

Death By Meeting

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THE PARADOX OF MEETINGS

Meetings are a puzzling paradox. They are critical to have, and are at the center of every organization, yet they are often painful, long, and sometimes pointless. The good news is that there is nothing inherently bad about them. It's possible to transform them into compelling, productive, fun activities. But, to do this we have to rethink much of the way we perceive and manage meetings. That means we cannot keep on hating them, and we must abandon our search for technological solutions that promise to free us from having to sit down face to face. Much is lost in the "modern tech meeting", while they do serve a purpose. And, we have to stop focusing on agendas, minutes, and rules. We have to accept that meetings start with the attitudes and approaches of the people who lead them, and those who take part in them. The rewards of rethinking our meetings: higher morale, faster and better decisions, and inevitably, greater results.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (actually part of the end of the book)

What is the real problem? There are TWO.

- 1) meetings are boring, tedious, un-engaging, and dry.
- 2) meetings are ineffective – often taking energy and time with little to no return.

WHY?

Meetings are boring because they lack drama. Most have plenty of potential for drama, but rather than looking for it and mining for it, most leaders seem to be focused on avoiding tension and ending the meetings on time. Instead leaders must look for legitimate reasons to provoke and uncover relevant, constructive, ideological conflict. This will keep people engaged, and will lead to more passionate discussions and better decisions.

Meetings are ineffective because they lack contextual structure. Most organizations have only one kind of meeting, often a staff meeting, to discuss everything. People get together, once a week, or once a month for 2-4 hours and discuss every sort of topic under the sun...important topics, mind you. But to make our meetings more effective, we need to have multiple types of meetings, designed for various topics, and that distinguish between various purposes, formats and timings.

Let's look at more detail...

PROBLEM #1 – LACK OF DRAMA

So, why are our meetings so dull? Because we eliminate the one element required to make most human activity interesting: conflict. You see, conflict is at the center of every great movie...without it, we lose interest. And yet, meetings should be more interesting than movies because they have more inherent potential for passion and engagement than movies do.

Meetings Vs. Movies

First, meetings are interactive, movies are not. When you go to a movie, you are a passive observer, not a participant.

Second, meetings are directly relevant to our lives, movies are not. We are not required to alter the course of our actions in any way as a result of how the story in the movie was resolved.

And so, how is it that we can enjoy one activity that is inherently passive and irrelevant, and loathe another that is interacting and relevant? Because screenwriters and directors figured out long ago that if you avoid nurturing conflict in your story, no one will watch your movie.

The Hook

The key to injecting drama into a meeting lies in setting up the plot from the outset. Participants need to be jolted a little during the first 10 minutes of a meeting, so that they understand and appreciate what is at stake. Employees are not expecting Hamlet, but they're certainly looking for a reason to care. And that's what the leader of a meeting should be giving them.

Ironically, most leaders of meetings go out of their way to eliminate or minimize drama and avoid the healthy conflict that results from it. This only drains the interest of those in the meeting.

So, I am advocating the provocation of drama and confrontation among team members to create interest during meetings. I am encouraging those who lead meetings, and participants to be miners of conflict.

Mining for Conflict

It is both natural and productive for disagreement to occur. Resolving those issues is what makes a meeting productive, engaging, even fun. Avoiding issues that merit debate and disagreement not only makes the meeting boring, but it ensures that the issues won't be resolved. And this is a recipe for frustration. Ironically, that frustration often manifests itself later in the form of unproductive personal conflict, or worse, politics.

And so a leader must make it a priority to seek out and uncover any important issues about which team members do not agree. And when team members do not want to engage in those discussions, the leader must force them to do so...even when it makes him/her unpopular.

Of course, getting people to engage in conflict when they are not used to it, is a challenge. I have found one method to be particularly helpful in making it easier, real-time permission

Real-Time Permission

After a leader announces to a team that more conflict is expected from them – and it is important to make this clear – there will be a moment when the risk of engagement begins. This will always be uncomfortable at first, even if we are prepared for it. But a leader can minimize this discomfort and maximize the likelihood that conflict will continue by interrupting participants and reminding them that what they are doing is good. Ex. *“Before you continue, and I definitely want you to continue, I just want to say that this is **exactly** what I was talking about when I said we need to start engaging in more passionate dialogue and conflict. It is all of our jobs to question each other if we think it will make the final outcome better. That’s what we all want, right? Ok then...continue please”*

This allows people to retain their ideological passion around the issue, and continue to advocate their positions without being distracted or discouraged by their fears or personal rejection.

Unfortunately, even if leaders of meetings learned to master the art of producing dramatic meetings full of conflict, they will still fail if that’s all they do. That’s because there is another big problem with our meetings as usual.

PROBLEM #2 – LACK OF CONTEXTUAL STRUCTURE

The single biggest structural problem facing leaders of meetings is the tendency to throw every issue in the same meeting, like a bad soup with too many random ingredients. Desperate to minimize wasted time, leaders decide that they will have on big staff meeting, either once a week or every other week. But, this only ensures that the meeting will be ineffective and unsatisfying for everyone. Some want information, data and tactical info. Others want strategy analysis and critical decisions. Others want to step back and talk about culture and people. Others want clear decisions and to move on. Who’s right? All of them. That’s the point.

The 4 Meetings

There should be different meetings for different purposes and each of them serves a valid and important function.

Meeting #1 – The Daily Check-in

This is not necessarily practical for EVERY organization. But for those that can make it work, it is powerful. Even for those that cannot, the rationale can be helpful. The Daily check in requires:

- Members get together face to face
- Standing only; no sitting
- 5 minutes
- Report on daily activities

The purpose is to:

- Avoid confusion about how priorities are translated into action on a regular basis.
- Provide a quick forum for making sure nothing falls through the cracks.
- No one steps on anyone else’s toes in daily work.
- Help eliminate the need for unnecessary and time consuming emails about schedules.

Inevitable Challenges to the Daily Check-in

Challenge 1 – getting team members to stick with it initially long enough to make it a routine.

Over come this challenge by:

- Keeping the meetings consistent in terms of where and when they occur.
- Do not cancel any, even if only 2 members are in the office on a given day.

Challenge 2 – keeping it to 5 minutes

If meetings exceed the time limit a little, it's OK, but not if they are going long because people are trying to address issues that are for Weekly Tactical meetings. People will get tired of having these “daily staff meetings” because that is what they will become.

Overcome this challenge by:

- Prohibiting people from sitting down during the Daily Check-in.
- End the sessions after no more than 10 minutes.

Finally, to avoid both of these challenges, teams should commit to doing Daily Check-in's for a set period of time – say 2 months – before they evaluate whether they work or not for them.

Meeting #2 – The Weekly Tactical

These are regular meetings focused exclusively on tactical issues of immediate concern. They can be weekly or every other week, but it is important that EVERYONE attends, and that the meeting has a sense of discipline and structural consistency. It should last between 45-90 minutes and involve the following critical elements:

The Lightning Round – a quick around the table reporting session where everyone indicates their top 2-3 priorities for the week. This should take each person no more than 1 minute to describe what is on their respective plates.

Progress Review – next is the routine reporting of critical information or metrics: revenue, customer satisfaction, inventory, etc. Whatever your key metrics are...review them quickly. The key here is to get in the habit of reviewing progress on KEY metrics...you can do all of them, but choose 4-6 and don't let this part take more than 5 minutes. Hit them all quickly...the numbers should be ready and at hand. Lengthy discussion of the underlying issues should be avoided here.

Real-Time Agenda – now it's time to talk about the agenda...yes 10-15 minutes into the meeting. The agenda should NOT be set before the meeting, but only after the lightning round and reporting. This is because the agenda must be based on what everyone is actually working on and how the company is doing compared to its goals, not based on the leaders best guesses before the meeting. While this is sacrificing some control, it ensures that the meeting will be relevant and effective.

During the Weekly Tactical there are 2 overriding goals:

- Resolution of issues, and

Reinforcement of clarity.

Obstacles need to be identified and removed, and everyone needs to be on the same page.

Inevitable Challenges to the Weekly Tactical

Challenge 1 – the temptation to set an agenda ahead of time, either formally or informally. Team members must come with an open mind, and let the real activities and progress against objectives determine what needs to be discussed.

Challenge 2 – going into too much detail during the lightning round, causing others to lose interest and cloud the ability of the team to identify the right issues for discussion and resolution. The key to avoiding this is holding members to the 1 minute rule. Just bullets here.

Challenge 3 – the temptation to get into discussions about long-term strategic issues. Why is this such an important problem to avoid?

1) – there is not enough time to properly discuss major issues. Important complex topics deserve enough time for brainstorming, analysis, and preparation. It's like a husband and wife trying to discuss what's for dinner while at the same time analyzing their children's behavior problems and discipline needs. One is tactical, one is strategic.

2) – leaders will tend to reconsider strategic decisions when faced with tactical obstacles. Limiting Weekly Tactical meetings to specific short-term topics requires people to focus on solving problems, rather than re-evaluating long-term strategies.

The key to overcoming these challenges is discipline. When strategic issues are raised – and they will be – it is critical for a leader to take them off the table for discussion and put them on the list of topics to be discussed during a different meeting: The Monthly Strategic.

Meeting #3 – The Monthly Strategic

This is where leaders wrestle with, analyze, debate, and decide upon critical issues (but only a few) that will affect their work in fundamental ways. They can dive into a topic or two without the distractions of deadlines or tactical concerns. The length will depend on the number of topics. But, it is advised to schedule 2 hours per topic to allow for comfortable engaging in open ended conversation and debate. Once a month should be sufficient for these meetings, especially if you are holding the previous 2 types. But they must be regular so that important issues can be “parked” for these meetings and not set aside forever. This gives leaders the confidence to table them, knowing that they will be eventually addressed.

Ad-Hoc Strategic Meetings

In some cases a strategic or critical issue that gets raised in a Weekly Tactical meeting cannot wait for next month's Strategic meeting. That does not mean it should be taken up during that Weekly Tactical meeting. Rather it should be addressed in an AD-HOC meeting specially scheduled for that topic. It can be that afternoon, later in the week, or whenever, before the next Monthly Strategic.

Great organizations rally around these kind of issues with the sort of focus and urgency that allow them to outmaneuver competitors who are too mired in the monotony of their meetings, or who wait for full-blown crisis before addressing these important issues.

Inevitable Challenges to the Monthly Strategic Meeting

Challenge 1 – Failure to schedule enough time for these meetings.

Challenge 2 – Putting too many items on the agenda – diluting the quality of debate around the most critical ones.

Challenge 3 – Failure to do research and preparation ahead of time. The quality of a strategic discussion, and the decision that results from it, are greatly improved by a little preliminary work. The key to ensuring that preparation occurs is to let team members know as far in advance as possible what issues will be discussed during the meeting.

Challenge 4 – Fear of Conflict. – already discussed.

Meeting #4 – The Quarterly Off-Site Review

Topics to Cover

Comprehensive Strategy Review – leaders should re-assess their strategic direction, not every day as many try to do, but 3-4 times per year. On the other hand, reviewing strategies annually or semiannually is usually not enough to stay current.

Team Review – leaders should assess themselves and their behaviours as a team, identifying trends and tendencies that may not be serving the organization. This often requires a change of scenery so that team members can interact with each other on a more personal level.

Personnel Review – Talk about key employees in the organization. It allows you to jointly manage and retain top performers, and work with poor performers similarly.

Competitive and Industry Review – Step back and look at what is happening around you in a more comprehensive way so that you can spot trends.

Inevitable Challenges to the Quarterly Off Site Review

Challenge 1 – The tendency to overburden and over structure the meetings, which usually takes the form of tightly scheduled slide presentations and lengthy informational sermons. The purpose is to reflect on and discuss the state of the organization, to provide presentations.

Challenge 2 – The temptation to make it a boondoggle at an exotic location with too much travel and too many planned social activities. The purpose is to get out of the office to step back from daily distractions and interruptions. Driving an hour or so to a hotel or conference center is usually enough to do the trick.

Challenge 3 – Inviting outsiders is a bad idea because it can change the team dynamic. The only exception might be for an outside consultant or facilitator who is trusted by the team, and is driven to help the team achieve their goals, not their own. One benefit of a facilitator is that it can allow the leader of the team to participate fully in the discussions without having to moderate them.

The Four Meetings at a Glance

Meeting Type	Time Required	Purpose and Format	Keys to Success
Daily Check in	5 minutes	Share daily activities and schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Don't sit down. * Keep it administrative. * Don't cancel it, even when some people can't be there
Weekly Tactical	45-90 minutes	Review weekly activities and metrics, and resolve tactical obstacles and issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Don't set an agenda until after the initial reporting. * Postpone strategic discussions.
Monthly Strategic (or Ad Hoc)	2-4 hours	Discuss, analyze, brainstorm, and decide upon critical issues affecting long-term success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Limit to one or two topics. * Prepare and do research. * Engage in conflict.
Quarterly Off-Site Review	1-2 days	Review strategy, industry trends, competition, key personnel, team development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Get out of the office. * Focus on work, limit social activities. * Don't overstructure or over burden the schedule.

A Time Requirement Comparison

Total Yearly Meeting Time Proposed by Patrick Lencioni's plan.

Daily Check in - 5 minutes/day = 260 days or 1300 minutes or 22 hours total.

Weekly Tactical - 1 hr average/week * 52 weeks = 52 hours total.

Monthly Strategic - 3 hr average/month * 12 months = 36 hours total.

Quarterly Off-Site - 6 days average per year * 6 hours/day = 36 hours total.

TOTAL Proposed by this book in a year = 146 meeting hours.

Compare that to a 2 hour staff meeting every week = 104 hours.

Really the only difference, or addition in time, is the Off Site Quarterly Meetings.