

Avoid Death by Meeting

By Patrick Lencioni

The greatest myth that exists about meetings is that they are inherently bad.

As a business society, we've come to accept that meetings are unavoidably painful and unproductive—one of the necessary evils of organizational life. But the fact is, bad meetings are a reflection of bad leaders. Worse yet, they take a more devastating toll on a company's success than we realize.

Fortunately, for those organizations that are willing to challenge the notion that meetings are unfixable, it is possible to transform what is now tedious and debilitating into something productive, focused, even energizing. The key to improving meetings, however, has nothing to do with better preparation, agendas or minutes. To address the problem, leaders will need to take a contrarian view of meetings and apply a few basic guidelines.

The first step in transforming meetings is to understand why they are so bad. There are two basic problems. First, meetings lack drama. Which means they are boring. Second, most meetings lack context and purpose. They are a confusing mix of administrivia, tactics, strategy and review, all of which creates unfocused, meandering and seemingly endless conferences, with little resolution or clarity.

Drama

The key to making meetings more engaging - and less boring - lies in identifying and nurturing the natural level of conflict that should exist. One of the best places to learn how to do this is Hollywood.

Directors and screenwriters learned long ago that movies need conflict to hold the interests of their audiences. Viewers need to believe that there are high stakes on the line, and they need to feel the tension that the characters feel. What is more, they realized if they didn't nurture that conflict - or drama - in the first 10 minutes of a movie, audiences would lose interest and disengage.

Leaders of meetings need to do the same by putting the right issues - often the most controversial ones - on the table at the beginning of their meetings. By demanding that their people wrestle with those issues until resolution has been achieved, they can create genuine, compelling drama, and prevent their audiences from checking out.

Context and Purpose

Unfortunately, no amount of drama will matter if leaders don't create the right context for their meetings and make it clear to team members why the meeting is taking place, and what is expected of them. To create context, leaders must differentiate between different types of meetings. Too often, however, they throw every possible conversation into one long staff meeting. This creates confusion and frustration among team members who struggle to shift back and forth between tactical and strategic conversations, with little or no resolution of issues.

But be warned, by creating context, leaders might just have to have more meetings. That's right. More meetings. Not necessarily more time in meetings; but more different types of meetings for sure.

In fact, teams should ideally be having four distinct meetings on a regular basis. These include the Daily Check-in, the Weekly Tactical, the Monthly Strategic and the Quarterly Off-site Review. The Daily Check-in is a schedule-oriented, administrative meeting that should last no more than five or

10 minutes. The purpose is simply to keep team members aligned and to provide a daily forum for activity updates and scheduling.

The Weekly Tactical is what most people have come to know as staff meetings. These should be approximately an hour in length, give or take 20 minutes, and should focus on the discussion and resolution of issues which effect near term objectives. Ironically, these work best if there is no pre-set agenda. Instead, the team should quickly review one another's priorities and the team's overall scorecard, and then decide on what to discuss during the remainder of the meeting. This will help them avoid wasting time on trivial issues and focus only on those issues that are truly relevant and critical. The key to making these tactical meetings work is having the discipline to identify and postpone the discussion of more strategic topics, which brings us to the third kind of meeting.

The Monthly Strategic is the most interesting kind of meeting for leaders, and the most important indicator of a company's strategic aptitude. It is the appropriate place for big topics, those that will have a long-term impact on the business. These issues require more time and a different setting, one in which participants can brainstorm, debate, present ideas and wrestle with one another in pursuit of the optimal long-term solution. Each strategic meeting should include no more than one or two topics, and should allow roughly two hours for each topic.

The Quarterly Off-Site Review is an opportunity for team members to step away from the business, literally and figuratively, to reassess a variety of issues: the interpersonal performance of the team, the company's strategy, the performance of top-tier and bottom-tier employees, morale, competitive threats and industry trends. These can last anywhere from the better part of a day to two full days each quarter.

The Commitment

One of the keys to making this four-pronged meeting structure work is to overcome the most common objection of corporate leaders, "How am I going to get my work done if I'm spending all of my time in meetings?" There are two ways to answer this.

First, adding up all of the time that these meetings require amounts to approximately twenty percent of a leader's time. Ironically, most leaders spend even more time on meetings anyway, particularly if they factor-in "sneaker time" which accounts for the hours of sending e-mail, leaving voicemail and roaming the halls to clarify issues that should have been made clear during a meeting in the first place.

Second, leaders need to ask themselves a basic question. "What is more important than meetings?" If they say "sales" or "e-mail" or "product design," then maybe they should reconsider their roles as leaders and go back to an individual contributor position. If you think about it, a leader who hates meetings is a lot like a surgeon who hates operating on people, or a symphony conductor who hates concerts. Meetings are what leaders do, and the solution to bad meetings is not the elimination of them, but rather the transformation of them into meaningful, engaging and relevant activities.

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