Too Many Meetings Suffocate Productivity and Morale

Early stage companies have many demands on an employee's time. From getting the product built to marketing for new customers to getting the capital lined up, it is a never ending battle to fit in all that work in a limited amount of time.

But, what I often see is productivity gets squeezed by early stage entrepreneurs scheduling way too many meetings, which gets in the way of employees having enough time to do their actual jobs. And, when productivity slows, the company's bottom line suffers and employees start looking for the door in frustration. Let me explain further.

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Why so many meetings get scheduled.

There are many reasons to schedule a meeting. Some are recurring meetings between bosses and their direct-reporting employees, for weekly check ins and collaborative needs of the team. Some are one off meetings for non-recurring items, like annual strategic planning, putting out a client fire or team building events. But, most get set because entrepreneurs are inexperienced and don't know any better. That is largely related to their not trusting the team to do their jobs or their needing to control every single decision that is made. It is this last category that is the killer.

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The negative effect on employees.

Employees get frustrated when a couple things happen around meetings. First, they think it is a waste of time, and they

are not even sure why they are needed in the room (so don’t invite everyone to every single meeting, only invite the ones that actually need to be there).

Second, they get frustrated they are sitting in a meeting, and not sitting at their desk getting their actual work done in a more timely fashion (so maximize their time at their desks, not yours). Or, third, they get offended that they are not trusted to do their job, by a boss that feels they need to keep tight oversight on all of the decisions (so empower your people to make decisions without you).

All of this is a recipe for a disaster, often having employees looking for the exit, where the resulting employee turnover can be crippling to a young company needing to race full steam ahead, as quickly as possible.

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Case study

I was once getting started as an interim executive at a new client and was given a team of people to manage. On my first day I was handed a calendar of all the weekly meetings that I need to participate in with my team. I looked at the long list and realized that about 40 percent of my time was in meetings, many of which that I deemed as unnecessary, a legacy process from a prior manager. I didn’t have two days a week to lose in getting my job done.

So, I pulled the team together and asked what each of the meetings were trying to accomplish, and we agreed we didn’t need as many, merging many of the meetings into one. And, I asked each of the employees to look at their own personal schedules, and to cut out any unnecessary meetings. One of those persons said they were being included in meetings that were eating up a whopping 80 percent of his time each week. I

asked how he got any work done at all? He said he didn’t!!

He said, it was mandatory he be in those meetings, and he didn’t have a choice. To which I replied he need to cut his meeting time down to a cap of 20 percent of time, shedding 75 percent of his meetings. He turned white as a ghost saying that was impossible. Where I dug in and said it was not only possible, but required by the end of the week. After a bunch of rethinking his time, he prioritized only the most important meetings, cut his meeting load down to the target, and actually started getting his own work done, reversing years of complaints that he was the bottleneck to others in their getting their work done.

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How many meetings should be scheduled?

To me, I try to cap my recurring weekly meetings at 20 percent of my time. One one-on-one meeting with each of my direct reports, one meeting with the person managing me and one meeting with my peers to collaborate on needs between departments. That leaves plenty of other time for the one-off meetings that come up during the normal course of business, again which should be capped within this 20 percent framework. This keeps me efficiently working on the most important work that needs to get done, and keeps my team efficiently working on their most important work. And, when people start checking projects off their to-do list, they feel a sense of accomplishment, the business moves forward and a healthy vibe is maintained in the office.

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Flat organizations thrive best.

So, my appeal to all you entrepreneurs, don’t suffocate the life out of your companies with too many meetings. Hire smart

people, trust them to do their jobs, and get the heck out of their way, so they can do the jobs they were hired to do. You don’t have to micro manage every single decision. Empower your team to make their own decisions in a flat organizational structure. Even if they make mistakes, that is fine, they will learn from them. But, the team will be moving twice as fast at getting things done, than if they were burdened with a bunch of meetings. Speed matters with startups.

Challenge yourself and every employee in your company to cap their recurring weekly meetings at 20 percent of their time. That is one day a week, or eight hours in a normal working day. That is up to 16 thirty-minute meetings they can schedule, plenty of slots to working with.

Yes, I said thirty minutes, efficient meetings don’t need to be longer than that. So, that means come to the meetings organized with a set expectation on how they are going to be run each week. And, if there is nothing new to update on this week, there is nothing wrong with cancelling meetings. Give your team the flexibility to only do meetings then they feel are absolutely needed.

As you can probably tell, I am not a fan of scheduling too many meetings. It often leads to combatting issues like analysis paralysis, management by committee, micromanagement, disgruntled employees and an overall loss of business productivity. So, instead, take more of a hands-off role in managing your team, kick your business into the next gear and start getting all those unnecessary meetings off of everyone’s calendars. You will be shocked how much more work actually starts to get done!