Sweet Eden by Sheron
☆ *inspiring bliss* ☆

11 Ways to Meet Less, Produce More and Reduce Workplace Stress

Sheron Brown, PhD

Time of death: The second the meeting began.

Have you ever worked someplace where it seemed there were more meetings than real work? Have you ever been in a meeting where you thought, "I could have been told this in an email?" Well, you my friend are not alone. It has been the repeated frustration that I've heard from others that gave life to this article.

Meetings, when executed effectively and when necessary, serve a purpose. They provide the opportunity to strategize, share sensitive information, create projects, etc. I believe everyone can agree that meetings have their place in our work, but…

SOMETIMES—MAYBE A LOT OF TIMES—THEY AREN'T THAT EFFECTIVE!

When I worked on a team of Directors, meetings happened every day. We would meet to discuss the need for a meeting, then meet to set the agenda, then actually have the meeting (and go off the agenda), then meet after the meeting to debrief the meeting. If

tasks resulted from the meeting, subcommittees would meet to plan the meetings to complete the tasks. And that was just two days. I remember another job where there was *at least* one meeting every day. Many times, either the right people weren't in the meeting or information was not communicated clearly, making another meeting about the same topic necessary. In short, there were more meetings than work and I am sure productivity was not what it could have been.

I am not alone in my experiences. As I reflected with colleagues in other settings, they were able to share similar and sometimes even worst stories regarding the loss of time due to meetings. It caused me to wonder: how much do meetings cost? The factors in the cost include: (1) the hourly rate of the employees around the table multiplied by the amount of time used to plan, organize, participate in and debrief the meeting; (2) the materials used in the meetings and (3) the food ordered for the meetings. One year the meal budget for meetings totaled $70,000 for a team of ten! Then there is the cost associated with the stress-related health concerns experienced by employees who are constantly "under the gun" to produce with little time because of excessive meetings. How do you begin to count that?

As a leader of my own team, the experiences prompted me to observe what practices allowed for less meetings, more productivity and reduced stress among team members. I witnessed 11 behaviors and tested them. They worked, so I decided to write about them and share with other team leaders.

1. **Examine Your Personal Intentions**
   Prior to the meeting, decide what you want to get out of the meeting as the team leader. Perhaps you want all members to walk away feeling empowered and equipped to complete their tasks. Or maybe you personally want to inspire team members' actions through their deep understanding of how their role connects to a bigger purpose. Personal intentions that are sincere, positive and encouraging is the first step to reducing your team's stress levels because they will sense your care for their success.

2. **Set Meeting Intentions and Objectives**
   As the organizer, set an intention before the meeting. Write down the top 1-3 ideas or concepts you want team members to walk away understanding. Getting clear about your intentions will guide how you plan and lead the meeting to ensure its efficiency.

   Also, establish no more that 3 clear objectives. What do you want from team members? Will they create a protocol, analyze results, evaluate a new tool? And to what end? In order to improve a process? Integrate systems? Reduce waste? An example of a clear objective may be "*Analyze data in order to create appropriate action steps for each team member.*"

You may find yourself wanting to create more than three, but don't. Discipline yourself. Fine tuning the meeting's purpose on the front end is key to ensuring not only a purposeful meeting, but increased productivity after the meeting.

3. Honor the Agenda

Create an agenda that aligns with your objectives then, send it out to meeting attendees to ask for their input with the clear understanding that if there is none, the meeting will run according to the agenda. Afterward, ask for a volunteer to serve as the keeper of the agenda and inform him/her that their role will ensure the team stays true to the agenda. Side topics that do not impact the work outlined in the agenda must be tabled for another time. This method guarantees productivity.

4. Watch the Clock

This one is simple. In addition to you as the meeting leader remaining aware of the time, ask someone to volunteer for the role of time keeper. Often times, mission creep can set in during meetings because of conversations that take the meeting off course. Table those discussions for a later conversation and empower the time keeper to keep you and team members on track to end the meeting on time. This method ensures efficiency.

5. Establish Meeting Norms for the Team

If your team hasn't done this already, establish team norms or agreements. Some standard agreements include, start on time-end on time, monitor you air time, silence electronic devices and be fully present. Again, ask for a volunteer to serve as the keeper of the agreements and empower him/her to reinforce the norms during the meeting when the team is going astray. This simple strategy when done well allows for a focused meeting and yields productivity.

6. Avoid Meeting Creep

Get the work of the meeting done in the meeting. Avoid setting another meeting to further discuss what should be resolved in the current meeting per the agenda. Establishing additional meetings is sometimes a subconscious mechanism for work avoidance. "As long as we are meeting we feel busy," is the unspoken thought. Your team may appear busy with creating all meeting related documents, but it's likely that they may be busy doing the wrong work. Increase post-meeting productivity by applying this technique.

7. Drink Water

Our bodies need water. Nourishing our bodies with water during meetings yield two results. First, it provides health benefits such as increasing energy, boosting the immune system and remedying headaches. All of these benefits are great in relation to meetings, but there's another benefit that supports the efficiency of the meeting. Water flushes toxins and flushing requires the participants to leave the meeting. Instead of taking a restroom break, end the meeting when it's

scheduled to end. Let your bladder be your guide, then end the meeting to allow everyone to be about the work of acting on the meeting objectives.

8. **Put it in an Email**

   This one is easy. If you simply want to deliver information or updates, put it in an email. If you're concerned the email will be overlooked, use a compelling subject like such as "RESPOND BY COB TODAY," then ask readers to reply that they have read and understood the content. This way you know who read it and you know they can be held accountable for knowing. This allows the meeting time to be held sacred for addressing the meeting objectives.

9. **Allow Truth Telling**

   Honesty is the best policy, especially on teams. In Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,* the first element discussed for effective teams is trust[i]. In order to have effective meetings, increased productivity and reduced stress, a culture of trust is a must. Team members must *know and feel* that it is fine to share their disagreements and possibly better ideas. Egos have to be in check for the sake of organizational goals and long-term productivity. Allow respectful truth telling on your team.

10. **Tell Yourself a New Story About Work**

    It is possible that you believe every element of your work requires a meeting, but do they? Consider all elements of the work. Write them down, then ask yourself, "Do I really need to call a meeting for this?" Also challenge yourself by asking, "Does a meeting on this item lead to tangible results in relation to organizational goals, or does it simply make me busy?" This is a tough one that will require you to be honest with yourself, but if you're willing to go there, you'll spare yourself and your team from unnecessary meetings and allow more time for the critical work to get done.

11. **Stand Up for Your Health**

    As a Baldrige Examiner a few years ago, I witnessed an approach to meetings that yielded the most efficient meeting I've ever seen. All members were standing. According to the leader, standing allowed for an increased attitude in valuing time. He indicated that the team used to meet longer than necessary prior to implementing the technique, but once they shifted to standing meetings, they stayed on topic and got through their agenda quickly.

    In addition to efficiency, standing also has health benefits. Too much sitting increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease and early death[ii, iii]. On the other hand, increased opportunities to stand during the day lowers the risk of weight gain, may lower blood sugar and heart disease, reduces back pain and improves mood and energy levels[iv].

When meetings are efficient and less frequent, there is more time for producing quality work. Likewise, there is less "under the gun" stress energy. When high stress levels are

consistent, your team is faced with chronic stress. In addition to contributing to negative health conditions in your team mates, chronic stress reduces the effectiveness of the executive functions in the brain. In other words, there'll be more mistakes, poorly executed tasks, wasted time and lack of results. If you want the opposite of this, plan and lead more effective meetings less frequently by employing a few or all of the tips discussed here. You'll better serve your organization, your team and yourself while infusing life into your work.

---

[i] Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

[ii] Biswas, A., Oh, P. I., Faulkner, G. E., Bajaj, R. R., Silver, M. A., Mitchell, M. S., & Alter, D. A. (2015, January). *Sedentary time and its association with risk for disease incidence, mortality, and hospitalization in adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis.* (Research Report No. 10.7326/M14-1651). PubMed.gov.

[iii] Wilmot, E. G., Edwardson, C. L., Achana, F. A., Davies, M. J., Gorely, T., Gray, L. J., . . . Biddle, S. J. (2012, November). *Sedentary time in adults and the association with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and death: systematic review and meta-analysis* (Research Report No. 10.1007/s00125-012-2677-z). PubMed.gov.

[iv] Pronk, N. P., Katz, A. S., Lowry, M., & Payer, J. R. (2012, September). *Reducing occupational sitting time and improving worker health: the Take-a-Stand Project, 2011* (Research Report No. 10.5888.pcd9.110323). PubMed.gov.