Meetings Signal Bad Organization

Idea In Short

Treat every meeting as a symptom to investigate, not a tool to schedule. Earn the right to convene by doing ten times the work beforehand, decline invitations where you neither speak nor decide and fix the root causes, unclear roles and missing trust, that meetings merely bandage.

A Calendar as Evidence

Look at any consultant's calendar from a busy week and the pattern indicts itself: wall-to-wall commitments, some legitimately client interviews, with the real work and thinking squeezed into the gaps between meetings or into hotel nights. Even the edges are lost, consumed by walking to, waiting for or running late toward the next session. Peter Drucker diagnosed the disease decades ago: "Meetings are a symptom of bad organization. The fewer meetings the better."1 Agreement with that sentence can hardly be strong enough.

The Ripple Effect

Meetings waste time in the obvious ways, with too many people invited for too long covering too little content with too little accountability, and Elon Musk's blunt advice to walk out of meetings where you add no value follows naturally.2 The less obvious cost is cascade. One company discovered that a single weekly executive meeting consumed 300,000 hours of organizational time annually: the meeting itself took 7,000 hours across headcount and weeks, but it forced 11 unit meetings consuming 20,000 hours, which forced 21 team meetings consuming 63,000 hours, which forced 130 preparatory meetings consuming 210,000 hours, a chain reaction documented in Harvard Business Review's research on meeting madness.3 The same research finds 15 percent of company time spent in meetings, rising every year since 2008, a share that consulting economics would call unwise and possibly unacceptable.

Earn the Right to Convene

Many meetings are simply disrespectful, with a presenter holding court through their agenda while the audience sits hostage, which is bad form and a bit sad. The corrective principle: the person calling a meeting should invest at least ten to twenty times the meeting's effort accomplishing its goals beforehand. Do the research, build the persuasive deck, walk the halls and talk to the right people, collect feedback by email, gather buy-in and start the work; once the initiative has momentum, secure funding and resources and then call the kickoff. Convening is a privilege purchased with preparation, not a default scheduled for lack of a better idea. Poor mechanics compound the offense, since meetings without agendas, facilitation, punctual starts and ends or minutes are unacceptable where time is money, producing hours of life that nobody gets back.

The Consulting Angle

Consultants face a doubled version of the problem, attending their own firm's meetings plus the client's, and billing economics make the waste visible: every conference-room hour is an hour not spent on the analysis the fees actually purchase. The discipline therefore starts internally, with project teams modeling short, agenda-driven, minuted sessions that clients notice and sometimes copy. A consulting team whose own meetings sprawl has forfeited the right to recommend operating-model discipline to anyone.

Decline, and Diagnose

Indiscriminate invitations deserve indiscriminate declines. Everyone has sat wondering why they were invited to a meeting about which they know nothing, and the rule cuts cleanly: without a speaking or deciding role, you do not need to be there, since minutes or a quick rundown serve the loop-keeping function. Every declined invitation to a meeting that proves unproductive counts as a clear win. Leverage suffers too when hierarchies stack, with a vice president, director, manager and analyst from the same department observing, commenting and group-thinking answers side by side, which is the opposite of efficient delegation.

The deeper diagnosis is that meetings are band-aids. Too often they are the only way things move, because without them people do not know what to do or how, and fear taking action; the meeting produces limited forward progress that beats none, a manual solution to a systemic problem. The systemic fix is painfully simple to state, as BCG's complexity work puts it: know what people do. Clear roles and responsibilities remove the need for the bandage, and another meeting never solves the root cause it papers over.

A Personal Calendar Intervention

Individuals cannot reform a meeting culture alone, and they can reform their own week. Audit one recent calendar honestly, marking each meeting by your role: speaker, decider or audience. Decline next week's audience-only invitations with a polite request for the minutes, and track how many are even missed. For meetings you own, cancel one recurring session outright as an experiment, since standing meetings outlive their reasons more often than not. Convert one information-sharing meeting into a written update with a comment deadline. Protect the recovered blocks visibly for the deep work the meetings displaced, because reclaimed hours that refill with new meetings teach the organization nothing. A month of this produces a calendar that looks like a professional's rather than a hostage's, and colleagues notice faster than expected.

The Realistic Endgame

Abolishing meetings is Pollyanna territory, since meetings are how most organizations function, pushing things along, generating momentum and building consensus. The ideal is nonetheless worth naming: an organization with very few meetings because people know the mission at every level, collaborate daily, know where to find information and resources, innovate, make mistakes and organically course-correct inside a culture of trust and growth. That state is sadly rare, which returns the burden to individuals: convene only what you have earned, attend only where you contribute, run what remains with professional discipline and spend the recovered hours on the work the meetings were pretending to advance. Drucker's sentence was not a complaint. It was an instruction.

- 1Drucker Institute
- 2Elon Musk
- 3Stop the Meeting Madness

Summary

Drucker said it best: meetings symptomize bad organization. One weekly executive session cascaded into 300,000 annual hours, and 15 percent of company time now sits in conference rooms. Earn the right to convene, invite only contributors and fix the roles and trust that meetings bandage.