

# Viewpoint: How to Create Team Meetings That Don't Suck

By Steve Gladis  
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Feedback

**M**ost meetings suck—they suck time, energy and often the very joy out of life. And in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, we're all Zoomed out with meetings stacked upon meetings.

In his book *The Surprising Science of Meetings* (Oxford University Press, 2019), Steven Rogelberg, a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, shared that according to research from software company Lucid Meetings, nonmanagerial staff members meet eight times per week, managers meet 12 times and executives spend most of their time in meetings. All that time in meetings leaves most employees feeling flat, he found.

A separate study by Microsoft reinforced employees' negative feelings about meetings: 69 percent of more than 40,000 people said meetings are unproductive and a waste of time.

However, meetings don't have to suck. If we apply some of the research conducted about meetings, adapt a critical meeting process and enforce an intentional cadence, meetings won't suck and they could even strengthen our organizations.

## Team Meeting Research

Teams need a way to communicate ideas and update projects collectively. However, think of all the team meetings you've attended and ask yourself, would you rather have done anything else? The resounding answer is almost always yes—anything is better than sitting for an hour or more listening to people drone on about what they have been doing.

Harvard professors Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman have studied teams for several decades and determined that for teams to thrive, they must meet six conditions: be a real team, have the right people, have a compelling purpose, have a sound structure, have support and integrate team coaching. Within their body of research, they also discovered that most meetings, frankly, suck.

In their research, Hackman and Wageman isolated what actually happens in meetings: People present information (blah, blah, blah), provide consultation ("Lemme give you some advice ..."), coordinate ("OK, who's doing what?"), make joint decisions ("All in favor, say aye") and, finally, practice collective work ("Let's work together in breakout rooms to solve this problem").

In most team or group meetings, can you guess where most of the time is spent? Correct answer: people presenting information. No surprise there. Listening to people drone on in meetings is the cue for most of us to send e-mails, solve Wordle or daydream. Here are those team meeting activities in generally descending order of time spent in the meeting: Presenting information, followed by providing consultation, then coordination, joint decision-making and, dead last, collective work.

Now, guess what the most efficient meetings look like. Answer: It's the exact opposite of what usually happens! In the most productive meetings, collective work is king and presenting information is the least time-consuming. Simply adjusting how teams spend their time fixes most meetings. Lead with collective work. Consider the example of one executive, who is the CEO of a company and the chair of a major

community nonprofit. He experimented with using collective work sessions (breakouts in Zoom) in both of his organizations and reported that those meetings were the best he's ever had with either group.

### Team Problem-Solving

Universities create and teach knowledge. The primary goal of every doctoral student is to write a dissertation that contributes new knowledge to his or her discipline. Further, the pinnacle of recognition for discovery and knowledge creation is the Nobel Prize—the ultimate acknowledgment awarded each year in various academic disciplines (chemistry, physics, medicine, literature, peace and economics) to those who have contributed the greatest benefit to humankind.

Most universities would be more than proud to have a single Nobel Laureate on their faculty. Well, the Cavendish Physics Labs (a single department) at Cambridge University has received 29 Nobel prizes over the years! How do they do it? One doctoral student, Reg Ravens, studied the department's scientists and discovered that they regularly used one key element in all meetings: asking questions. From his study, he developed a process called Action Learning to help any group or team solve problems.

The requirements for Action Learning were covered in my book, *Leading Well* (Steve Gladis Leadership Partners, 2017), and are as follows:

- **Coach.** You need someone to act as the coach in charge of the process who doesn't directly participate in the problem-solving.
- **Participants.** A total of four to eight people works best. If you have fewer than four people, you lose the power of cognitive diversity—people thinking differently about the same problem. With more than eight people, simply convening the meeting might be difficult.
- **Rules.**
  - The coach acts like a traffic cop and can stop and start the meeting at any time.
  - Participants may only speak if responding to a direct question. No pontificating is allowed.
  - Anyone can ask anyone else in the group a question.
- **Questions.** These should be open-ended and information-seeking. Using words like who, what, how, when or why is the best way to begin your questions.
- **Process.** The 4 P's process works well:
  - Problem (identify what is the real, root nature of the problem, not just its symptoms).
  - Present state (determine how big of a problem it currently is).
  - Possible solutions (list and describe a few good options to solve the problem).
  - Plan (tell the group and coach what you will do, by when and how others will know).

### Team Meeting Cadence

Finally, the cadence of meetings is critical to success. One highly effective sequence of meetings comes from *The Advantage* (Jossey Bass, 2012) by Pat Lencioni, who combined all of his work over the years into his magnum opus and produced a comprehensible team leadership theory to explain "why organizational health trumps everything else in business."

Lencioni discusses the central importance of communication. To that end, he also reviews his intentional structure for highly effective internal corporate communications:

- **Daily check-in meeting.** This is a quick, boots-on-the-ground meeting that should be held in five to 10 minutes while standing up. Each participant shares what they are working on in 30 seconds.
- **Weekly tactical staff meeting.** This meeting without an agenda should last 30 to 45 minutes. In timed two- to three-minute bursts, each participant lists (not discusses) their top two to three priorities. The leader then drills down with questions in the areas he or

she believes are the most important to the team.

- **Monthly strategic meeting.** Take two to four hours per month to tackle the big vision, including strategic and directional questions that take time to solve. Leaders should seek the team's input on the agenda, which should be distributed before the meeting, allowing time to clarify and debate issues to resolution. Using the action learning process for these meetings is effective.
- **Quarterly development meeting.** Quarterly offsite meetings for one to two days allow teams to revisit their strategy, including thematic goals, and define their objectives.

We spend an inordinate amount of time in meetings. They suck, but they don't have to if you spend most of the time doing collective teamwork. Use the action learning process coupled with the 4 P's (Problem, Present, Possible, Plan) to help get to the root problem quickly. And finally, adopt Lencioni's daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly meeting cadence. Intentionally planning your meetings in this way will save time and raise engagement levels across your teams.

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