

CoolTimeLife Podcast 67 Meetings - Mastering Meetings - Blubrry transcript

Picture this. You have two stores side by side in a mall, or two merchants side-by-side on Amazon, and they are both selling the same product. One seller has the item priced at \$20, the other is selling the identical item for \$19.95. Which vendor will sell more? It's not a trick question. It will be the vendor with the slightly cheaper price of \$19.95. It isn't so much that people really need that extra five cents. It's that the lower price is also a psychological price point. It moves the item down to a completely lower bracket, into the teens rather than the 20s. This technique has been used in retail for decades. It's highly influential. It gives people the sense of getting a deal. If we used this kind of technique with time-consuming activities like meetings, we would all get a lot more done.



Hello and welcome to CoolTimeLife. I'm Steve Prentice. Each of our CoolTimeLife podcasts focuses on a topic dealing with people, productivity, technology, and life, and each offers ideas and facts you need to know about to thrive in today's busy world. An index of our podcasts is available at steveprentice.com under the podcast link. This is an updated episode, revised and re-recorded in 2023.

What do you think is the most important ingredient for a successful meeting – whether in person or online through video chat? I'll give you a hint, it's not the agenda.

This Could Have been an Email

Meetings are considered by many to be the single biggest time waster in the workday. Millions of meetings happen every day around the world. They are considered necessary as an opportunity to share information, to discuss, or to collaborate. But overall our meeting culture is a leaking ship – a impractical approach based on tradition – we've always had meetings in this way – supported by the permanent human capacity for just getting through things as best as we can. There's also the fear factor, of course, that you don't want to annoy your boss by declining an invite.

So, why are meetings a failure in their traditional format? First of all, there are too many of them, and many meetings are unnecessary. Hence the expression, "this could have been an email." In addition, most don't start on time or are held up due to late arrivals. How many times have you been at a meeting, whether in person or on Zoom, where the chairperson says, "so-and-so isn't here yet – let's give them another five minutes and then we'll get started"? Many meetings also have unclear agendas. They go on for too long. The wrong people are invited or have to stay overly long. People introduce irrelevant topics off agenda. They conclude with vague ideas and unresolved issues, and very often they end late. These are all powerful disincentives, and worse, are a sad waste of time and a stress inducing delay that adds to an already overloaded workday.

When we talk about best practices for a meeting, this is based on the assumption that the meeting must exist at all. It must justify its existence somehow. Every meeting must promise a value that exceeds the sum of the individual hourly worth of the participants around the table. The meeting has to have a bottom line dollar value that exceeds and is greater than all the things that these invitees could otherwise be doing in that period of time. It has to prove that it will advance the cause of an organization in some way. Whether the intent of the meeting is to coordinate an action or exchange information or motivate a team or discuss issues or to make a decision, the meeting must achieve this in the shortest time possible. That's its true purpose.

When Will It Be Over?

The most important element of a successful meeting is its end time. In advertising a meeting – and I use that word specifically – the most significant motivating factor is, "when will it be over?" Giving people a

promise of its end time is instrumental in getting them to show up on time, and to be engaged in its content.

Many times throughout this CoolTimeLife podcast series, I talk about the fear of the unknown, and even wrote a book about it, called *The Future of Workplace Fear*. Humans are dominated by emotion, and the strongest emotion of all is fear. In this regard, the fear of the unknown attaches itself to concepts such as how long a meeting will last. When will it be over? When can I get back to my day? These are the types of uncertainties that make people hesitant to participate or make them procrastinate to a point of arriving late, because they don't know when they will be freed up again.

The simple solution is to deliver the facts that will neutralize their fear of the unknown, and that will allow them to confidently move into a situation that they feel in control of, and that they can see an end to.

Enter the 55-Minute Meeting

The solution that I have taught for years, and which still applies in the era of video chat is called the 55-Minute Meeting. Remember the story I told at the start of this podcast, about the competing vendors and which one would sell their inventory first? It was the \$19.95 company, right? Why? Because people are more motivated when they not only have clear facts in front of them, but also when they feel they're getting a deal.

Now a clarification here: Just because I call this a 55-Minute Meeting does not mean that every meeting must be exactly 55 minutes. If you can get them shorter, that's even better. The point is, it's a break away from a culture that says "everything must occur in one-hour blocks" which not only leads to time wastage, but also to excess fatigue, especially when there's no break time built in.

A meeting of 55 minutes or less focuses on three key proactive items:

- First, it aligns better with the human attention span. A typical attention span can never go longer than an hour, and for most people it is now much, much less than that. It's a big mistake and quite an anachronism to expect people to be tuned in for a full hour. They just can't.
- Second is the fact that it is indeed finite. We can see the end, which is a big inoculation against the fear of the unknown.
- Third is that shorter meetings make it easier to build in buffer zones – vital blocks of time of five or ten minutes for you to rest, shift gears, and stay in control of your day and your thoughts.

Not only do traditional one hour meetings last longer than peoples' attention spans, they also cause havoc for the rest of the day. Let's look at an example:

If I schedule a meeting for one hour, let's say it starts at 1:00 and ends at 2:00, that meeting really steps into other parts of people's calendars. Even if the meeting does end on time exactly at 2:00, people need to pack up, leave, or log off, make notes, schedule follow ups, and this moves into the two o'clock block. It's not possible to be on time for a 2:00 meeting when you've just finished a 1:00 meeting, even if it's on time.

Also it's very difficult for people to commit to anything at 2:00 even if they wanted to. So your one-hour meeting at 1:00 makes other events more difficult for everyone, which will naturally result in reduced engagement from your participants. I liken it to a passenger plane pulling in at the gate and allowing the next flight load of people to try to board the plane while the current passengers try to get off.

Even in this current age, the 2020's post-peak Covid, where people are meeting virtually, how often have your online meetings started late? For the same reasons – people still stuck in their earlier meeting, as well as newer reasons, including not being familiar with the app and needing to download updates before logging on?

The bottom line is, we need shorter meetings, fewer meetings, and carefully protected buffers between them.

The Benefits of that Space

Going back once again to the competing retailers at the start of this story, it's important to recognize the emotional appeal of breaks and gaps. A healthy workplace is one in which rest and refueling are parts of the day, not luxuries to be enjoyed on your own time. Not only is this essential for peoples' mental and physical health, it also vastly improves the ROI of the meeting itself. Healthy people do better. It's as simple as that. Remember that people literally thrive on the anticipation of breaks and rest to come.

When I call a meeting, I advertise it. I use that word specifically. It's not a command, it's an invitation, and as such it must appeal to an inner motivation. Any manager can command people to arrive at a meeting, and they will likely attend, but their level of engagement will be flat or absent. As the meeting leader, I must advertise its attractiveness primarily by addressing peoples' physiological and psychological needs, specifically answering their internal question "when will this meeting be over?" and reminding them they will have space to recover, relax, and to commit to another task or meeting without feeling pressured or rushed.

These principles have proven to work extremely well in reducing the number of late arrivals and non-engaged employees because when they see they're getting a deal in terms of time, and when they see that the meeting duration is manageable, and when they see they have the freedom to leave whenever, they are more likely to want to be part of the actual event. That's very different from simply showing up with a mind distracted by all the other priorities left behind.

So the essence of the 55-Minute Meeting is not that it absolutely has to be 55 minutes, but rather, that it is not an hour by default.

Where shall we meet?

We don't need to go into dedicated physical meeting rooms to communicate any more. There are much more practical ways of connecting remotely. If the reason for meeting in a room is to simply get people away from their other work in order to focus, well, that never worked. We have had access to email and text messages for twenty years now, so you can't cut people off from the outside, and also, focus doesn't work according to a Microsoft Outlook calendar. Human focus and attention ride the day like a roller coaster, depending on factors like time of day, food, sleep, stress, and the importance of the meeting. Trapping people inside a cell for an hour or more has never been productive and has always been doubly costly given the other things they could have been doing with their time.

Also, individual physiologies differ. Some people are morning people, others are night owls, and everyone has problems with meeting in the midafternoon. In addition, some people are introverts, or have language issues, which prevent them from fully participating, and this can be paired with the presence of dominant personalities in the room, which, all in all, completely drain a meeting of its full potential.

Time isn't what it was, either. People have shorter attention spans and more numerous tasks and pressures to address every minute. So much of traditional workplace procedure is based on how things were in the mid-20th century, where there felt like there was more time to focus on meetings simply because people could be isolated from their other work for a while. There was also precious little alternative back then. For centuries, the only way to share knowledge was to bring people into a room all together at the same time.

Today, there are also new and more dynamic media platforms that can attain the true goals of a meeting. These include asynchronous meetings through channels like Slack, and virtual meetings in Toucan, Virbela and many more.

People are wary of change, but we embrace it all the same. Managers, who define themselves by who they manage can admittedly have a problem with no longer being able to pull a group together to work on an idea or to chat. But the fact is, the opportunities to do that better, using the technologies that are now freely available and which were kick-started into legitimacy by the Covid lockdowns of 2020-2021 reveal most of all that great managers will be the ones who capture the potential of these new approaches, not for the sake of the technology itself, but for the wellbeing, engagement and productivity of the people they lead.

And it all starts by letting people know they are getting a deal. A real deal. Something that makes their life just a little bit better.

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