How to Create a Meeting-Smart Work Culture

Your employees attend 62 meetings each month, and they consider half of those wasted time. Even so, you may think they're building camaraderie, brainstorming solutions under the surface or cutting out inefficiencies through direct communication.

What they're actually doing is wasting $37 billion per year.

It's common for companies to have standing meetings for status updates and team bonding, and it's even more common for people to put off inconvenient discussions by suggesting, "Let's schedule a meeting to talk about it next week" or "Why don't we call a meeting to figure out next steps?" While their intentions are noble, their results wreak silent havoc.

That $37 billion that's lost each year to U.S. businesses could be spent on furthering their visions. Instead, that money is sunk in meetings that drain team members' energy, lower morale, lead to bad ideas, and waste time – all of which hurts a business. And the pain is more severe when you consider that 50 percent of high-level managers' time is spent in meetings. That means that your most valuable – and expensive – team members are wasting the most time.

Related: 4 Steps to Avoid 'Death by Meeting'

Declare war

That's why I want you to declare war on meetings.

I'm not saying you should kill them entirely. In fact, they're sometimes a necessary form of communication; done right, they provide extremely valuable team alignment. More often than not, however, attendees are multitasking, unengaged and/or

unnecessary to furthering the goals of the meeting.

What I *am* proposing – and what we've adopted at ONTRAPORT – is a limit on the number of meetings your team calls. Training your team to treat meetings as time- and money-intensive endeavors will result in better outcomes for everyone.

The first step to declaring war is to assess where your business currently stands on meetings. How many of each type of meeting are you having?

Regularly scheduled meetings: These are set for the same time and place each week, month or quarter. These meetings have set agendas, attendees and purposes and are intended to prevent the need for the second type of meetings.

Ad hoc meetings: These are unplanned time sucks, and they almost always lead to a lack of action. These meetings should be avoided whenever possible.

Related: How to Master Meetings (Infographic)

Remember your company culture.

If you're holding some of both, you're not alone. At ONTRAPORT, we hold several regularly scheduled meetings for employees' benefit. From one-on-one meetings to companywide meetings to quarterly insights, the goal of all these meetings is to allow our staff to gain a better

understanding of how to contribute, share ideas and build alignment. These meetings allow us to generate the best ideas, hone the best talent and respond faster to opportunities.

Of course, these meetings aren't required, and many businesses choose to eliminate meetings that aren't executive-only, deeming them a waste of time (and time is money). They simplify the process by having senior executives make all the decisions; they then tell their middle managers to execute on

those decisions. If goals are met, bonuses are paid.

If goals aren’t met, jobs are up for review (which means people could be replaced). Employees aren’t given an opportunity to question the decision or ask why – or even to suggest a better solution. They’re simply expected to do the job and meet the goals.

To be honest, I find that other model very appealing at times. When my schedule is packed with meetings, I have a handful of people in my office wondering why we’re doing a project or I just don’t have the words to explain my gut feeling, I wish I didn’t have to take the time to hash it out.

During these times, I look around and see all the amazing people we have and what we’ve created together. I wonder if things would be the same if we had done it the other way – and I always decide that it wouldn’t.

Related: How the Best Companies in the World Run All-Hands Meetings

Wage war

If you’ve considered your company’s culture and determined that you need to keep some of your meetings to maintain the decision-making success you’ve had thus far, you still need to work on eliminating poisonous ad hoc meetings.

Before accepting the scheduling of or attending another ad hoc meeting, ask yourself these questions:

Is a meeting necessary? Are there options that would require less time?

Can the needed work and/or discussions be accomplished via email? Could you set up a system for people to simply communicate when their part of a project is done so the next person can start?

Who really needs to be there? Is everyone required, or are some attendees optional?

If you don't think the entire 60-minute period is necessary for you to attend, offer your opinion via email or ask to have the part that needs to be worked out moved to the front of the agenda to get some time back. Do you simply want one person's opinion to ensure you're not forgetting anything, but she won't be expected to execute on the decisions made? Ask her ahead of time.

What can I do to ensure that the meeting is focused and fully interactive? Is there a clear agenda? Have all necessary materials been shared? Will action items be captured and sent out after the meeting?

If the meeting organizer fails to send out an agenda in advance, the meeting should be canceled; this will alert your team that people's time is valuable and will not be wasted. To that end, you should also set some ground rules: Show up on time and prepared; put your phone away; and participate fully.

Every meeting should end with clear outcomes that attendees can reference. That means someone needs to be tasked with taking easy-to-understand, to-the-point minutes that include action items with assignees and deadlines. (To keep this from feeling like a burden, switch up the assigned note taker for each meeting. It shifts engagement and prevents people from feeling like they're not valued participants in the discussion itself.)

These questions should pinpoint which ad hoc meetings need to be kept — and transformed into regular meetings. By setting up regular meetings, you create structure and eliminate the need for wasteful, last-minute additions.

Meetings themselves aren't the bad guys; bad planning and follow-through are. By waging war on unproductive gatherings, your team can not only save time and money, but it can also

use both to accomplish more.

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