Musk's War on Meetings

Idea In Short

Apply the Tesla email's rules with judgment: kill large and frequent meetings, leave when adding no value if your career capital permits, ban glossary-dependent jargon and let communication travel the shortest path rather than the chain of command. Replace ceremony with direct conversation.

A Critical Juncture, as Always

In April 2018 Tesla stood at a critical juncture, which is redundant, since Tesla is always at a critical juncture. The company had produced only about 30,000 cars, a figure that would pass 5.6 million within six years, and needed precision, profitability and productivity.1 Elon Musk sent a company-wide email, verified and published by CNBC, whose bulk and beauty was a thoughtful disdain for meetings, a clear statement that meetings, and poor communication generally, waste time.2

Shrink Them, Then Shrink Them Again

The first two rules target size and frequency: "Excessive meetings are the blight of big companies and almost always get worse over time. Please get rid of all large meetings, unless you're certain they are providing value to the whole audience, in which case keep them very short. Also get rid of frequent meetings, unless you are dealing with an extremely urgent matter. Meeting frequency should drop rapidly once the urgent matter is resolved." Blight is a nice, harsh word, and accurate, since bureaucracy kills productivity and signals a fading founder's mentality. The war on large meetings echoes Amazon's rule that no meeting should exceed what two pizzas can feed, unscientific and effective at roughly six to eight people. Urgency-driven frequency carries its own discipline: standing meetings should die when the emergency does, and almost never do.

The Walkout Rule

Rule three is the famous one: "Walk out of a meeting or drop off a call as soon as it is obvious you aren't adding value. It is not rude to leave, it is rude to make someone stay and waste their time." This is aggressive, likeable and dangerous in equal measure. Twenty-plus years in corporate America never once produced an actual walkout, and mothers did not raise us to act this way; interns and new hires should emphatically not try it without career capital they almost certainly have not banked, and even veterans are playing with fire. And yet the principle underneath is exactly right: corporate cultures need to be lean, thoughtful and outwardly focused, and alignment meetings, however necessary, are a drag whose cost someone should be allowed to refuse.

Plain Words, Shortest Paths

Rules four and five attack the language and routing of communication: "Don't use acronyms or nonsense words for objects, software or processes. In general, anything that requires an explanation inhibits communication. We don't want people to have to memorize a glossary just to function. Communication should travel via the shortest path necessary to get the job done, not through the chain of command. Any manager who attempts to enforce chain of command communication will soon find themselves working elsewhere. It must be ok for people to talk directly and just make the right thing happen." Both rules earn their emphasis. Acronyms and jargon create familiarity for insiders while walling out new hires and contractors, and hierarchical routing turns professionals into mailmen, merely packaging stories, reinterpreting them and reigning over forwarded threads. The alternative is finding the real people doing the work and going to the place, the gemba instinct applied to corporate communication.

Making the Rules Practical

The radical email translates into unradical daily habits. To eliminate meetings before they form: walk the halls or send a direct message to test whether a five-minute conversation resolves the matter, convert informational updates into a comprehensive email and clarify a proposed meeting's purpose to see whether asynchronous input, resources or links would answer it. To improve the meetings that survive: request an agenda and confirm a reason for attending, build a culture of no-nonsense sessions that start on time, skip the chit-chat, take great notes, table unrelated topics and finish early, write minutes worth reading, push pre-work ahead of the gathering, experiment with standing or walking formats and, structurally, develop the trusting culture where information flows and decisions get made

without ceremony. The final tip is the quietest: stay genuinely busy, because people visibly cranking out work get unselected from meetings automatically.

Drucker Approved in Advance

The email's radicalism has a distinguished pedigree, since Peter Drucker rendered the same verdict decades earlier: "Meetings are a symptom of bad organization. The fewer the meetings the better."3 Musk's contribution was converting the diagnosis into enforceable rules and staking cultural authority on them at a moment when his company could not afford wasted hours. Most organizations cannot copy the walkout, and every organization can copy the standard behind it: each hour in a room together must beat the alternative uses of that hour, or the room should empty.

- 1Tesla, Inc.
- 2CNBC
- 3Peter Drucker

Summary

The 2018 email named excessive meetings the blight of big companies and prescribed radical cures: tiny rare gatherings, walking out, plain language and shortest-path communication. Interns should skip the walkout; everyone can adopt the asynchronous habits that make meetings unnecessary. Drucker approved in advance.