

IDEAS AT WORK

Cancel All Meetings, or Transform Them?

Takeaways

- Clearly identify the purpose and agenda of any meeting in advance
- Follow up after meetings to make sure everyone is on the same page
- Recognize which situations don't require a full meeting

As a quarterback, I obviously played an important role in our offensive meetings. Part of my job was to meet with our offensive coaches to come up with the game plan, and work with the other players on the offense to be ready for the upcoming game.

But I found that some of the most valuable time was when I sat in on meetings with the defensive coaches! It helped me understand how opposing defenses were thinking, so I could be an even better quarterback.

We're not all playing football, but meetings are a part of life. A lot of people sense that those meetings are not as productive as they could be. One of the challenges in any business is to learn how to get the most out of your valuable time. This article from our Senior Project Manager has great lessons for making sure meetings aren't wasted time!



Jim Tarkenton

Cancel All Meetings, or Transform Them?



How much money are you wasting on meetings?

Employers and employees alike regard too many of those meetings as a waste of time. According to a [2023 study](#), the average company invests more than \$80,000 per year in staff and team meetings. Judging by the number of meetings employees feel comfortable skipping, at least \$25,000 of that investment is money down the drain.

So, should you cancel all future meetings and move everything to Slack? Or is there a better solution?

The truth is, meetings have gotten a bad rap. It's certainly true that a bad meeting is worse than none at all. But meetings are also essential to a healthy, sustainable business – if you do them the right way.

So how do you lead successful meetings? That's the \$80,000 per employee question, and the answer is multi-faceted. But it really comes down to getting four things right: **Purpose, Preparation, Engagement, and Follow-up.**

1. What's the point?

It might sound obvious, but before you schedule a meeting, ask yourself why you're having a meeting in the first place. What do you hope to achieve? Most failed meetings are failures because of a lack of orientation: no one knows why they are there. Taking just five minutes to jot down the reasons and communicate them to the team in advance will help ensure the meeting is productive, and will allow you to avoid having meetings you don't really need. It's fine to schedule gatherings for abstract concepts like "team building" or "professional development." Just be sure you know the reason why, and your expectation for the outcome.

2. Prepare in advance

Just like giving a speech or making a sales call, success often lives and dies in the preparation. It's very tempting – and far too common – for leaders to call a meeting and do no prep work in advance, leading to a disorganized mess.

But a little time invested up front can reap huge rewards. Here are four keys to good prep work:

- **Figure out who needs to attend.** Sometimes that means including everyone involved in the project or task, especially for a kick-off meeting or a regular status conference. But sometimes a smaller task force is more appropriate to tackle a specific issue or delicate problem. Think that through in advance to make sure you have the right people in the room.
- **Figure out who's going to lead.** It might not be you. Even if you see a need for a meeting, you might not be the right person to lead it. If someone else is the point person on a project or the champion of an initiative, let them take the lead.
- **Discuss expectations in advance.** If you delegate leadership of the meeting to someone else, make sure you brief that person on your goals and expectations for the meeting.
- **Create an agenda, and circulate it in advance of the meeting,** ideally one or two days beforehand. This will allow attendees to prep, gather any necessary info or data, and ask questions in advance. It also means everyone walks into the room understanding what will be covered.

3. Get engaged

Productive meetings usually start with a quick explanation of why you're there and what you hope to accomplish. You gave everyone an agenda in advance; now use it to guide the conversation. But remember: this isn't a presentation, it's a discussion. Encourage participation, including brainstorming or pursuing a new idea that comes up, or tackling a problem you didn't anticipate.

In a great meeting, the leader pulls off the perfect balance between lively engagement and respecting everyone's time by managing the flow to stay basically on course. Here are three useful strategies:

- **We've all come across "meeting hijackers,"** people who change the subject, talk nonstop, or get fixated on irrelevancies. The best way to get back on track is to tactfully interrupt, confirm that their comments are valuable to you, and suggest that you find time to pursue that conversation with them outside of the meeting.
- **Conversely, you'll also have "flies on the wall,"** people who never seem to speak up during meetings. If you already know who those folks are, consider approaching them before the meeting and letting them know you'd really like to hear their thoughts on a particular topic. You might get a tidbit from them in advance, and then ask them to elaborate in the meeting (but warn them you're going to "call on them" beforehand).



- **Sometimes it just takes one person to break the ice.** Most people don't want to be the first to talk, but they are willing to chime in later. Consider approaching someone who doesn't mind being first and asking them to kick off the discussion. You can arrange that in advance with a simple, "I'm counting on you to kick off our discussion of item 3B on our agenda," or just call on someone in the meeting who you know won't be afraid to speak first.



4. Follow up

Take your meetings from good to great by following up after the meeting is over. You can do it through email, text, chat, or any other written channel; just make sure you do it. Effective follow-up includes recapping what was covered, clarifying what was agreed on, and articulating next steps and assignments, with deadlines, if appropriate. Just like a great meeting, a follow-up is not a one-way communication; invite questions, requests, and confirmation to keep the lines of communication open and eliminate confusion.

Signs and Benefits of a Good Meeting

Throughout the course of any meeting, your team will provide you with one form of data or another, to let you know how it's progressing. If it's going well, you should sense some (or all) of these:

- The team shows increased confidence and eagerness to take action.
- They ask intelligent questions and raise valuable points during and after the meeting.
- They clarify whether "what they heard" matches "what you said."
- They comfortably express opinions and concerns, without fear of judgment.
- You feel comfortable backing off and letting them do their jobs.

One of the biggest benefits of productive meetings is **raising the quality of work** produced by your team. If you follow the prescription above, your meetings will equip team members at all levels with the information and understanding that helps them do their jobs better.

Another key benefit is **company morale**. Employees go the extra mile when they feel heard, when their input is sought, and when their contributions are valued. All of this can be accomplished through well-done meetings.

A third reward – one you may not think of at first – is conflict. Of course, we're talking about **healthy conflict** – the kind of disagreements that lead to stronger ties and more intelligent solutions. Meetings with little to no dissent or proposed alternatives can be under-productive. The best disagreements often lead to the best solutions.

When Should You Not Have a Meeting?

Of course, not every issue requires a discussion, and not every discussion requires a meeting. While well-run meetings offer plenty of upside, we're all in favor of fewer meetings! Here are a few reasons not to meet:

- When you can do follow-ups by email
- When you send out a group message asking if anyone has updates for a meeting, and no one responds
- Operationalized, day-to-day activities and decisions that can be handled without meetings
- General information you need to distribute
- “Yes” or “No” decisions
- When you're a frequent and consistent communicator. If you believe in “management by walking around,” some meetings become redundant; you cover many of the things your team needs to know through your day-to-day conversations with them.

Tarkenton helps partners design and execute communication plans that revolutionize morale, customer impact and profitability. If you struggle to move your team in a substantive direction toward greater cohesion and customer satisfaction, maybe it's time for a fresh strategy. [Schedule a complimentary consultation](#) with a member of our business development team today.



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