A PSYCHIATRIST LOOKS AT COMMITTEES

by

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INTRODUCTION

The mental health professional is often called upon to spend a large amount of his time at administrative meetings. Occasionally, he may forget his role as a participant and become an observer of what goes on around him (2). He will then notice some of the many different types of personalities at work during committee meetings.

THE ANTAGONIZER

The nitpicker and hairsplitter seems to be an emanation of most committees. He feels invested with the exclusive role of finding faults in his colleagues, though he never sees any in himself. He never acts as a constructive element in the committee's smooth functioning. He wastes other members' time by his continuous barrage of destructive criticism. His motto seems to be Mephisto's in Goethe's Faust, "I am the spirit who always says no." His unhappy victims resent him deeply for "poisoning" the atmosphere with his systematic obstructions.

Harry always shrugs off any solution offered by a committee member. Instead he requests that a subcommittee devise alternate plans. When this is done, and a new meeting has been called, he takes immense pleasure in thwarting every plan suggested. Unwittingly, he follows the aphorism coined by Clemenceau (the French physician who became Minister of War in World War I), "When I do not want to make an immediate decision I let a committee handle the problem."

The other committee members have learned, to their chagrin, that the length of a meeting doubles whenever Harry attends. Only once did he keep quiet during a meeting. Afterwards his pleasantly surprised colleagues surrounded him with congratulations. He then indicated to them that his dentist had just extracted a wisdom tooth. This had made talking next to impossible. In fact, he had tried in vain to have the meeting re-scheduled.

THE COMPULSIVE PERSON

The constancy of arrival and departure times by individuals at committee meetings is one of the many possible indicators of compulsivity. In this respect, different categories can easily be described: First in — Last out (FILO), First in — First out (FIFO), Last in — First out (LIFO), and Last in — Last out (LILO).

Frank always comes at the exact moment the meeting is scheduled to begin, and always sits in the same place. When somebody arrives after him, he glares ostensibly at his watch, then at the latecomer, to show his deep repprobation of this detestable behavior. This pattern occurs quite frequently as some individuals arrive systematically late. He also shows his compulsivity by methodically taking detailed notes, in spite of the fact that verbatim minutes are being taken.

Unable to bear the painful thought of ever missing a committee meeting he will come, rain or shine, in sickness or in health. In winter, afflicted with a virulent flu, he continues to attend virtually every meeting. He feels like an early Christian martyr as he coughs and sneezes, generously disseminating his germs onto unhappy or unsuspecting colleagues. On the other hand, opposite types of personalities utilize any minor headache, or a lone sneeze, to avoid attending meetings (or coming to work altogether).

John believes that thick reports are an accurate reflection of the seriousness of a meeting. He is not satisfied until he can mail, to as many people as possible, a document as voluminous as possible. To achieve this result, he adds to his already rambling and lengthy minutes all kinds of corroborations, as well as copies of some of his past and recent memoranda. It seems that only people as obsessive as the sender can read such a report in its entirety. The average committee member, after having tried once to go through John's minutes, will henceforth avoid reading any of his "respectfully submitted" productions.

THE SEARCHER FOR SAMENESS

The seats in a conference room may vary considerably. A few are comfortable, plush armchairs. Others are regular, "no-frills" chairs. Finally, there are the humble, but necessary, folding chairs.

Alfred is so fond of "his" armchair that he arrives early to make sure that nobody else can take it. A phone call, or more prosaically the call of nature, may oblige him to leave his hard-earned seat. In such a predicament he will mark his "territory", by leaving sheets of paper or his coat on the coveted armchair. His day will be ruined should a latecomer inadvertently remove the sheets, place the coat on a hanger and sit in the treasured armchair.

A "constancy maniac" feels he should always be seated at the same place, as in elementary school. His place is his forever. It is his exclusive possession. Others, on the contrary, enjoy moving back and forth
according to their mood. A conflict may then develop when the wandering member happens to sit on another member’s “permanent seat”.

Some individuals like to sit next to the chairman hoping that some of his majesty may fall on their shoulders. They foresee that when the day comes for a promotion, or evaluation, the chairman will remember them more fondly than those seated further away. Others prefer to be far away from the chairman. This allows them to daydream, or to discreetly — or not so discreetly — talk to one another during the meeting.

In some instances, a court-like setting is being created: next to the chairman sits the inner council, while the rest of the entourage stays at a distance. In one setting, the number of seats around the table was insufficient and chairs had to be regularly brought into the room. Eventually, two concentric circles were formed; the inner reserved for the old-timers and the outer left to the newcomers.

THE NARCISSISTIC PERSON

He often happens to be the chairman of a committee, or at least behaves as if he were. Imbued with his own importance he requests verbatim minutes. Now a secretary must waste time taking down all of his verbal productions, and to a lesser extent those of the other committee members. This recording prevents some individuals from speaking freely, because they don’t want to be quoted. On the other hand, it encourages others to go on talking endlessly. They are narcissistically titillated by the knowledge that what they utter is being recorded. They believe, even more than usual, that what they say must be of major importance, otherwise why would it be so carefully recorded?

Julius, a chairman with a particularly inflated ego, refers to his trifling subcommittee as his “cabinet”. He proudly announces he is going to be with his cabinet, unaware that term is frequently used in French to mean toilet. He rather presumptuously calls the minutes of his meetings “press releases”, and sends them to all the local newspapers. For the next few days he carefully scrutinizes the newspapers. Invariably, and much to his disappointment, he does not see in print the flamboyant report he expected. For his birthday the “cabinet” members offered him his picture as the “Time Magazine Man of the Year”. It is rumored that he really believes what toastmasters say of him at office parties.

Ronald prides himself on his military background. He arrives at his committee meeting carrying flip charts, maps, and slides of the facility and surrounding area. He uses a pointer to make his speech more explicit. He behaves as if he were still surrounded by a group of highranking officers being briefed. With ample, authoritarian, and martial gestures, he indicates on the map the building where a burnt-out light bulb needs replacement, or where a window has been broken.

At some committee meetings those present are required to sign an attendance sheet, or diverse forms such as evaluations. Some individuals, out of fear of having to write their names a few times, have requested that rubber stamps be provided with their signature. They may give as a model a fancy, ornate, elaborate, or enlarged signature, which reflects their inflated self-esteem. They carry with them their extra-large sized rubber stamp, and proudly take it out of their bulging pocket whenever their signature is required.

THE SUSPICIOUS INDIVIDUAL

He does not wish to own a rubber stamp, fearing that somebody else may use it without his knowledge.

To prevent his seat neighbor from reading over his shoulder he makes his handwriting illegible — if it is not already — by writing in smaller characters than usual. An intrigued neighbor may breathe over the writer’s shoulder, trying in vain to decipher the indecipherable, rather than being involved with the meeting.

A committee member may feel safer writing his notes in a different language. The author has witnessed, in the United States, notes taken in the Arabic, Armenian, and Gothic alphabets, not to mention even more esoteric ones. Every committee member knew when notes were taken in Arabic because the writer was the only one around the table to write from right to left.

THE FORMER HYPERACTIVE CHILD

The adult who was a hyperactive child often experiences some discomfort remaining still during a prolonged meeting (1). After a while he tries to get rid of some of his energy. He starts tapping and swinging his feet. He breathes deeply in and out or contracts his abdominal muscles. He slowly flexes his arms, makes a fist or rocks as discreetly as possible in his chair. These “invisible exercises” allow him to survive the meeting. In some instances he vigorously chews gum. When the meeting is over he is the first to get on his feet, glad finally to be able to move freely again.

Other non-specific signs such as explosiveness, irritability, and distractibility can also be noticed during a committee meeting in former hyperactive children.

THE DOODLER

During a boring and time-consuming meeting the efficient person eventually tries not to waste his time any further. He stops taking notes and starts catching up with his “real” work. For instance, he may prepare a list of what he still has to accomplish after the