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War on meetings

by Rich Poryako

Research has shown that most meetings are a major productivity killer. “The only way you’re going to get me for a meeting is if you’re writing me a check,” entrepreneur/investor Mark Cuban once told *Inc.*

Some might say they are managing their teams in meetings. I’d argue they’re creating more work for their people to do in less time while making themselves appear busy by hopping from one meeting to another and not actually producing any concrete output. Tech billionaire Elon Musk shares the same view and is reportedly fond of saying that meetings are what happen when people aren’t working. As I wage my personal war against wasted meetings, my goal is to make them less painful, leaner and more productive.

FEWER MEETINGS

The best solution to the meeting conundrum is to not meet at all. A colleague of mine proudly sports a coffee mug that says “I survived another meeting that should have been an email.” The fact that this coffee mug even exists says it all. In a letter to employees, Musk wrote, “Communication should travel via the shortest path necessary to get the job done.” Phone calls, emails and texts are amazing tools that can be incredibly lean. “I keep communication limited to email, it’s more efficient,” Cuban is reported to have said. Unless you are dealing with an extremely urgent matter, push weekly meetings to bi-weekly or monthly. Weekly meetings quickly add up and are low-hanging fruit to reduce or ditch altogether.

SMALLER MEETINGS

Does everyone really need to be here? Seriously. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos apparently won’t attend a meeting if two pizzas can’t feed the whole group. The law of diminishing returns is clear. If there are too many people in a meeting, it will actually become less productive. Musk also says to leave a meeting if you’re not contributing. “Walk out of a meeting or drop off a call as soon as it is obvious you aren’t adding value. It is not rude to leave, it is rude to make someone stay and waste their time.”

FASTER MEETINGS

A former mentor of mine used to say, “If you’re not five minutes early, you’re late.” He’d also say, “If you don’t respect my time, you don’t respect me.” I couldn’t agree more. There is nothing more frustrating or wasteful than waiting five minutes for the usual latecomers to arrive, go over the topics at hand, come to a decision with clear direction on next steps and then have a team member arrive even later and have to restart the whole process. Deduct five points if that team member is a decision maker. Deduct 50 points if plan changes or becomes indecisive due to the late party.

I’m a fan of huddles. They are fast (less than five minutes), informative and can be knocked off with a few simple questions: Good news? Where are we stuck? Who needs to meet offline? Okay, back to work. Most tactical meetings should be small groups and kept to 10 to 15 minutes, maximum. Any longer and either someone was late, you are spinning your wheels or substantial scope creep has occurred. Strategic meetings (also small groups) should be kept to one hour maximum. If Cuban, Bezos and Musk can all do it, so can you.

When I first started out as a consultant in 2008, not attending frequent meetings was my big advantage. It’s how I made a name for myself. I’d crush projects in record time and no one could figure out how. It was because I was hardly attending any meetings, which helped me become exceptionally efficient. Over the years, my work has evolved but one of my greatest strengths of staying lean has become threatened. In some ways, I’ve become the old guard that I’ve been battling my whole career. I recognize this and am challenging myself and my peers to push back and fight the status quo to improve the way you communicate within your workplace. Even if that status quo is you.

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