



The Science of Better Meetings

You can't abolish office gatherings, but you can make them shorter, smaller and smarter with the help of recent research

By Steven G. Rogelberg

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"I wish I could go to more meetings," said no one, ever. Meetings consume and waste a massive, rising amount of individual and organizational time. In a survey last year by Salary.com, "too many meetings" was the top time-waster at the office, cited by 47% of 3,164 workers. The scheduling platform Doodle estimates that 700 million hours will be lost in U.S. workplaces this year to unnecessary or wasteful meetings.

But meetings themselves are not the problem. They are essential to teams and organizations, supporting inclusion, communication, and coordination. Abolishing meetings is a false solution.

Sadly, most companies and most leaders view poor meetings as inevitable, like living with rain in London. But, unlike the weather, meetings can be improved. My own research team has been working on these issues for 15 years, including interviews and surveys of some 10,000 employees across many organizations. We've found that improving just one meeting a day yields tremendous benefits not only for the organization but for the person responsible. Here are some ways to counteract the most common ways that meetings fail.

Recognize that you may be the problem. We are poor judges of our own meeting leadership skills. My team's research, published in 2011 in the journal *Group Dynamics*, shows that one person usually leaves a meeting feeling good about it: the leader. In a 1998 Verizon survey of more than 1,300 company managers, 79% of them reported that the meetings they initiated were extremely or very productive, but only 56% said the same about meetings initiated by others. Clearly those running meetings and attending them are not aligned.

Though it's rare, some companies seeking better meetings have surveyed employees to find out how much they felt all members contributed and whether meetings went beyond reiterating routine information. At RSC Bio Solutions, a small firm in Charlotte, N.C., the CEO polled employees in 2016 and decided to rotate the leadership of daily short meetings to make them more productive.

Keep it small. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is known for instituting a “two-pizza rule”—if you need more than two pizzas to feed everyone, the meeting is too large. A 2010 study conducted by consultants Bain & Company found that for each additional person over seven members in a decision-making group, decision effectiveness is reduced by approximately 10%. A 2011 study of 97 work teams by three Canadian researchers found more counterproductive behavior and interpersonal aggression in larger groups.

Leaders should limit attendance to just the essential stakeholders. But to widen scope, they can ask those outside the meeting for their input beforehand and can provide minutes afterward—a technique that keeps non-attendees in the loop while letting them do their work.

Don't take an hour. The Yerkes–Dodson law, which maps the inverted-U-shaped relationship between stress and performance, is well established in psychological research and holds that performance is optimal with some moderate level of pressure. To achieve that in meetings, carefully consider how long you need—and then dial it back a bit.

Try a 48-minute rule in place of an hour, for example, to create focused, efficient discussion. A regular fast “huddle” or a stand-up meeting (used by companies such as Apple , Zappos and Capital One) has similar effects. A 1999 study in the Journal of Applied Psychology found that sit-down meetings last 35% longer than those held standing up, with no gains in effectiveness.

Our own 2009 survey of meeting-goers noted the importance of ending on time to avoid frustration and a domino effect on schedules. To avoid running over, some companies use a countdown clock. At the vacation website Tripping.com, the leader must contribute to a team beer jar if a meeting ends late.

Do a meeting “pre-mortem.” Our studies show that having an agenda is a poor predictor of attendees’ perceptions of meeting effectiveness. And it’s no wonder: A 2003 survey of 187 companies detailed in the Harvard Business Review found that, in about half of them, agendas were typically standard boilerplate, repeated at every meeting, or made up on the spot.

An effective agenda works like a plan for an event: It has clear goals or key questions to answer. To get there, consider a pre-mortem—that is, envision how the meeting could go wrong and devise a strategy to prevent it. Ask attendees for agenda items and assign ownership.

Research shows that such preparation increases engagement and a sense of purpose. And if the agenda isn’t coming together, that points to an obvious solution: Cancel the meeting.

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