



## Just Say No To Meetings!

Insights

11.04.13

I had not previously read posts by Ron Thomas, but based upon his recent TLNT post, *"The Problems With Meetings? They Cost More Than They're Really Worth,"* Mr. Thomas is that rarest of leaders . . . : an individual with common sense and great judgment. I relate to Thomas' comment:

*Meetings are the bane of corporate existence. Whether it is a conference call or a physical meeting, these are part of our process of doing business, and for the most part they are not going away.*

### Just Say No!

Thomas goes on to conclude:

*Let's face it – Most meetings are a drain and a waste of time. How many times have we sat there and realized that the meeting had turned into something else, and the discussion is like talking to an aged uncle where it starts in one direction and ends someplace else.*

Mr. Thomas then cements his status as a management "stud" by not offering the proverbial "7 steps to improve meetings." Instead, Thomas cuts to the chase:

*My magic bullet is to not have them in meetings in the first place. In 7 months in my new role, I have called two all-hands-on-deck meetings. I had one to introduce myself, and one more to discuss how we would move ahead with our processes. I will probably have one more before the end of the year to lay out my HR plan and walk them all through it.*

While Thomas wisely refuses to offer a formulaic "7 step plan" to recover from meeting addiction, he does share a number of useful ideas. Thomas first states that he consciously reminds himself that *"our days are precious and we all know that when we arrive at work, we have our list of things to do to accomplish that day."* In other words, as the big dog who often schedules meetings, he weighs the value of a meeting before automatically hitting his outlook scheduler. He then acknowledges that when a meeting is called, *"there is trouble ahead if the concept is not clear."* He uses conversation, email, or better yet, a face-to-face discussion to narrow and frame the topics. He also champions educating other people to understand that meetings may be more of a time waster than even internet use:

*What has always amazed me was how initially, companies would lock down the internet and/or block social sites because they considered them time wasters. However, pull out the time clock and*

*measure the amount of money that is sitting around the conference room during an overlong meeting and the true time waster will pop up.*

Ron succumbs to the need to offer a few bullet points at the end, but his recommendations are practical:

1. If you are the meeting chairperson, don't be weak because you are the conductor. If it is bad it is because of YOU.
2. Have a clear agenda. "What, pray tell, are you trying to solve?"
3. At the end of the meeting, what decisions should be made?
4. Think – how much time do you really need to arrive at a decision?
5. Always! – think about that meter that is running in the background.

### **Practical Guidance On Meetings**

Perhaps we do need a 7 Step Program to address our addiction to meetings. The *Harvard Business Review Blog Network* regularly posts relevant articles, including the appropriately titled, [“Break Your Addiction To Meetings”](#) by [Elizabeth Grace Saunders](#). Ms. Saunders starts out her blog as follows:

Manager, Noun

Textbook Definition: An individual whose in charge of a certain group of tasks, or a certain subset of a company. A manager often has a staff of people who report to him or her.

Modern Translation: An individual who races through the halls in a frantic attempt to make the next meeting on time while also answering emails on his or her mobile device.

Ms. Saunders immediately moves to recommendations. Her most basic recommendation . . .

***“reduce the number of meeting invitations that you accept.”***

She proposes that one always asks whether they really need to attend the meeting, and either decline or use one of the following strategies:

- Ask for a pre-meeting look at the agenda so you can pass on your comments to the facilitator to share. (Bonus: this may force the facilitator to actually make an agenda!)
- Send someone else from your group to communicate your team's position.
- Request a copy of the meeting notes after the fact.

Now, Ms. Saunders goes to the jugular. *“Reduce the number of meetings you schedule – and reduce their length.”* Ms. Saunders asked, *“do you schedule meetings where you spend most of the time*

*talking – perhaps giving ‘updates’ to a room of people subtly checking their phones? Do you default the scheduling-hour long meetings (or longer)?” If so, you need to reprogram your default response of “when in doubt, schedule a 60 minute meeting.”*

Ms. Saunders raises the much neglected issue of meeting *“etiquette:”*

- Don’t schedule for FYI when you can communicate by email. Only use meetings for discussions and decisions that must happen with a team, in real time.
- Send a clear agenda when you send the meeting invitation – not two minutes before the meeting – so it’s easier for everyone to tell whether they need to attend.
- Designate someone to take thorough notes on the discussion, the decisions, and the rationale behind these conclusions. Circulate those to your manager, and anyone else who might need to be in the loop – but doesn’t need to come to the meeting.

I strongly agree with Ms. Saunders’ final admonition, which is to *“keep your calendar clear by blocking in work time.”* Ms. Saunders observes that if one refrains from meetings, they might accomplish more “actual work.” It might not surprise one to learn that Ms. Sanders describes herself as a *“time coach,”* and earlier this year posted, *“Stop Work Overload By Setting These Boundaries.”*

If the answer is “just say no,” why does everyone agree that we seem to be making little progress in reducing the number of meetings?

I sometimes wonder if we are overly fixated on achieving “consensus” either out of a sense of fairness or a desire to avoid political attacks. Sometimes, I find myself simply wishing that someone would make a decision or delegate responsibility. Of course, an autocratic decision making system excludes other worthwhile ideas. In a 1996 article, *“Fast Company”* described the importance of meetings and the effect of “bad meetings.”

*Meetings matter because that’s where an organization’s culture perpetuates itself. . . . Meetings are how an organization says, “you are a member” so if everyday we go to Board meetings full of boring people, than we can’t help but think that this is a boring company. Boring at meetings is worse than negative messages about a company and ourselves.”*

“Back To The Future Advice On Meetings”

The author, Eric Matson, goes on to list his *“7 Deadly Sins of Meetings:”*

Sin No. 1: People don’t take meeting seriously. They arrive late, leave early, and spend most of their time doodling. (Keep in mind that this article was written in 1996 before the advent of apps).

Salvation: Adopt Intel’s mindset that meetings are real work.

Sin No. 2: Meetings are too long.

Salvation: Time is money. Track the cost of your meetings and use computer-enabled similarity to make them more productive.

Sin No. 3: People wander off topic. The participants spend more time digressing than discussing.

Salvation: Get serious about agendas and store distractions in a “parking lot.” (I wonder if this 1996 article created that sometimes overused concept of the “parking lot.”)

Sin No. 4: Nothing happens once the meeting ends. People don’t convert decisions into action.

Salvation: Convert from meeting to “doing” and focus on common documents.

Sin No. 5: People don’t tell the truth. There is plenty of conversation but not candor.

Salvation: Embrace anonymity.

Sin No. 6: Meetings are always missing important information, so they postpone critical decisions.

Salvation: Get data, not just furniture, into meeting rooms.

Sin No. 7: Meetings never get better. People make the same mistakes.

Salvation: Practice makes perfect. Monitor what works and what doesn’t and hold people accountable.

After reading this useful, albeit aged article, my conclusion remains that we should wage a holy war to reduce the number of meetings. As the “De Motivators” poster for “Meetings” states . . . “none of us is as dumb as all of us . . . .”

Howard