

Efficient Meetings

Adrian Kosmaczewski

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In this post you will find a collection of interesting book quotes about meetings, and how to make them suck less.

- Meetings are Good™@©
 - “The Mythical Man-Month” by Frederick P. Brooks (1975)
 - “Agile!: The Good, the Hype and the Ugly” by Bertrand Meyer (2014)
- Meetings Suck™@©
 - “Rework” by David Heinemeier Hansson and Jason Fried (2010)
 - “More Effective Agile” by Steve McConnell (2019)
 - “Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams (3rd Edition)” by Tom DeMarco and Tim Lister (2013, first edition 1987)
 - “Leading a Software Development Team: A developer’s guide to successfully leading people & projects” by Richard Whitehead (2001)
 - * Chairmanship
 - “Principles” by Ray Dalio (2017)
 - “The 4-Hour Workweek” by Timothy Ferriss (2007)
 - “Making Things Happen” by Scott Berkun (2008)
 - * The art of facilitation
 - * Three kinds of meetings
 - * Meeting pointers
 - “Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision and Reality” by Scott Branson (2012)
- More
- Tweets

Meetings are Good™@©

Some authors have a positive view on meetings in general.

“The Mythical Man-Month” by Frederick P. Brooks (1975)

(Link) Page 75:

Regular project meetings, with one team after another giving techni-

cal briefings, are invaluable. Hundreds of minor misunderstandings get smoked out this way.

“Agile!: The Good, the Hype and the Ugly” by Bertrand Meyer (2014)

(Link) Page 153:

Short daily meetings focused on simple verbal reports to progress – the “three questions” – are an excellent idea. It need not be practiced in a dogmatic way, since distributed projects and companies with flexible work schedules must adapt the basic scheme, but is one of the practices that undeniably help software development, and deserves to be adopted even more widely than it already is.

Meetings Suck™®©

Some authors, a large number I must say, don't share the same opinion.

“Rework” by David Heinemeier Hansson and Jason Fried (2010)

(Link) Page 108: “Meetings are toxic”

Very, very, very negative outlook. If you need meetings at all, follow these simple steps:

- Set a timer. When it rings, meeting's over. Period.
- Invite as few people as possible.
- Always have a clear agenda.
- Begin with a specific problem.
- Meet at the site of the problem instead of a conference room. Point to real things and suggest real changes.
- End with a solution and make someone responsible for implementing it.

“More Effective Agile” by Steve McConnell (2019)

(Link) Page 112:

For general meetings, it's useful to provide guidance in conducting meetings effectively. At a minimum this should include standard advice: have a clear purpose for the meeting, set clearly defined expectations about what decision or other deliverable the meeting will produce, err on the side of scheduling the meeting to be shorter rather than longer, invite only people who are necessary to support the meeting's deliverable, declare the meeting to be over as soon as it has met its objective, and so on. A good resource in this area is *How to Make Meetings Work* (Doyle, 1993).

“Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams (3rd Edition)” by Tom DeMarco and Tim Lister (2013, first edition 1987)

(Link) Chapter 31 is all about meetings (page 187)

A meeting that is specifically called to get something done might be called *working meeting*, typically called to reach a decision. Who should be invited? That’s easy, the people who need to agree before the decision can be judged made. Nobody else. To make sure no one is blindsided, it’s essential that the working meeting have an agenda relevant to its purpose and that it stick to that agenda.

No one has to attend defensively.

The cost of the meeting is directly proportional to the number attending.

“Leading a Software Development Team: A developer’s guide to successfully leading people & projects” by Richard Whitehead (2001)

(Link) Chapter 5 is all about meetings (page 34). Valid reasons to call a meeting:

- To get people together to talk about a specific topic
- Get a decision by consensus instead of decree
- Discuss something contentious
- When people have not met before, when they start working together, coming from different environments.

Even if it sounds obvious: if a meeting is not necessary, don’t call for one. If someone isn’t needed, don’t call them.

If a meeting has more than about 8 people in it, it’s unlikely that everyone will contribute. That’s fine if it’s a “get everyone together to tell them all something” type of meeting.

Meetings 2h long or more, and senior people are involved, it might make sense to arrange to meet off-site. This gets people away from interruptions, to clear the mind of day-to-day concerns. Excellent for forward-thinking strategy or radical proposals.

Meetings cost a great deal of money. Not only because people’s time is expensive, but because they can’t do their normal jobs if they’re in a meeting.

Chairmanship

1. Before the meeting is held, always send round an agenda. Does not need to be long, just a bullet point per discussion item; make sure people arrive at the meeting having had a chance to think about the issues to be discussed.
2. Wait for everyone to arrive
3. Remind everyone why the meeting takes place.
4. Make sure someone takes notes (or do it yourself.)

5. Keep the meeting on course, sticking to the agenda. Lead the conversation towards the decision that needs to be made.
6. Draw discussions to a close by summarizing.
7. Thank people for coming.
8. Send minutes afterwards.

“Principles” by Ray Dalio (2017)

(Link) Section 4.4 is about meetings (pages 364-368)

There are many reasons why meetings go poorly, but frequently it is because of a lack of clarity about the topic or the level at which things are being discussed.

1. Make it clear who is directing the meeting and whom it is meant to serve.
2. Be precise in what you’re talking about to avoid confusion.
3. Make clear what type of communication you are going to have in light of the objectives and priorities.
4. Lead the discussion by being assertive and open-minded.
5. Navigate between the different levels of the conversation.
6. Watch out for “topic slip.”
7. Enforce the logic of conversations.
8. Be careful not to lose personal responsibility via group decision making.
9. Use the “two-minute rule” to avoid persistent interruptions.
10. Watch out for assertive “fast talkers.”
11. Achieve completion in conversations.
12. Leverage your communication.

“The 4-Hour Workweek” by Timothy Ferriss (2007)

(Link) Section about meetings in chapter 7 (page 96): “Interrupting Interruption and the Art of Refusal”

The third step is to master the art of refusal and avoiding meetings.

1. Steer people toward the following means of communication, in order of preference: e-mail, phone, and in-person meetings. If someone proposes a meeting, request an e-mail instead and then use the phone as your fallback offer if need be.
2. Meetings should only be held to make decisions about a predefined situation, not to define the problem.

Nine times out of ten, a meeting is unnecessary and you can answer the questions, once defined, via e-mail.

3. If you absolutely cannot stop a meeting or call from happening, *define the end time*. Do not leave these discussions open-ended, and keep them short. If things are well-defined, decisions should not take more than 30 minutes.

“Making Things Happen” by Scott Berkun (2008)

(Link) Chapter 10: “How not to annoy people: process, email, and meetings” (page 205)

Here is my meeting confession: I do not like regularly scheduled meetings. Unless there is a force keeping them lean and tidy, they will eventually slide into slow, bloated, frustrating, dysfunctional wastes of time. However, if there is that force in place, meetings can be energizing, centering experiences for everyone in the room.

The art of facilitation Facilitate: the act of making things easy or easier.

Good meetings happen only when someone in the room understands how to facilitate. (...) Facilitating can be a semiformal role, held by a designated person who runs the show (often the PM) or by whoever called the meeting.

- Establish a host position
- Listen and reflect
- Direct the conversation
- End the conversation
- Make history

Three kinds of meetings

- **Highly interactive discussion.** Everyone is expected to participate, for depth and intimacy, exploring or resolving specific issues, seeking out alternative ideas. Size: 2-8 people. Examples: brainstorming, design discussion, triage.
- **Reporting or moderate discussion.** One person has content to cover, and she needs people to respond to or to understand that content. Goal to get knowledge. Medium to large (5-15 people.) Examples: small presentation (like this one), spec review.
- **Status and project review.** Summarize the status of a team or an entire project, to medium to large groups (10-100 people.) All-hands meeting, project review, status review.

Meeting pointers

- Are the right people in the room?
- Sit or stand
- Prepare
- Laptops and gadgets
- Being on time
- End with clear steps and owners

“Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision and Reality” by Scott Branson (2012)

(Link) Discussion about meetings in page 78.

Most meetings are fruitless. Amidst all the brainstorming, we must find ways to measure the outcome of meetings.

- Don't meet just because it's Monday. Abolish automatic meetings without an actionable agenda.
- End with a review of actions captured.
- Call out nonactionable meetings.
- Conduct standing meetings.
- Don't call meetings out of your own insecurity.
- Don't stick to round numbers. Instead of 30 or 60 minutes, call for 10 minute meetings instead.
- Always measure with action steps... or something else.

More

I found more information about the subject. There's a lot out there.

- “The Essence of Technical Communication for Engineers: Writing, Presentation, and Meeting Skills” by Herbert Hirsch, 2000, has a whole chapter about meetings.
- “How to Make Meetings Work” (Doyle, 1993). The title says it all.

Tweets

Finally, an interesting thought on Twitter about the subject.

How to make teams productive:- keep them very small- have as few priorities as you can- do as few hours of meetings as possible

— Jack Altman (@jaltma) July 13, 2020

And a funny one, too.

The key to effective meetings. pic.twitter.com/ZPdnnscCiM

— Northern Soul (@Northern_Soul_) July 14, 2020