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McKinsey Explainers

What is an effective meeting?

Effective meetings are all about purpose, preparation, and presentation.

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“This meeting should have been an email.” Emblazoned on coffee mugs, endless memes, and your colleagues’ faces on their ninth video call of the day, this sentence may end up being a catchphrase of the modern era.

As the pandemic rewrote the rule book for coworking and office culture, new processes and untested systems allowed inefficiencies to creep in—inefficiencies that included meetings scheduled for the sake of unstructured discussion or even basic human interaction rather than for productivity. While interacting might be easier than ever, value-creating collaboration isn’t—and its quality seems to be deteriorating.

Effective meetings aren’t just about keeping ourselves from going around the bend. When meetings aren’t run well—or when there are too many of them—decision making becomes slower and the quality of decisions suffers. According to one McKinsey survey, 61 percent of executives said that at least half the time they spent making decisions—much of it surely spent in meetings—was ineffective. Just 37 percent of respondents said their organizations’ decisions were both timely and high quality. And, in a different survey, 80 percent of executives were considering or already implementing changes in meeting structure and cadence in response to the evolution of how people worked during the pandemic.

What’s more, when leaders try to solve for inefficient decision making, they too often look to organizational charts and vertical-command relationships. Rarely, in McKinsey’s experience, do they see the real issue at hand: poor design and execution of collaborative interactions. In other words, you guessed it, ineffective meetings.

It doesn’t have to be this way. When meetings are run well, they not only foster better decisions but also leave attendees feeling energized and motivated to carry the momentum forward independently. For tips on how to put a stop to video call fatigue and restart your team’s productivity, read on.

What does time management have to do with effective meetings?

“The only thing on Earth that never lies to you is your calendar,” says renowned business author and McKinsey alum Tom Peters. “That’s why I’m a fanatic on the topic of time management. But when you use that term, people think, ‘Here’s an adult with a brain. And he’s teaching time management. Find something more important, please.’ But something more important doesn’t exist.”

Endless, diffuse meetings, according to Peters, take up far too much of executives’ precious working time. Half of leaders’ time, he says, citing an idea from the Israeli executive Dov Frohman, should be unscheduled. What should they do with all that unstructured time? One typically cheeky suggestion from Peters is to read more.

The reality is that effective meetings and good time management exist in a virtuous circle. Good time management means you feel empowered to turn down unnecessary meetings—and better meetings mean you spend the rest of your time feeling more purposeful in carrying out your work.

How can leaders address the problem of time scarcity?

McKinsey’s experience shows that leaders may want to stop thinking about time management as primarily an individual problem and start addressing it institutionally. Increasingly, time management is an organizational issue with roots deeply embedded in corporate cultures.

Unsurprisingly, the solution seems to be balance. Executives in one McKinsey survey who reported being satisfied with the way their time is allocated spent 34 percent of their working time interacting with external stakeholders (including boards, customers, and investors), 39 percent in internal meetings (including one-on-ones with direct reports, leadership team meetings, and other employee gatherings), and 24 percent working alone.

Here are five ways to achieve optimal balance in allocating time:

1. *Have a 'time leadership' budget—and a process for allocating it.* When adding a project or initiative, companies should analyze how much leadership attention, guidance, and intervention each will need. In our experience, this is the best way to move toward the goal of treating leaders' time as a finite resource—one that is as precious as a company's financial capital.

2. *Consider time when you introduce organizational change.* Understanding the time required to achieve goals is critical to the long-term success of any organizational change. The hours needed to manage, lead, or supervise an employee can leave managers with little time left over. Getting this balance right can be tough—having too few managers could lead them to feel overwhelmed, with more direct reports than they can manage. But having too many managers can cause redundancies and unnecessary complexity.

3. *Ensure that individuals routinely measure and manage their time.* Time analysis exercises can yield surprising results—and can inspire time management that more closely aligns with organizational priorities. Including time-related metrics in performance reviews is another driver of behavioral change.

4. *Refine the principal calendar.* Revisit all standing meetings and make an honest assessment of which ones are being held out of habit and which ones are genuinely useful.

5. *Provide high-quality administrative support.* In a survey of executives on how they allocate their time, 85 percent of those who considered themselves effective time managers reported that they received strong support in scheduling and allocating time. Only 7 percent of ineffective time allocators said the same. In the case of one global chemical company, the administrative assistant of the CEO considers it her responsibility to ensure that the organization's strategic objectives are reflected in the way she allocates the CEO's time.

What are three questions you should ask yourself before scheduling a meeting?

Good meetings nurture better decision making. On the flip side, inefficient meetings not only waste time but also create distraction and confusion even when people are working independently. Here are three questions you can ask when scheduling a meeting that can help create the clarity needed for efficient decision making.

1. *Should this even be a meeting at all?* Recurring meetings are particularly susceptible to migration from the original purpose toward something more diffuse. Check in with stakeholders to ensure that the frequency is right (weekly meetings could be changed to monthly, perhaps), or think about whether decisions could be best made by an individual—with, of course, guidance from others.

   Then go deeper. Examine whether your company's culture is to encourage meetings rather than individual decision making. To remedy this, if you're a leader, think twice before reflexively accepting any meeting invitation as it appears in your inbox. The goal should be to treat leadership capacity as a finite resource—just like your company's financial capital.

2. *What is this meeting for?* A meeting's title and its purpose are not the same. When the latter isn't clear, meetings can seem frustrating at best and futile at worst. To help avoid this, companies can appoint a "chief of staff" for certain efforts or products. This person collates materials before meetings, ensures that they are distributed ahead of time, and verifies that the due diligence has been done to necessitate a meeting in the first place. This can lead to better-informed participants, which in turn can lead to more effective time spent in meetings—and, ultimately, better decisions.

3. *What is everyone's role?* Even if a meeting has a clear purpose, it's of little use if there is no one present deputized to make a decision. Equally, even if it's clear who the decider is, it's a mistake to hold a meeting when people are unsure of participants' roles. McKinsey analysts have seen poor role clarity stymie productivity and cause frustration, especially when decisions involve complicated business activities that cut across organizational boundaries. Blurry accountability is especially costly in an era where speed and agility confer a competitive advantage.

Meeting participants can be divided into four roles:

— *Decision makers* should be the only participants with a vote, and the ones with the responsibility to decide as they see fit. Sometimes decision makers will need to "disagree and commit," to use a phrase coined by Jeff Bezos in a 2017 letter to Amazon shareholders.

— *Advisers* give input and shape the decision. They typically have a big stake in the decision's outcome.

— *Recommenders* conduct analyses, explore alternatives, illuminate pros and cons, and ultimately recommend a course of action to the advisers and decision makers. The more recommenders the better—for the process, not the decision meeting itself.

— *Execution partners* don't give input in making the decision but are deeply involved in implementation. For optimal speed and clarity, execution partners should be in the room when the decision is made so that they can envision how the implementation will evolve from the decision.

OK, I've eliminated all unnecessary meetings and assigned specific purposes to each one. Now what?

Great work. Now you can assign each meeting to one of the following three categories, and make specific shifts to improve the outcomes.

1. *Decision-making meetings.* This category includes routine decisions, like quarterly business reviews, as well as complex or uncertain decisions, like decisions about investments. In order to make high-quality decisions quickly, it's critical to clarify exactly who is going to make them. Some of these meetings can be held virtually, but complex decision-making meetings are better in person. These meetings should result in a final decision (even if not everyone agrees).

2. *Creative solutions and coordination meetings.* These include innovation sessions—for instance, in support of a new product—as well as routine working sessions, like daily check-ins. Rather than telling people what to do, leaders should work to empower employees to make their own (supported) decisions and to spend more time on high-quality coaching sessions. As with decision-making meetings, creative solutions and coordinating meetings can be virtual—but most innovation sessions should be in person. Innovation sessions should result in potential solutions and prepare for a decision meeting, whereas routine working meetings can result in next steps.

3. *Information-sharing meetings.* Live interaction can be useful for information sharing, especially when an interpretive lens is required or if the information is sensitive. But information-sharing meetings are often regarded as having limited value. Many organizations have recently moved to drastically improve meeting efficiency. Netflix, for example, has limited the duration of meetings to a maximum of 30 minutes and requires that meetings involving one-way information sharing be canceled in favor of other mechanisms like a memo, podcast, or vlog. Early data from Netflix shows that the company has reduced meetings by more than 65 percent and that more than 85 percent of employees favor the approach. The goal of these meetings should be to increase awareness of the new information shared in the meeting.

What are some best practices for video meetings?

Establishing best practices for meetings might seem like common sense—but they are not commonly practiced. Here are some helpful tips from Karin M. Reed, author of the 2021 book *Suddenly Virtual: Making Remote Meetings Work*:

— *Time:* The most effective meetings are short meetings. Rather than scheduling a two-hour call with ten agenda items, cut it down to a 20-minute meeting with two agenda items. There are limits to people's endurance and attention spans in the virtual environment.

— *Participants:* When determining the number of attendees for decision-making meetings, the sweet spot is five to seven. More than seven attendees in any meeting can result in an unwieldy discussion.

— *Appearance:* Pay attention to your appearance when hosting a videoconference. It's not a matter of vanity—it shows respect for your conversation partner and can help you get your message across. Light your face properly: facial expressions are critical to conveying a message. And anything that takes attention away from you, whether it's a crackly audio connection or a silly picture of Uncle Rupert in the background, will distract from your message.

— *Eye contact:* Look at your camera lens when you're talking, not at your screen. This goes against our natural impulses, but eye contact is critical when you're having a conversation. And to maintain eye contact on a video call, you need to look at your camera.

— *Inclusion:* Leaders should engage in proactive facilitation to ensure that everyone has the chance to say their piece. Cold calling on people—gently, and with good intention—lets people know that it's their time to speak. Even if someone doesn't have anything to add, they will have felt included.

For more in-depth exploration of these topics, see McKinsey's People & Organizational Performance Practice. Also check out organizational structure–related job opportunities if you're interested in working at McKinsey.

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