How to Stop Meetings From Killing Your Startup

Meetings in startups can be fun and exciting. But then low-energy, meandering discussions set in, wrecking decision-making and killing, not inspiring, creativity.

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Meetings, for anyone who works in a corporate environment, can often feel like the bane of your workday — a black hole that sucks up your productivity and focus, nixing any chance that you'll finish your to-do list or that stack of emails piling up in your inbox.

For a startup, on the other hand, meetings are more often fun, exciting, creative, and inspiring than they are dull and draining. There is a point in every startup's life, however, where those low-energy, meandering discussions start to take hold to kill decision-making and creativity, instead of inspiring it.

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So, how do you recognize when "bad meetings" are happening to you?

As an entrepreneur with a background in enterprise banking software, I thought that a bad meeting would seem obvious: no goals, zero structure and no one at the meeting's helm with the power to make real decisions.

Example? I once worked for a Swiss software company in Australia as a “configuration specialist” on a project with more than 300 people.

Of those 300, more than 70 were project managers, and fewer than 30 were developers. To inspire us, the program director brought in a lead Spotify project manager – let’s call him Daniel – to regale us with the benefits of Agile Project Management.

At one point, Daniel asked us to “put your hands up if you’re a developer.” Not a single raised hand could be seen among the sea of heads. And that was a funny, if somewhat jarring moment to realize that nobody on the project considered himself or herself to be doing the heavy lifting – the grunt work of the project. All leaders, no followers …

That dynamic made for some very (un)interesting meetings. Sometimes, there would be a gathering composed entirely of project managers. Other times, there would be only one developer or subject-matter expert, but this person would be from the wrong team.

En route I witnessed screaming matches, walk-outs (I was one of them), brazen acts of sleeping or simple cancellations when experts or decision-makers just failed to turn up. So, losing interest over time, I eventually jumped ship and founded my own startup, Ora Organic.

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At Ora, in terms of meetings, we had a blissful few years of get-togethers with everyone who mattered, all the expertise needed and all the decision-makers anyone could ask for. Then one day,it became clear that we had hit the wall. Again, in terms of meetings, something was going very, very wrong. Here’s what I would see:

- A meeting would begin, and someone would ask, “Who wants to start?”
- If no one took the lead, people would take that as a cue to discuss whatever they wanted – usually some other startup that had popped up on Buzzfeed in the past week
- The only notes taken were too vague to mean anything, or simply doodles doomed to die in the pages of a mindfulness journal
- We would finish the meeting with no action items, no next steps.
- All of us would leave the meeting more tired than when we had entered it.

When you’re running a meeting in a high-paced startup where the only constant is change, structure comes second to action. It can be difficult to take the time to reflect on why you’re having that meeting in the first place.

That’s why one day, after a particularly draining marketing discussion, we sat down to determine what it was exactly that was causing our meetings to go wrong. Here’s what we concluded were the five causes of bad meetings:

1. There are no agenda items.

At startups, people have a tendency to run through agenda items in their heads improvisationally, rather than defining them as a list to address systematically. A good agenda is the best way to stay on-topic, guiding and encouraging solutions, while keeping your team’s eyes on the prize.

2. The meeting organizer hasn’t designated a lead, or set goals.

It’s the responsibility of the meeting organizer to make sure that someone is in charge of keeping the meeting on track, and working toward a common goal. According to Robert Half, Moira

Cullen of Method Products has her leaders keep problems and solutions front of mind by putting them in charge of etiquette, agendas and goals, ensuring that no meeting is set without a good reason.

3. There is no official note-taker.

Facebook has developed templates, using the company wiki platform Confluence to ensure that no important action items are missed. Good meeting notes can improve understanding of key topics for those who could not attend, and for those who learn visually, rather than aurally. Good notes keep a record of decisions made verbally, for future confirmation.

4. The meeting lead is low energy.

Brett Steenbarger of SUNY Upstate Medical University identifies energy as the key ingredient to effective leadership, according to a *Forbes* article. Everyone in the room (or on screen) takes his or her energy and cues from the meeting lead, so if that person is slow and uninterested, it's guaranteed that everyone else will either feel the same way, or degenerate into off-topic discussion.

5. There are no decision-makers attending.

As McKinsey & Company has noted, ensuring that every attendee's role is defined is the first step. From there, a meeting leader should ask himself or herself: "Do I have someone who can authorize tactics or actions on behalf of the company?" If not, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

So what can you do as a startup (or any size business) do to stop bad meetings?

A structural solution for ending bad meetings

Much theory exists about group dynamics and the most efficient ways to get maximum output from group discussion in the shortest time, but at our company, we found ourselves needing something more operational, more practical: meetings built for the 21st century startup.

1. Meeting types

We came up with five meeting types that fit 90 percent-plus of the meetings we have on a daily basis:

- **The general update** – This is exactly as it sounds: an update for the team on what's happening in the company or department right now. These meetings should be fun and high energy, and focus on wins! *(Recommended length: 10 to 15 minutes)*
- **The project update** – Similar to the general update, but more detail-oriented and focused on the progress of a specific project. This is like your typical Agile stand-up; you get everyone on the project in sync, and then get everyone back to work. (*Recommended length: 15 to 20 minutes)*
- **The planning session** – The classic meeting to plan out a project or a set of tasks or events, or assign roles and actions. A strong, high-energy leader is absolutely key, so don't even start without one! (*Recommended length: 30 to 60 minutes)*
- **The presentation** – A meeting we all dread. But setting a good framework for presentation length and a structured Q&A at the end can turn a boring presentation into one that people actually engage with and remember. (*Recommended length: 20 to 30 mins, 5 to 10 mins Q&A)*
- **Collaborative editing** – Definitely the most creative and

fluid of the meeting types, collaborative editing is about gathering a small group of people together to kickstart a project or task or get it to the finish line. *(Recommended length: 30 to 60 minutes)*

2. Meeting agendas

To complement our company-wide meeting types, we developed a set of requirements for agendas, to help our employees get the most out of the meetings they set:

- **A bullet point list of items** that will be discussed in the meeting
- **A designated discussion / meeting leader** who will drive the meeting forward
- **A designated notetaker** who will record meeting notes and takeaways
- **A set of clear goals** that deliver a result in line with the meeting form

Good meetings have goals. Even if they're not explicitly stated in the agenda, the neeting keader should own the meeting goals, and be vigilant in course-correcting the discussion if it gets derailed.

Looking for agenda examples? Find some of ours here.

Easy to say, hard In practice

Creating structure in a startup is hard. New rules can feel stifling, restrictive and unnecessary. When we started our company, we were trying to get away from the rules and systems put in place by big corporate.

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With the rapid growth and iteration typical of a millennial startup, however, considerate, thoughtful and empathetic

structure can actually feel empowering, and take young and ambitious teams to the next level.

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