

Brief

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We must stop meeting like this: A manifesto for better meetings

There is more than enough data on this: meetings are dreadful. They last too long. There is a lot of talking - often dominated by unhelpful people. We spend at least 40% of our time in meetings (this has tripled in 40 years) - and yet we rate over half as ineffective. One study of 20 organisations found that dysfunctional meetings correlate with lower levels of market share, innovation, and employment stability.

Organisations have powerful processes to manage money, yet do remarkably little to manage their most precious resource – people’s time. Boeing now uses technology to challenge senior managers responsible for having meetings whose number and length go above a ‘budgeted’ ceiling. Andy Grove, the former CEO of Intel, once wrote, “Just as you would not permit a fellow employee to steal a piece of office equipment, you shouldn’t let anyone walk away with the time of his fellow managers.”

Ripple effect

Bain & Co studied the Outlook calendars of a major corporation, looking in particular at how many meetings across the business were connected to the weekly executive committee status meeting. This is what they found about how many person-hours were used up – overall, across the business, 300,000 hours a year were spent on the Executive meeting:

Ripple effect of a weekly ExCom status meeting every week	Hours a year
1 x ExCom meeting a week	7,000
11 x ExCom members each had prep meetings with their leadership teams	20,000
21 x further meetings a week by members of those leadership groups to prep for these meetings	63,000
120 x meetings a week further into the organisation to support these meetings and provide information	210,000
Total person-hour cost of a weekly ExCom status meeting (and that is just meetings, not including prep time outside of meetings)	300,000

The simple conclusion would be to abolish meetings. But of course not. We are by DNA and evolution a social species. We meet informally all the time to agree things over a beer, or around the kitchen table. A meeting defines any group – formal or informal. It creates the possibility of ‘the social mind’, the wisdom of a (small) crowd, or the bonding of a team with big challenges to meet.

Meetings are more important than ever

Increased collaboration is essential for the future success of us all. So, imagine: a world where people knew that an invite was only ever for a meeting that was necessary? That the agenda would only include something that deserves the group’s attention? That you could decline if your attendance was not essential? That if not invited you could still provide input? That the meeting would be managed to show deep respect for your time? Above all, imagine if every meeting strengthened the common purpose of the group involved.

We looked at the very wide range of evidence and advice from the ageless and peerless Anthony Jay article from 1976, to the technology-based studies by Bain – and here are 15 all-round tips for better meetings.

A MANIFESTO FOR BETTER MEETINGS

1. *Abolish most ‘meeting rooms’*

In offices and hotels, airless, windowless, energy-sucking, depressing rooms are the worst start to a meeting. The heart sinks. When you get a meeting in a room with windows, daylight – there is instantly more energy, the mood lifts. The value we place in collaboration is shown by our office design – where too often the best spaces are given to senior people who are never in their great rooms because they are always in meetings!

2. *Spend twice as much time on the agenda and preparation as normal*

If you haven’t prepared for a meeting, cancel it. The hour you spend is to make 10 people’s time more valuable. The hour you don’t wastes 10 people’s time. Get the agenda right, make sure appropriate material is sent in advance, work out how to approach any thorny issues. If there is an item that needs fresh thinking, look out some provocative material. Check whether key people are actually coming. If you are going to chair effectively, you must be prepared.

- 3. *Make the meeting half the length it normally is*** (except when you should double its length because there is a really big hairy issue that you should spend hours on).

How many times do you hear anyone complain a meeting is too short?

Why are so many meetings 60 minutes – regardless. Can it be 30? Or 45? Or 15? If you are group or team that meets regularly, it is often better to make most meetings short and then have the occasional much longer one to allow brainstorming, long-term thinking or going through complex detail.

- 4. *Try standing up, drinking or stopping***

Research suggests meetings where everyone stands are more productive and finish sooner. People are more alert and keen to finish sooner. One study suggested the same quality of meeting and outcomes takes a third less time than a seated meeting.

Or else, the CEO of Flickr starts meetings with everyone drinking a pint of water. The meeting finishes when the first person must go to the bathroom.

Lenovo lets any employee halt meetings that go off-track, in the same way as Toyota gives production workers the power to stop assembly lines when they spot problems.

- 5. *Never have a meeting without a clock in the room***

Decades ago, all 'meeting rooms' had clocks. These days, few seem to. Obviously, we all have a watch, or can look at the phone – but a good meeting is one where everyone is keeping a quiet eye on the clock.

Or even (as Google does to add a little pressure and focus), have a giant timer on the wall, counting down the minutes left.

- 6. *Don't start a second late***

There is only one way to start a meeting on time, and that is to start it on time. Some will remind us this is of course partly a national culture issue. In a networked world with diverse people, it is certainly a corporate culture issue where the approach to meetings should be deliberately chosen by the organisation.

So, start on time. Don't recap for latecomers – they need to incentive to turn up promptly. But do welcome them warmly – all good meetings should be a positive experience.

7. *Start executive meetings with 10 minutes of silence*

Amazon's Jeff Bezos is one of several CEOs who have found it saves time and improves the quality of the regular executive meeting, as people paused and collected their thoughts. The busier and more senior the people, the less time they will have to readjust their focus between meetings. The result is better quality discussion.

Meetings should be about the nature of the experience, not just the process.

8. *Ban technology*

One big survey suggested that in 22% of meetings, everyone present sends three emails for every half hour. Apart from ensuring lack of focus (and probably ensuring the meeting lasts longer than necessary), such multi-tasking is shown to be a contributor to stress, over time.

Do the deal, every time: everyone puts their pads and phones away, you finish early. And ask at the start if anyone is expecting an urgent and unavoidable call. Give them permission to leave the meeting when it arrives.

Some groups will benefit from a wider range of ground rules, discussed and agreed by all.

9. *Be the servant not the master*

If you are running the meeting, be a great host - arrive early, stay late, and make people welcome. As the chair, any self-indulgence or laziness will be the biggest barrier to a successful meeting. Try and say little, and when you do, keep it short. This will not prevent you expressing your view – and as chair, if the meeting veers off in an unproductive direction you can simply manage it back. (This is not the same as closing down a discussion too soon – which will only cause people to raise the issue again later.)

10. *Manage the conversation*

Set up each discussion so everyone knows the point of that particular agenda item. Is it simply an important sharing of information? Do you want to reach a decision in the room? Is the purpose to gain views so that a decision can be made later? Manage the conversation appropriately for each item and its purpose.

And: spend the most time on the important things. One leadership team started discussing the risk of missing business plan by £200m and then spent hours debating a tougher travel policy that might (at best), save a few million.

11. 70% of the value of meetings is on how you close and how you follow-up

A great meeting (or workshop, or offsite) is soon gone and forgotten – with little value – without everyone clear about what happens next and above all the actions they are all responsible for.

A good summary of what has been agreed (who does what and by when) – and what is going to be shared with others – is the best end to a meeting. Check for alignment. If there is someone who is not on board, make a note to talk to them afterwards.

A short, clear and precise action note as soon as possible afterwards not only prompts quick progress, but helps everyone keep track of delivery. One estimate is that two thirds of meetings have no *effective* follow-through or note.

All of which will significantly reduce the extent you seem to find yourselves have discussions about the same issue over and over again.

12. If you add a meeting, take one away

This is not always possible but a great rule of thumb. Certainly, if it is going to be a regular meeting, try and take a regular one out that involves the same people. And if the new meeting you are planning is not focused on priorities as high as the existing meetings – then maybe there are better ways to address the issues, or else may just make it an agenda item on another meeting.

13. It's not a spectator sport

You don't need to invite everyone (Jeff Bezos has a 'two pizza rule' – never have more people in a meeting than you can feed with two pizzas – although remember this is American-size pizzas!). And if you are not going to volunteer to do something for the group, don't go to the meeting.

Whether an executive decision-making meeting with 10 people, a brainstorming meeting with 30 or an all-staff meeting with 1000, everyone should be there to do something in the meeting and afterwards.

The best meeting cultures are about them being active experiences, not passive ones. This includes being on the lookout for 'Social Loafers' (those who go to meetings to fill up their time and look busy but avoid volunteering for actions) and 'Free Riders' (those who go to meetings to steal ideas and gain political insight and benefit, but do not contribute and share in return).

14. A good meeting is like an Italian family dinner

This was one description by a Reckitt Benkiser CEO of his executive meeting. Challenge is good: lots of strong constructive argument but everyone remains totally loyal to the group – especially afterwards.

15. Have more meetings with people you don't normally have meetings with

One risk of regular meetings, with the same people, is creating a safe bubble with a common mindset. Sometimes we need to meet with other. Not just anyone – obviously, but to talk about what matters with the people with whom you have shared interests, but who might have different perspectives and experiences to you.

Sources

There are a million blogs, articles and books about meetings. Most cover the same common-sense ground. Sources used for this article include: Axelrod, Axelrod: *Let's stop meeting like this*; Axtell: *Meetings matter*, Axtell: *The right way to end a meeting* (Harvard Business Review); Barakat: *11 ways to cure bad meetings – and be more creative and productive* (Stanford); Hartman: *Seven steps to running the most effective meeting possible* (Forbes); Jay: *How to run a meeting* (Harvard Business Review); Katzenbach, Smith: *The wisdom of teams*; Lipman: *5 simple steps to more efficient, effective meetings* (Forbes); Mankins, Brahm, Caimi: *Your scarcest resource* (Harvard Business Review) article & slides; May: *The secret of better meetings Fun* (Scientific American); Perlow, Noonan, Eun: *Stop the meeting madness* (Harvard Business Review); Pigeon: *Leadership Lessons: tools or effective team meetings – how I learnt to stop worrying and love my team* (Association of American medical Colleges); Spiro: *How to run an effective meeting* (Inc); *How to know if there are too many people in your meeting* (Harvard Business Review); *HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter* (Harvard).