

Stop Killing Organizational Productivity: Conduct Better Meetings

We are all party to endless meetings that sap everybody's energy. As leaders, we can and must reverse this downward spiral. Here's how.

by BH Tan

12th Aug, 2019



The Cost of Poorly Organized Meetings

Zurich-based online scheduling service Doodle has released the results of its 2019 State of Meetings report. It draws its findings from three sources: an in-depth Nielsen study of 1,000 professionals, a survey of 5,528 professionals from the UK, Switzerland, Germany and the US, and an analysis of over 19 million responses. It is estimated that poorly organized meetings will cost companies \$399 billion in the US and \$58 billion in the UK. As American and European businesses have huge presence in other parts of the world, these figures serve as a weather vane of the meeting culture that they export. Based on my work with organizations in diverse range of industries in the Asia-Pacific, I can say unequivocally that the picture here does not look pretty as well.

Here are some frequently heard comments from leaders at all levels:

- Non-existent or unhelpful agendas
- Attendees, including the meeting host, come unprepared
- Tendency to rush into solutioning without first understanding the problem
- Decisions taken mostly don't translate into actions. No accountability and follow-up

- Discussions spin out of control as facilitation is ineffective.
- Too many attendees. Some talk too much. Others don't contribute at all.
- Virtual meetings are frustrating: cultural & time zone differences, attendees don't know each other well, and frequent internet connectivity issues. Can't see body language.
- Senior leaders spend up to 75% of their workday in meetings. They also find them unproductive.

Types of Meetings

Despite the litany of statistics and comments about bad meetings, it is unrealistic to abolish meetings. Well-conducted meetings can bring together ideas and opinions, and allow people to do their job in a more aligned and collaborative manner. They can help establish and promote a common purpose, thus serving as a focal point for collective drive *and energy*. The solution is not *no meetings*. *But fewer, smarter and better meetings*.

Broadly-speaking, these are five types of meetings that are useful:

- Meetings to solve problems, make decisions and define actions
- Business and project review meetings
- Dissemination of information such as all-hands meetings
- Planning meetings
- 1-on-1 meetings such as between a manager and a direct report or between two co-workers

As problem-solving, decision-making and taking actions constitute the lifeblood of organizations, this article will focus on such meetings. The ideas discussed, however, will be applicable for the other meetings.

Cultivate a Keystone Habit

A keystone habit is a behavior that creates a domino effect that impacts positively other habits or processes. By exercising regularly, you become healthier, sleep better, become more alert and effective in life and work. In October 1987, Paul O'Neill was newly appointed as CEO of Alcoa, the aluminum manufacturing giant. Alcoa's product lines were faltering, profit margins and revenue were in decline. And though their safety record was better than other American companies', it was *not good enough*. An industry outsider, O'Neill stunned investors and employees by not speaking about how he would turnaround the company. He chose to focus on safety: making Alcoa the safest company in America. This was a keystone habit that galvanized Alcoa. It led to other sweeping process improvements across the whole company. When he retired 13 years later, Alcoa's annual earnings was five times higher than when he started. [For more details, see reference 1 in the footnotes.]

If you wish to break the vicious cycle of bad meeting, first cultivate a keystone habit. *Adopt the steward's mindset*. In holding any meetings, be very mindful that the attendees are putting their time and energy at your disposal. It is your obligation to ensure that they extract value out of the meetings.

The steward's mindset can be practiced by everyone in the company, whether she carries the title of manager or not. The effect will of course be much more powerful if it starts at the top. This is what it looks like.

Pre-meeting Preparation

Before initiating any meeting, pause and consider the following:

Q1: Why do I need to have this meeting? If it's a virtual meeting, what must be considered?

Q2: What are the desired objectives?

Q3: What will success look like when we achieve these objectives?

Q4: Who needs to be involved? And why?

Q5: What is the role of each attendee?

Q6: What must go into the agenda so that everyone comes fully prepared?

It is always wise to minimize the number of attendees. Jeff Bezos has a two-pizza rule. If you need more than two pizzas to feed everyone, you have too many participants. In some companies, a meeting invitation is seen as a sign of one's importance and prestige. The host must make hard choices: no spectators.

Develop a detailed agenda with time allocation. Break away from the usual itemized list. Instead of short phrases such as "outsourcing production of Omega Plus," pose question(s) to be answered. Such as "Under what conditions should we outsource the production of Omega Plus?" This stimulates thinking and clarifies what will be discussed. It will be useful to ask attendees for inputs. This will enroll them as co-owners of the meeting.

If you can't convincingly answer Q1-Q6, you shouldn't have the meeting. Preparation will require time. And indeed it should. High quality preparation will result in shorter and more productive meetings.

Hosting and Facilitating

Being the host, always arrive early. Greet and welcome attendees and thank them for being punctual. Start strongly about the purpose of the meeting. Introduce attendees who may be new or do not know each other. Remind all on previously agreed-upon rules of engagement such as keeping comments to the point, taking turns to speak and being receptive to differing opinions.

Make the first topic "review and modify the agenda as needed." Slow down and invite comments. Silence may not mean attendees have nothing to add. They are just warming up and getting ready to speak. Wait patiently. Next discuss and seek alignment on the desired objectives of the meeting, and what success will look like. Are the needs and expectations of every participant considered?

To get people to be fully engaged, discourage Powerpoint presentations as far as possible. Ask attendees to put their views succinctly in the form of a narrative. Our brains process good storytelling

much better than charts and hard data. If someone feels that she has some background information to share as pre-reading, she can prepare a short note. Give participants a few minutes to do silent reading. As the conversation starts, adopt the steward mindset. Ask questions, model curiosity and active listening, draw out concerns and encourage the quieter participants to voice their opinions. Create an atmosphere for everybody to speak up without fear. This happens only when there is psychological safety.

With robust and stimulating debate, there will come a point to decide on the next steps. What is your decision-making process? This is hugely important and cannot be glossed over. Otherwise, there may be an illusion of consensus. But no ownership and follow-through. [For more information, see reference 2 in the footnotes.]

Finally, the wrap-up. Who will take what actions by when? This is recorded in a 1-pager, and will act as a meeting summary. As the steward of others' time, now ask participants to complete a short survey on what has been useful for them and what can be improved.

The Follow-up

The 1-pager should be distributed to all attendees within a day or two. The host needs to take a light-touch in ensuring that assignments are completed on time. Attendees can prompt each other as many tasks require interdependent and complementary activities. In the agreed-upon rules of engagement they would have committed to collaborate to deliver on decisions made. Remember to do a post-mortem on the meeting. Circle back to Q1-Q6. What are pluses/minuses? What must you improve as a facilitator?

Kick-starting a Virtuous Cycle of Productivity

When you act as a steward of others' time, it's an act of decency, care and respect. These are basic psychological needs of all people. They will reciprocate by contributing their discretionary energy to make the meeting a productive one. The ripple effect will continue. They will also be inspired to act as time stewards. There will be fewer, smarter and better meetings. Your organization will soon reap the virtuous cycle of greater job satisfaction, higher productivity and people engagement

References

1. *The Danger of Learning without Unlearning* by BH Tan (15th May '15)
https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/5a6528_6bd2e0e152a94cabbb6c0880a0ac03eb.pdf
2. *Why Collaboration Remains Elusive Despite Team Consensus* by BH Tan (26th Feb'19)
https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/5a6528_41636547355c46148717a919c6845102.pdf

BH Tan is the President of Lead Associates, a leadership consultancy based in Singapore. He is author of two books: *The First-Time Manager in Asia* and *Leading with New Eyes*. You can find him at www.leadassociates.com.sg or email him at bh@leadassociates.com.sg
