

Just a Minute

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Roy Lilley's excellent "Don't let them go to waste" (14th September) highlighted the importance of making best use of meetings to drive matters forward, and listed how they can represent an expensive waste of time.

Given Roy's words limitation, he was unable to emphasise the (implicit) importance of ensuring meetings' minutes "glue" everything together and make things happen by holding people to account. Yes, writing minutes is probably the most boring part of management, but it is also arguably one of the most important!

There's a legend that at meetings of Lenin's Bolshevik government, Trotsky would eloquently and persuasively speak at length on many agenda items. But he considered the writing of minutes beneath him, and so this menial task was left to one of his comrades – Stalin.

When minutes eventually appeared there was little mention of Trotsky and much about the great things Stalin had achieved!

No doubt this is apocryphal, but it illustrates the power that can be invested in those responsible for the minutes.

Certainly, during my NHS and consultancy careers, I witnessed many senior managers who avoided this responsibility like the plague and considered it a clerical/ administrative task to be done by the minions; some professions guiltier than others!

Unfortunately, whilst a committee clerk (if one is used) might accurately record what has been said, (s)he will not necessarily have the experience and confidence to write minutes that engender positive action from those attending.

It is for the Chair or the manager with designated responsibility for the committee/ project team that must grasp this nettle. Therefore I set out below some of my best tips for getting minutes to maintain momentum.

Be prompt – look to write the minutes within 24 hours of the meeting, and certainly no more than 48 hours. The longer you leave it the more detail you will forget.

Ensure quality – write succinctly in plain English, be focused and avoid ambiguities.

Be clear on actions – the Chair should have spelled out any actions during the meeting, but even if (s)he didn't then the minutes should still be clear. They should answer the simple questions: **Who? What? Why? Where? How? and When?** (as appropriate). Preferably each action will be highlighted in bold text in the

appropriate place, e.g. **Action: [Such and such person(s)] will do [Action] by [Date]**. There may be more detail about “Why”, “Where” and “How”, but this is an absolute minimum. (Some people prefer a specific, comprehensive Action List at the end of the minutes).

Check the minutes – get the Chair to quickly look over the draft minutes to make sure they are accurate and complete. And if *you* are the Chair then get a friendly senior colleague who was present to do this.

Circulate them –as soon as they have been checked, while the meeting is still fresh in people’s minds. This also maximises the time for people to take actions assigned to them. They should **not** be left so late that they go out with the agenda for the next meeting!

Challenge them – if you were at the meeting and you do not feel that the minutes are accurate and complete, or if you think there are ambiguities, then challenge them! Preferably you

should do this by communicating with the Chair and/ or person responsible for the minutes as soon as possible, and in the nicest possible way. It is more likely there has been an inadvertent error or omission, rather than it being evidence of a Machiavellian plot. This then gives time for corrections to be circulated.

Hopefully, these tips will help make minutes be the pathway for action for those directly involved.

But minutes are also vital to ensure transparency, and should be available to relevant people (e.g. councillors, non-execs) so that they can hold people to account. All the more reason for the minutes to show that things are being done!

I learned my lessons about the importance of minutes in the cauldron that was Joint Care Planning in Liverpool in the 1980s when the *Militant* controlled the Council.

Such circumstances were the exception, but maybe check if the person taking the minutes at your next meeting is called Josef?