

Death by Meeting

a Leadership Fable
(Lencioni)

Summary

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1-The Fable	1
2-The Model.....	1
The Paradox of Meetings.....	1
Overcoming Lack of Drama and Conflict	1
Overcoming Lack of Contextual Structure	1
3-Final Thoughts	2
Five Tips for Better Meetings.....	2
4-Tools.....	3
Meeting Type Overview	3
Tactical Meeting Note-taking Guide	4
Death by Meeting Quiz	5

Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable

Patrick Lencioni

When it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team, there is no substitute for a **good** meeting.

Note: This summary replaces corporate terminology with more generic terms relevant to social sector organizations.

1-The Fable

The Fable is a story of how an organization's ineffective meetings deteriorated both its performance and employee morale.

As the story unfolds, the leaders are confronted with the problem. With some help, they arrive at a method for making their meetings productive and energizing.

2-The Model

The Paradox of Meetings

Meetings are a puzzling paradox. They are critical yet often frustrating and seemingly pointless.

Bad meetings begin with the attitudes and approaches of the people who lead and take part in them.

The two main problems with meetings are that they are boring and ineffective.

Why are they boring and ineffective?

- They are boring because they lack drama and relevant constructive ideological conflict.
- They are ineffective because they lack contextual structure. There is no clarity around what topics are appropriate.

Overcoming Lack of Drama and Conflict

The Hook: The key to injecting drama into a meeting is to jolt participants during the first 10 minutes of a meeting. You need to give people a reason to care.

Mining for Conflict: A meeting leader must make it a priority to seek out and uncover any important issues about which team member do not agree. The only thing more painful than confronting an uncomfortable topic is pretending it doesn't exist.

Real-Time Permission: A leader can minimize people's discomfort with conflict by interrupting them to let them know that their constructive conflict is helpful.

Overcoming Lack of Contextual Structure

The biggest structural problem with meetings is our tendency to throw every type of issue into the same meeting. There should be different meetings for different purposes.

Daily Check-In: The purpose of a daily huddle is to provide a quick forum for ensuring that nothing falls through the cracks. Keep it to 1-minute per person simply stating their key activities for the day.

Weekly Tactical: The purpose of this meeting is to address tactical issues of immediate concern.

- Lightning Round: Each person states their two or three priorities for the week. (1-minute per person)
- Progress Review: Team reviews progress on key metrics (4-6). There should be no discussion of issues.
- Real-Time Agenda: Based on the priorities that members stated and the progress on metrics, decide what tactical issues to address to ensure that short-term objectives are not in jeopardy. If any long-term or strategic issues arise, put those on the parking lot for possible topics on the Monthly Strategic meeting.
- Goal: Resolve tactical issues, remove obstacles, and get everyone on the same page.

Monthly Strategy: The purpose of this meeting is to analyze, debate, and decide what to do about critical issues that will affect the organization in fundamental ways. The meetings should occur at regular intervals; however, you can call an additional Ad Hoc Strategic Meeting if there is an issues that can't wait.

- Schedule three to four hours for the meeting.

- Put, only one to three issues on the agenda.
- Assign a lead person for each item to do research and prepare for the discussion. Hold members accountable for coming to the meeting prepared.
- Mine for conflict and engage members in unfiltered, productive ideological debate.

Quarterly Off-Site Review: The purpose of this meeting is to step away from daily issues and review the organization more holistically.

- **Comprehensive Strategy Review:** Reassess your strategic direction.
- **Team Review:** Assess yourselves and your behaviors as a team. Identify any tendencies that

may not be in the best interests of the organization.

- **Personnel Review:** Talk across departments about key employees. Jointly manage and retain top performers and work with poor performers.
- **Environmental Review:** Look at what is happening around you with an eye to spot trends, opportunities, and threats .
- **Team Unity Caution:** Adding even one person who is not a team member, no matter how well-liked or well-informed, can disrupt team unity.

3-Final Thoughts

Bad meetings generate anger, lethargy, and cynicism.

When you properly use meetings, they save time. Good meetings provide opportunities to accelerate decision making and eliminate the need to revisit issues. Improving meetings is not just an opportunity to enhance the performance of organizations. It is also a way to positively impact the lives of our people.

Five Tips for Better Meetings

1. **Purpose:** Know the purpose of your meeting. Is it about solving a tactical, short-term problem, or a critical strategic issue? Are participants meant to brainstorm, debate, offer alternatives, or just sit and listen? Don't let your meeting devolve into a combination of all of these, leaving people confused about what is going on and what you expect of them.
2. **What's at Stake:** Clarify what is at stake. Do participants understand the price of having a bad meeting? Do they know what could go wrong if your team makes bad decisions? If not, why should they care?
3. **The Hook:** Hook them from the outset. Have you thought about the first 10 minutes of your meeting and how you're going to get people engaged? If you don't tee up your topic and dramatize why it matters, you might as well invite participants to check-out.
4. **Time:** Set aside enough time. Are you going to be tempted to end the meeting before resolution has been achieved? Contrary to popular wisdom, the mark of a great meeting is not how short it is, or whether it ends on time. The key is whether it ends with clarity and commitment from participants.
5. **Constructive Conflict:** Provoke constructive conflict. Are your people uncomfortable during meetings and tired at the end? If not, they're probably not mixing it up enough and getting to the bottom of important issues. Conflict shouldn't be personal, but it should be ideologically emotional. Seek out opposing views and ensure that they are completely aired.

4-Tools

The following tools are adapted from those that Patrick Lencioni has created.

Meeting Type Overview

<i>Meeting Type</i>	<i>Time Required</i>	<i>Purpose / Format</i>
Daily Check-In	5-10 min.	Share daily schedules and activities. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Don't sit down.● Keep it administrative.● Don't cancel even when some people can't be there.
Weekly Tactical	45-90 min.	Review weekly activities and metrics. Resolve tactical obstacles and issues. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Don't set agenda until after initial reporting.● Postpone strategic discussions.
Monthly Strategic (or ad-hoc strategic)	2-4 hours	Discuss, analyze, brainstorm, and decide upon critical issues affecting long-term success. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Limit to one or two topics.● Prepare and do research before the meeting.● Engage in good conflict.
Quarterly Off-site Review	1-2 days	Review strategy, trends, key people, team development. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Get out of the office (not necessarily out of town).● Focus on work; limit social activities.● Don't over-structure or over-burden the schedule.

Death by Meeting Quiz

1	Yes / No	Are your meetings dull and uninspiring?
2	Yes / No	Do team members question the usefulness of meetings?
3	Yes / No	Are critical issues avoided or overlooked during meetings?
4	Yes / No	Do you wonder if team members are holding back during meetings?
5	Yes / No	Do team members complain about having to attend meetings?
6	Yes / No	Do you find that meetings end without resolution of critical issues?
7	Yes / No	Do you discuss administrative, tactical, and strategic topics in the same meeting?
8	Yes / No	Are important discussions cut short because of time constraints?
9	Yes / No	Is your team reluctant to go off site more than once a year to discuss the state of your organization?
10	Yes / No	Do team members seem disengaged during meetings?

- If you answered NO to all of these questions, congratulations! You have one of those rare teams who has mastered the art of meetings.
- If you answered YES to 1-4 of these questions, you could improve your organization's decision-making and overall effectiveness by making a few adjustments to the structure and content of your meetings.
- If you answered YES to 5 or more of these questions, your meetings are probably causing you to waste considerable resources and creating confusion in your organization. You should consider making significant changes in the content and structure of your meetings.