The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings

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Fast Magazine December 2007

Naomi Chavez, an internal consultant for Cisco Systems, one of Silicon Valley's leading network-equipment manufacturers, is frustrated: "We have the most ineffective meetings of any company I've ever seen."

Kevin Eassa, vice president of operations for the disk division of Conner Peripherals, another Silicon Valley giant, is realistically resigned: "We realize our meetings are unproductive. A consulting firm is trying to help us, and we think they've hit the mark. But we've got a long way to go."

Richard Collard, senior manager of network operations at Federal Express, is simply exasperated: "We just seem to meet and meet and meet and we never seem to do anything."

Meetings are the most universal -- and universally despised -- part of business life. But bad meetings do more than ruin an otherwise pleasant day. William R. Daniels, senior consultant at American Consulting & Training of Mill Valley, California, has introduced meeting-improvement techniques to companies including Applied Materials and Motorola. He is adamant about the real stakes: bad meetings make bad companies.

"Meetings matter because that's where an organization's culture perpetuates itself," he says. "Meetings are how an organization says, 'You are a member.' So if every day we go to boring meetings full of boring people, then we can't help but think that this is a boring company. Bad meetings are a source of negative messages about our company and ourselves."

It's not supposed to be this way. In a business world that is faster, tougher, leaner, and more downsized than ever, you might expect the sheer demands of competition (not to mention the impact of e-mail and groupware) to curb our appetite for meetings. In reality, the opposite may be true. As more work becomes teamwork, and fewer people remain to do the work that exists, the number of meetings is likely to increase rather than decrease. Jon Ryburg, president of the Facility Performance Group in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is an organizational psychologist who advises companies on office design and "meeting ergonomics." He tells his clients that they need twice as much meeting space as they did 20 years ago. The reason? "More and more companies are team-based companies, and in team-based companies most work gets done in meetings."

A variety of tools and techniques (plus a healthy dose of common sense) can make meetings less painful, more productive, maybe even fun. There's also an important role for technology, although the undeniable power of computer-enabled meeting systems usually comes with astronomical price tags. Still, there's lots to learn from electronic "meetingware" even if you never buy it. What follows is Fast Company's guide to the seven sins of deadly meetings and, more important, seven steps to salvation.

Sin #1: People don't take meetings seriously. They arrive late, leave early, and spend most of their time doodling.

Salvation: Adopt Intel's mind-set that meetings are real work.

There are as many techniques to improve the "crispness" of meetings as there are items on the typical meeting agenda. Some companies punish latecomers with a penalty fee or reprimand them in the minutes of the meeting. But these techniques address symptoms, not the disease. Disciplined meetings are about mind-set -- a shared conviction among all the participants that meetings are real work. That all-too-frequent expression of relief -- "Meeting's over, let's get back to work" -- is the mortal enemy of good meetings.

"Most people simply don't view going to meetings as doing work," says William Daniels. "You have to make your meetings uptime rather than downtime."

Is there a company with the right mind-set? Daniels nominates Intel, the semiconductor manufacturer famous for its managerial toughness and crisp execution. Walk into any conference room at any Intel factory or office anywhere in the world and you will see on the wall a poster with a series of simple questions about the meetings that take place there. Do you know the purpose of this meeting? Do you have an agenda? Do you know your role? Do you follow the rules for good minutes?

These posters are a visual reminder of just how serious Intel is about productive meetings. Indeed, every new employee, from the most junior production worker to the highest ranking executive, is required to take the company's home-grown course on effective meetings. For years the course was taught by CEO Andy Grove himself, who believed that good meetings were such an important part of Intel's culture that it was worth his time to train the troops. "We talk a lot about meeting discipline," says Michael Fors, corporate training manager at Intel University. "It isn't complicated. It's doing the basics well: structured agendas, clear goals, paths that you're going to follow. These things make a huge difference."

Sin #2: Meetings are too long. They should accomplish twice as much in half the time.

Salvation: Time is money. Track the cost of your meetings and use computer- enabled simultaneity to make them more productive.

Almost every guru invokes the same rule: meetings should last no longer than 90 minutes. When's the last time your company held to that rule?

One reason meetings drag on is that people don't appreciate how expensive they are. James B. Rieley, director of the Center for Continuous Quality Improvement at the Milwaukee Area Technical College, recently decided to change all that. He did a survey of the college's 130-person management council to find out how much time its members spent in meetings. When he multiplied their time by their salaries, he determined that the college was spending $3 million per year on management-council meetings alone. Money talks: after Rieley's study came out, the college trained 40 people as facilitators to keep meetings on track. Bernard DeKoven, founder of the Institute for Better Meetings in Palo Alto, California, has gone Rieley one step better. He's developed software called the Meeting Meter that allows any team or department to calculate, on a running basis, how much their meetings cost. After someone

inputs the names and salaries of meeting participants, the program starts ticking. Think of it as a national debt clock for meetings.

DeKoven emphasizes that he created the Meeting Meter as a conversation piece rather than as a serious management tool. It's a visible way to put meeting productivity on the agenda. "When I use the meter, I don't just talk about the cost of meetings," he says, "I talk about the cost of bad meetings. Because bad meetings lead to even more meetings, and over time the costs become awe-inspiring."

Technology can do more than just keep meetings shorter. It can also increase productivity -- that is, help generate more ideas and decisions per minute. One of the main benefits of meetingware is that it allows participants to violate the first rule of good behavior in most other circumstances: wait your turn to speak. With Ventana's GroupSystems V, the most powerful meeting software available today, participants enter their comments and ideas into workstations. The workstations organize the comments and project them onto a monitor for the whole group to see. Most everyone who has studied or participated in computer-enabled meetings agrees that this capacity for simultaneity produces dramatic gains in the number of ideas and the speed with which they are generated.

Geoff Bywater, senior vice president of marketing and promotion for FoxMusic, recently organized a strategic retreat for the 170 top executives of 20th Century Fox Filmed Entertainment. He used a computer system supplied by CoVision, a San Francisco consulting firm that specializes in technology-enabled meetings. Apple PowerBooks outfitted with customized software allowed participants to respond to questions, propose ideas, and vote on options -- all at the same time.

"We had 170 of the brightest people in the company in one room," Bywater reports. "The challenge was, how much information and how many ideas could we get out of them? Even if we had divided into 15 breakout groups, we'd still have only 15 people speaking at the same time. People were amazed. If we asked a question and each person typed in 2 ideas, that's nearly 350 ideas in five minutes! That was the biggest impact of the technology - the number of ideas generated in such a short time."

Be warned, though: electronic meetings can be more productive than traditional meetings, but they're not always shorter. "The good news about computer-supported meetings is that the discussions tend not to be repetitive or redundant," says Michael Schrage, a consultant on collaborative technologies and the author of No More Teams!, an influential guide to group work and meetings. "The bad news is that the meetings can become longer. The computer-supported environment encourages people to discuss things a little more thoroughly than they might otherwise."

Sin #3: People wander off the topic. Participants spend more time digressing than discussing.

Salvation: Get serious about agendas and store distractions in a "parking lot." It's the starting point for all advice on productive meetings: stick to the agenda. But it's hard to stick to an agenda that doesn't exist, and most meetings in most companies are decidedly agenda-free. "In the real world," says Schrage, "agendas are about as rare as the white rhino. If they do exist, they're about as useful. Who hasn't been in meetings where someone tries to prove that the agenda isn't appropriate?"

Agendas are worth taking seriously. Intel is fanatical about them; it has developed an agenda "template" that everyone in the company uses. Much of the template is unsurprising. An Intel

agenda (circulated several days before a meeting to let participants react to and modify it) lists the meeting's key topics, who will lead which parts of the discussion, how long each segment will take, what the expected outcomes are, and so on.

Intel agendas also specify the meeting's decision-making style. The company distinguishes among four approaches to decisions: authoritative (the leader has full responsibility); consultative (the leader makes a decision after weighing group input); voting; and consensus. Being clear and up-front about decision styles, Intel believes, sets the right expectations and helps focus the conversation.

"Going into the meeting, people know how they're giving input and how that input will get rolled up into a decision," says Intel's Michael Fors. "If you don't have structured agendas, and people aren't sure of the decision path, they'll bring up side issues that are related but not directly relevant to solving the problem."

Of course, even the best-crafted agendas can't guard against digressions, distractions, and the other foibles of human interaction. The challenge is to keep meetings focused without stifling creativity or insulting participants who stray. At Ameritech, the regional telephone company based in Chicago, meeting leaders use a "parking lot" to maintain that focus.

"When comments come up that aren't related to the issue at hand, we record them on a flip chart labeled the parking lot," says Kimberly Thomas, director of communications for small business services. But the parking lot isn't a black hole. "We always track the issue and the person responsible for it," she adds. "We use this technique throughout the company."

Sin #4: Nothing happens once the meeting ends. People don't convert decisions into action.

Salvation: Convert from "meeting" to "doing" and focus on common documents.

The problem isn't that people are lazy or irresponsible. It's that people leave meetings with different views of what happened and what's supposed to happen next. Meeting experts are unanimous on this point: even with the ubiquitous tools of organization and sharing ideas -- whiteboards, flip charts, Post-it notes -- the capacity for misunderstanding is unlimited. Which is another reason companies turn to computer technology.

The best way to avoid that misunderstanding is to convert from "meeting" to "doing" -- where the "doing" focuses on the creation of shared documents that lead to action. The fact is, at most powerful role for technology is also the simplest: recording comments, outlining ideas, generating written proposals, projecting them for the entire group to see, printing them so people leave with real-time minutes. Forget groupware; just get yourself a good outlining program and oversized monitor.

"You're not just having a meeting, you're creating a document," says Michael Schrage. " I can't emphasize enough the importance of that distinction. It is the fundamental difference between ordinary meetings and computer-augmented collaborations. Comments, questions, criticisms, insights should enhance the quality of the document. That should be the group's

mission."

In other words, the medium is the meeting. That's why Bernard DeKovan prefers computers

to flip charts and whiteboards. "Flip charts create behaviors conditioned by the medium," he says. "People start competing for room on the flip chart, the facilitator has to scratch thing out, and pretty soon you can't read what's on it. With a computer, you never run out of room for ideas, you can edit indefinitely, you can generate hard copies for everyone at a moment's notice. It's a much richer medium."

Sin #5: People don't tell the truth. There's plenty of conversation, but not much candor.

Salvation: Embrace anonymity.

We all know it's true: Too often, people in meetings simply don't speak their minds. Sometimes the problem is a leader who doesn't solicit participation. Sometimes a dominant personality intimidates the rest of the group. But most of the time the problem is a simple lack of trust. People don't feel secure enough to say what they really think.

The most powerful techniques to promote candor rely on technology, and most of these computer-based tools focus on anonymity -- enabling people to express opinions and evaluate alternatives without having to divulge their identities. It's a sobering commentary on free speech in business -- "Say what you think, and we'll disguise your names to protect the innocent" -- but it does seem to work.

Jay Nunamaker, CEO of Ventana Corporation, based in Tucson, Arizona, and a professor at the University of Arizona's Karl Eller Graduate School of Management, is a leading expert on electronic meetings. He says Ventana added anonymity to its software to meet the needs of the U.S. military. "Admirals can really dampen interaction at a meeting," he notes. "But we didn't realize the impact it would have in corporate settings. Even with people who work together all the time, anonymity changes the social protocols. People say things differently." CoVision, the firm that facilitated the 20th Century Fox meeting, provides a system that allows for anonymous voting and anonymous group conversations. Meeting participants enter comments onto laptops, and the comments are projected onto a screen without attribution. CoVision president Lenny Lind says the system is especially powerful in meetings of high-ranking executives.

"People in the upper reaches of management pay so much deference to the leader, and have so much to lose, that conversations quickly become measured and political," he argues. "People just won't bare their souls. Anonymity changes that."

But there are problems with anonymity. Some people like getting credit for their ideas, and anonymity can leave them feeling shortchanged. There are also opportunities for manipulation. Carol Anne Ogdin of Deep Woods Technology, a teamwork consultant and meeting facilitator based in Santa Clara, California, calls anonymity a "modest idea that's been blown out of proportion." In particular, she worries about gamesmanship - for example, people who build an anonymous groundswell of support for their own contributions.

Sin #6: Meetings are always missing important information, so they postpone critical

decisions.

Salvation: Get data, not just furniture, into meeting rooms.

Most meeting rooms make it harder to have good meetings. They're sterile and uninviting -- and often in the middle of nowhere. Why? To help people "concentrate" by removing them from the frenzy of office life. But this isolation leaves meeting rooms out of the information flow. Often, the downside of isolation outweighs the benefits of focus.

Computer-services giant EDS has built a set of high-tech facilities that leave meetings participants awash in data. These much-heralded Capture Labs, electronic meeting rooms used by the company and its clients, may offer a glimpse of the meeting room of the future.

The Capture Lab "is a self-contained information network," says Michael Bauer, a principal with EDS's management consulting subsidiary. "We can bring in information from the Internet or from EDS's internal Web. We can get information on stock prices, even about the weather if we're worried about shipping or travel. It's brought into the room, displayed on a screen, and talked about."

It's not necessary to go that far. Jon Ryburg, the meeting ergonomist, offers a few ways to increase the "information quotient" in meeting spaces. For one thing, allow enough space in your meeting rooms for teams to store materials. Project teams generate lots more than minutes and memos. Meetings build models, fill up flip charts, create artifacts of all sorts - "information" that's vital to future meetings. "People are constantly hauling materials to and from meeting rooms," Ryburg says. "It's much easier to just store things for later meetings."

William Miller, director of research and business development for Steelcase, the office-furniture manufacturer based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, emphasizes that mobility is about more than convenience. The radical redesign of work, he argues, requires a radical redesign of meeting space.

"Knowledge workers spend 80% of their time at the office away from their desks," Miller says. "Where are they? Working on projects. The way to support that work is to build project clusters and co-locate desks around them. You can post information and never take it down. We call it 'information persistence.' And we don't talk about meetings. We talk about 'interactions.' It's part of the new science of effective work."

Sin #7: Meetings never get better. People make the same mistakes.

Salvation: Practice makes perfect. Monitor what works and what doesn't and hold people accountable.

Meetings are like any other part of business life: you get better only if you commit to it -- and aim high. Charles Schwab & Co., the financial-services company based in San Francisco, has made that commitment. In virtually every meeting at Schwab, someone serves as an "observer" and creates what the company calls a Plus/Delta list. The list records what went right and what went wrong, and gets included in the minutes. Over time, both for specific meeting groups and for the company as a whole, these lists create an agenda for change.

How much can meetings improve? The last word goes to Bernard DeKoven: "People don't have good meetings because they don't know what good meetings are like. Good meetings aren't just about work. They're about fun -- keeping people charged up. It's more than collaboration, it's 'coliberation' -- people freeing each other up to think more creatively.