Fixing Slow Decisions

Idea In Short

Stop legislating answers through committees. Clarify the objective, set evaluation criteria, watch for biases and make the decision. Where meetings survive, run them hard: minutes, punctual starts, real agendas, pre-work, constructive argument, fewer attendees and a visible price on everyone's time.

Meetings Are Over-Rated

Someone has to say it: meetings are over-rated. Too many organizations assemble committees to drive alignment when they are actually trying to mollify a miscreant or hedge away risk by legislating an answer, and the maneuver usually fails at both goals, since the disgruntled simply get more attention while the middle-of-the-road compromise is often the least safe choice available. Bain's founder's mentality work covers this drift at length.1 The principle worth tattooing on the conference room wall: collaboration is critical, meetings are not. Most meetings are simply unnecessary, and putting people in a room is not consensus, it is just people in a room.

Make the Decision

The alternative to legislating an answer is deciding one. Stop frittering: think about the problem, get good advice, clarify the objective, determine the evaluation criteria, watch out for biases, stress-test the conviction and make the decision. Harvard Business Review's literature on decision architecture describes the mature version, designing the framework, rules, culture and incentives so the right people make the right decisions at the right level, rather than routing everything through administrative mailmen and bureaucrats.2 Bias awareness belongs in the design, because humans are beautiful and messy, carrying a hundred-plus biases and heuristics that cut through daily clutter, some useful and many not. Organizational behavior turns out to be the most practical class business school offers.

What Great Collaboration Looks Like

Collaboration deserves rescuing from its committee reputation, and the genuine article has a recognizable profile. A small group of relevant, diverse people. Gathered around a specific topic and context. Educated through curated content distributed before the meeting. Aware of which stage of the thinking process they occupy, whether brainstorming madman, structuring architect, drafting carpenter or editing judge. Full of professional trust, so people speak their minds without offense taken. Empowered to make decisions without checking with their bosses. And willing to do the proletariat work of implementation afterward. Underneath run five questions every gathering should answer: what are we trying to achieve, who belongs in the decision, what information and analysis does the decision need, what logic and methodology will govern it and what communication must follow it.

Seven Disciplines for the Meetings That Remain

Where meetings survive the cull, discipline makes them earn it. First, write meeting minutes, summarizing what was discussed and preserving progress so nobody wastes time rehashing the past. Second, start on time, refusing to wait for latecomers or coddle the bad children, and follow the Drucker spirit with pointed follow-up homework for those who arrive late, leave early or skip entirely. Third, send an agenda, because agenda-free meetings spend their first third storming and norming before any performing begins. Fourth, do the pre-work, distributing data and analysis early so attendees arrive with formed opinions, getting the boring information-transfer out of the way and honoring everyone's time.

Fifth, let people argue it out constructively. The former head of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, described spending much of his meeting time deliberately not speaking, to avoid prematurely tilting the debate, restraint from the executive office that lets the best ideas fight fairly.3 Sixth, remove people, asking how many attendees could be cut with the work still done, since keeping people in the loop is an email function, not a chair; un-inviting someone daily usually earns gratitude, not offense, and eliminates pure waste. Seventh, charge for the time. One company billed each department the opportunity cost of attendance, so a two-hour meeting of ten people at a 200-dollar imputed hourly rate posted 4,000 dollars against the organizer's account. Put a price on the hour and watch invite lists shrink.

A Decision Audit Worth Running

Organizations serious about speed can diagnose themselves in a week. Pick the last five significant decisions and time-stamp their journey from question to commitment, because elapsed weeks measure the disease better than anyone's impression. For each, count the meetings consumed and the attendees per meeting, then multiply into hours. Identify where each decision actually got made, in the room or in the hallway afterward, since committees that ratify hallway decisions are pure overhead. Note which decisions were reversible, and ask why reversible choices received irreversible-grade process. The audit usually reveals a pattern: a small number of genuinely hard calls starved of preparation while dozens of easy ones drowned in ceremony. Rebalancing that portfolio, ceremony to the irreversible few, speed to the reversible many, is the highest-return organizational fix most companies never run.

Decide Like It Costs Something

The disciplines share one premise: decisions and hours both have prices, and organizations that treat them as free will spend them like they are. A leadership team that clarifies objectives, prices its meetings, empowers small trusted groups and lets argument happen before decisions will move faster than its committee-bound competitors, and the speed compounds. The disgruntled voice still gets heard, once, in a room built for deciding rather than mollifying. Then the decision gets made, which was always the point.

- 1Bain & Company
- 2Decision-making
- 3Jim Yong Kim

Summary

Poor, slow decision-making hides behind alignment committees that mollify miscreants and hedge risk. The cure combines decision architecture, bias awareness and meeting discipline: minutes, agendas, pre-work, argument, ruthless invite lists and opportunity-cost pricing. Collaboration is critical. Meetings are not.