find a good book on this, *The science of posi-*