Solve your problem with a wink

I Run Meetings Everyone Wants to Survive

How to Set Clear Objectives, Bring Discussions to a Close, and Assign Action Items



Max Paradox

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PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

ISBN: 9788384906460

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INTRO

It's 9:58 a.m. At 10:00, a meeting is scheduled to begin, and twelve people have been invited. The calendar invitation bears the mysterious title "Discussion of Current Topics," which is the corporate equivalent of a sign saying "Something Will Happen." Nobody knows exactly what will be discussed, but everyone suspects it will take an hour. The organizer is still looking for the presentation. Someone asks in the chat whether attendance is mandatory. Three people are making coffee, one is finishing a previous meeting, and the others are wondering whether it's possible to participate in a discussion while catching up on unanswered messages. Technically, yes. Morally, the jury is still out.

At 10:07, the meeting actually begins. Someone asks the traditional question: "Shall we get started, then?" A moment of silence follows because nobody is quite sure who is supposed to answer. Eventually, the organizer explains that they'd like to "go through a few things." Twenty minutes later, it becomes clear that one person came to make a decision, another to share information, a third to raise a problem, and a fourth was invited by mistake but doesn't want to offend anyone. The discussion gathers momentum. Arguments fly, counterarguments follow, and somebody says, "We need to look at the bigger picture," which in many organizations means we are now moving away from a solution at the speed of an express train.

At 11:03, the participants leave the meeting. Everyone is busy, nobody is particularly happy, and the only undisputed outcome is that another meeting has been scheduled.

Sound familiar?

If so, you probably don't need another lecture about how valuable time is. You already know that perfectly well. Especially when you look at your calendar and see five colorful rectangles lined up one after another, without the slightest break to think, eat lunch, or remind yourself what you actually do for a living. What you need is something far more useful: a way to lead conversations that leave everyone genuinely understanding what has been agreed, why it has been agreed, and who is responsible for making the next move.

Because the problem with many meetings isn't a lack of intelligent people. Quite the opposite. The people around the table are often competent, experienced, and exceptionally good at their jobs. Trouble begins when their knowledge, ambitions, and different perspectives are thrown into the same hour without a clearly defined objective. It's a little like inviting a group of excellent chefs into a restaurant kitchen without telling them what dish they're supposed to prepare, then acting surprised when, an hour later, they've produced seven sauces, three menu concepts, and a heated argument about parsley.

A meeting doesn't produce results by itself. It produces conversation. Only the way that conversation is managed can turn it into a decision, an action plan, a solution to a problem, or a shared understanding of the situation. Without that, even the most elegant conference room remains a place where people collectively consume time. Sometimes there are cookies, which improves the atmosphere but not necessarily the outcome.

Perhaps you've already tried different approaches. You've prepared detailed agendas, kept an eye on the clock,

and asked participants to read the materials beforehand. Maybe you even created an action-tracking spreadsheet that everyone enthusiastically approved and nobody ever looked at again. These attempts often fail not because they're bad ideas, but because they address individual symptoms. An agenda won't help if nobody knows what decision needs to be made. Watching the clock changes very little when every contribution opens up a new topic. An action list becomes a decorative accessory when it says "the team will prepare a proposal" and responsibility dissolves somewhere among six different people.

Running effective meetings requires three skills that seem deceptively simple until you try to apply them in real life. The first is establishing why people need to meet in the first place. The second is bringing a discussion to a conclusion, even when participants disagree and everyone has an argument that begins with "Yes, but..." The third is turning agreements into specific actions assigned to specific people. Not an abstract "we," not the legendary "someone from the team," but an actual person who knows what needs to be done and by when.

That doesn't mean you now have to transform yourself into a conference-room dictator armed with a stopwatch and a deeply unsettling stare. Running a good meeting isn't about interrupting people for sport, suppressing doubts, or forcing everyone to agree. Sometimes a longer discussion is necessary. Sometimes you need to listen carefully to an uncomfortable opinion that prevents the team from making an expensive mistake. There are also situations where the only honest outcome is to acknowledge that a decision cannot yet be made because certain information is missing. The difference is that everyone then knows exactly what

information is needed, who will obtain it, and when the subject will be revisited.

In this book, we'll look at meetings as they really are. Meetings with people who arrive late, dominate conversations, remain silent despite having excellent ideas, or ask the one question that transforms a fifteen-minute check-in into a full-scale strategic debate. Meetings with managers who make it difficult to refuse an additional topic. With colleagues who declare themselves "in complete agreement" and then interpret the decisions in three entirely different ways the following day. And with meeting leaders who want to maintain a pleasant atmosphere, so they allow the discussion to continue until everyone reaches an emotional state remarkably similar to a dead battery.

We won't go searching for perfect participants, because the chances of finding them are slim, and recruiting new employees exclusively for the weekly team meeting might raise a few questions in HR. Instead, we'll focus on the decisions, statements, and small interventions that help you guide conversations with people as they actually are. You'll learn to recognize when a meeting is necessary and when a message would be enough. You'll discover how to define an objective that communicates something more meaningful than "we'll discuss the situation," and how to respond when the conversation starts circling around the same argument. We'll also explore ways to assign responsibility without awkwardly pointing fingers or pretending that a collective declaration automatically leads to collective action.

Along the way, it's worth accepting one uncomfortable truth: you don't have complete control over how other participants behave. You can't force everyone to prepare, eliminate every conflict, or ensure that people in positions of

authority always keep their contributions brief. You can, however, influence the structure of the meeting, the quality of the questions, the moment when decisions are made, and the way agreements are finalized. That's considerably more than you might think, especially if your main strategy for managing discussions so far has involved nervously glancing at the clock.

To begin, try a simple thought experiment. Think back to the last meeting that left you feeling your time had been wasted. Try answering three questions: What specific outcome was the meeting supposed to produce? At what point did the conversation stop moving toward that outcome? And who left knowing exactly what they were supposed to do next? If you find any of these questions difficult to answer, you've just identified an area worth working on. You don't need to fix anything yet. For now, it's enough to recognize the difference between holding a meeting and achieving its purpose.

Ultimately, the goal isn't for people to leave your meetings dazzled by your facilitation techniques. Most participants don't dream of admiring the person running the meeting. They want to know why they were invited, have an opportunity to say something important, and return to work without needing to organize another conversation to clarify what happened in the previous one.

If everyone leaves understanding the decisions, knowing their responsibilities, and not having to conduct a private investigation entitled "What Exactly Did We Decide?", you've accomplished something genuinely valuable.

And if everyone also gets to leave early, you might hear the most beautiful compliment in the history of workplace meetings:

"That's it already?"

Chapter 1 - A Meeting Is Not a Punishment for Having a Calendar

At a certain company, someone noticed that employees weren't sharing information often enough. The solution seemed obvious: organize a weekly meeting. After a few weeks, participants began complaining that there wasn't enough time during the meeting to discuss everything. So a second meeting was introduced, dedicated to preparing materials for the first one. When discrepancies appeared between the conclusions reached by the two groups, a third meeting became necessary to ensure proper coordination. Before long, everyone knew exactly what was happening in the meetings. The problem was that they knew less and less about the work they were supposed to be doing between them.

This fictional story sounds absurd only until you look at your own calendar. Meetings have an extraordinary ability to reproduce without any obvious human intervention. First comes a recurring team meeting, then a preliminary consultation before that meeting, followed by a brief recap, and finally a separate discussion to explain why the agreed actions haven't been completed. If meetings were a biological species, they would probably be classified as invasive and placed under a population control program.

That doesn't mean meetings are unnecessary. Without conversations, it's difficult to make collective decisions, solve complex problems, or coordinate the activities of people whose work depends on one another. Trouble begins when the meeting itself starts being treated as an achievement. Someone announces, "We've discussed the

issue," and everyone breathes a sigh of relief, as though an important stage of the project has just been completed. In reality, discussing an issue can mean anything from making a concrete decision to spending forty minutes describing difficulties everyone was already aware of.

It's therefore worth asking a question that's less obvious than it might initially seem: what exactly is supposed to happen as a result of several people coming together at the same time?

"We need to talk" isn't a sufficient answer. Talking is an activity, not an outcome. Just as opening a spreadsheet doesn't automatically mean you've performed an analysis, and walking into a gym doesn't guarantee improved fitness. Although, in the second case, you can at least take an impressive photograph.

A meeting is a tool, not proof that you're being productive. Its value comes from what it enables participants to accomplish that they couldn't achieve equally well, quickly, or responsibly without having a conversation together.

Imagine a team manager who notices that tasks are increasingly being completed late. She invites eight people to a meeting entitled "Timeliness." The invitation contains no further explanation, so everyone prepares differently. One person brings a breakdown of delays, another a list of obstacles, and a third a proposal for a new reporting system. A fourth expects a disciplinary conversation and prepares arguments in their defense, even though nobody has accused them of anything yet.

At the beginning, the manager asks why tasks are being delayed. A lengthy exchange begins, gradually turning into a

discussion about the team's workload, tools, communication, and how priorities are established. All these issues may be important. None of them, however, answers the question of what the meeting is supposed to achieve. After an hour, participants have more information but still don't know whether they should change the schedule, reduce the number of tasks, or improve the reporting process.

Now let's change just one element of this situation. Before sending the invitation, the manager decides that the objective will be to select two changes that could reduce delays over the coming month. She doesn't expect to solve every organizational problem, nor does she intend to analyze the entire history of every task since the company was founded. She wants to make specific decisions based on the information available.

Suddenly, preparation becomes simpler. Participants know which data will be useful, which arguments matter, and what needs to be agreed before the conversation ends. The meeting may still be difficult, and opinions may differ. But the discussion now has a reference point the manager can return to whenever someone feels tempted to explore the entire history of project management.

This small change illustrates the fundamental difference between a meeting that simply takes place and a meeting that actually serves a purpose.

Why Do We Meet More Often Than We Need To?

One reason is habit. Recurring meetings become so deeply embedded in an organization's routine that, after a while, we stop questioning their purpose. Monday's team meeting takes place on Monday because it has always taken place on Monday. When someone asks whether it's still

necessary, they're told that consistency is important. An interesting argument, although it could just as easily justify a weekly inspection of the contents of the office refrigerator.

Another reason is the need to feel secure. The organizer invites more people because they're afraid someone might be left out. Participants agree to additional meetings because they don't want to lose access to information. A manager expects frequent updates because they want reassurance that everything remains under control. Each of these needs may be legitimate. The problem begins when the response to every single one is identical: another calendar invitation.

Meetings can also provide a convenient way to postpone responsibility. Instead of preparing a recommendation independently, you can invite several people to "think things through together." Instead of resolving a minor issue within your existing authority, you can organize a consultation. Sometimes this genuinely makes sense. But when every decision requires a collective blessing, the organization turns into an institution that issues permits allowing employees to use their own judgment.

We don't always have the courage to ask whether a problem actually requires a meeting, either. Sending an invitation looks professional because it contains a subject, a time, a list of participants, and an acceptance button. It creates a pleasant feeling of order. In reality, the invitation itself doesn't solve anything. It may simply transfer the problem from one person to a group of people who must now share responsibility for finding a solution. And sometimes share the embarrassment as well.

Before organizing another meeting, consider what obstacle prevents you from achieving the desired result

without bringing all the invited people together at the same time. If you only need to communicate information, a message or document will usually be enough. If you're expecting a simple confirmation from one person, there's no need to invite the entire department. If you need to gather opinions, you can first request them in writing and arrange a meeting only if significant differences emerge.

This doesn't mean informational meetings should be banned. Direct contact can be important for building relationships, asking questions, and identifying misunderstandings. Even a regular team meeting can provide considerable value if it helps people recognize dependencies between their tasks. What matters is choosing this form of communication consciously rather than automatically reaching for it whenever a subject requires more than three sentences.

The Cost You Don't See in the Invitation

A one-hour meeting involving ten people doesn't cost the organization one hour of work. It consumes ten combined hours of participants' time, without counting preparation or the effort required to return to interrupted responsibilities afterward. That doesn't mean every one of those hours is wasted. A collective decision may save far more time than it takes to make. But you should understand what you're paying for.

Imagine a meeting in which nine people spend forty minutes listening to a detailed report prepared by the tenth. The report doesn't require a decision, and most questions concern information already included in a spreadsheet distributed beforehand. Participants leave feeling well informed, although some of them could just as easily have reviewed the document at a convenient moment.

Another cost is the fragmentation of the working day. You have thirty minutes between two meetings. You spend the first ten recovering your concentration and the last five preparing for the next call. The remaining fifteen minutes seem perfect for completing an important task, provided that task consists of finding the correct file and sighing.

That's why it's worth protecting participants' time as carefully as a project's budget. Invite people whose presence genuinely helps achieve the objective. Match the meeting's length to the work involved rather than accepting your calendar's default settings. Thirty minutes may be sufficient for a straightforward decision, while a complex problem may require an uninterrupted hour. The point isn't to set speed records. A meeting that ends after seven minutes without resolving anything isn't a success simply because everyone makes it to their next coffee break.

A useful distinction is this: who needs to participate in producing the outcome, and who only needs to know the result? The first group needs a seat at the table. The second can often receive a clear summary afterward. This reduces the number of people who must follow the entire journey toward a decision when they're only interested in its final destination.

This approach does require caution, however. Don't exclude people whose expertise is essential or whose responsibilities will be significantly affected without giving them an opportunity to explain the constraints involved. Saving time by excluding the right participants is like speeding up a renovation by skipping the electrician. Everything looks wonderful at first. The problems only appear when someone tries to turn on the lights.

Discover the Real Reason for the Meeting

Sometimes the most difficult task is distinguishing the problem someone has reported from the problem that actually needs solving. Someone suggests "a meeting about communication" because two departments have different understandings of when data should be handed over. Another person wants to "discuss cooperation" when what they really need is an agreement about who approves the final version of a document. The general subject sounds safe, but it invites a much broader conversation than the situation requires.

In such cases, a useful question is: "What needs to be different when this meeting ends?" You're asking about the expected change, not merely the topic. That change might be an agreed deadline, a selected solution, a list of missing information, or a shared understanding of a new procedure. Each of these outcomes requires a slightly different way of managing the conversation.

If you're organizing a meeting at your manager's request, you may not always have the authority to decide whether it's necessary. You can, however, clarify its purpose. Instead of protesting that your calendar is already full, ask, "Are we supposed to make a decision after this meeting, or is the main objective to collect possible solutions?" Framing the question this way helps your manager define expectations and allows you to prepare the discussion. You're not challenging the instruction. You're trying to carry it out sensibly.

It's also worth remembering that a single meeting doesn't have to resolve every issue connected to a particular problem. If the objective is to agree on how to handle overdue requests, a conversation about the long-term reorganization of the entire department may be valuable, but

it probably shouldn't consume the time reserved for the immediate decision. You can record it as a separate issue to consider. That way, you don't ignore an important argument, but you also don't allow it to take control of the meeting.

The person leading a meeting doesn't have to know the answer to every question. They should, however, know which question the group is trying to resolve. This is an important distinction, especially when the meeting includes experts with greater specialist knowledge than the organizer. You don't have to pretend to be the smartest person in the room. You simply need to make sure that the smart people don't spend an hour answering six different questions, none of which was ever officially asked.

The First Step You Can Take Today

Open your calendar and choose one meeting you're organizing over the next few days. It doesn't have to be the most important meeting of the year. It's better to begin with a conversation where you can introduce a small change without triggering an approval process for an entirely new management model.

Read the invitation's title, then try completing this sentence: "When this meeting ends, participants will be able to..." If your answer is "understand the situation better," clarify exactly what they should understand and why that knowledge will be useful. If your answer is "agree on the next steps," identify which actions genuinely need to be agreed upon. If you can't formulate a meaningful ending to the sentence, perhaps the meeting was scheduled out of habit.

You can then change its scope, reduce the participant list, or communicate the information in another way. Sometimes

adding a single sentence to the invitation is enough. For example: "The objective of this meeting is to select a method for transferring requests between departments starting next Monday." It's a small effort that changes both how participants prepare and what they expect.

Don't expect everyone to start treating your calendar as sacred overnight. Some people will still arrive unprepared, others will suggest additional topics, and someone will probably ask about an issue that was resolved three weeks earlier. But you'll gain the ability to calmly remind everyone why they're there and assess whether the conversation is bringing you closer to the intended outcome.

Meetings don't have to be short to be good. Nor do they have to be particularly pleasant. Sometimes the most important discussion is demanding because participants must negotiate a difficult compromise or openly acknowledge that the existing solution isn't working. A good meeting nevertheless leaves people feeling that the time they invested mattered.

That's precisely why it's worth stopping the habit of measuring effectiveness by the number of conversations held. If three meetings can be replaced by one that produces a concrete outcome, you haven't lost two opportunities for cooperation. You've recovered time to carry out what was agreed.

And in many companies, that would already be a genuine revolution. Probably one requiring a separate kickoff meeting, but you have to start somewhere.

Chapter 2 - "We'll Discuss the Issue" Is Not an Objective, It's a Warning of Suffering to Come

Imagine receiving an invitation to a meeting entitled "A New Approach to the Project." There's no agenda, no supporting material, and no information about the expected outcome. The participants include the project manager, representatives from sales and finance, and the person responsible for implementation. They all see the same title but interpret it differently. Sales expects a conversation about deadlines, finance anticipates a discussion about costs, implementation is concerned about resources, and the project manager wants to check whether everyone shares his optimism.

During the meeting, it quickly becomes apparent that optimism is the one thing you can't include in a budget, although some people certainly try.

The first question concerns the schedule. The second concerns costs. The third concerns responsibility for delays. Before long, participants start explaining what they believe "a new approach" actually means. One person suggests changing the order of activities, another proposes reducing the project's scope, and a third recommends further analysis. All these suggestions may be sensible, but nobody knows whether the meeting is intended to collect ideas, select a solution, or merely present a new plan.

After fifty minutes, the project manager announces, "We've gained a lot of valuable insights." This sentence is sometimes the final refuge of a meeting leader who can't

identify a single concrete agreement. The insights are valuable because they sound reasonable. The problem is that nobody knows which ones should be implemented and which will remain decorative elements in the meeting notes.

The confusion doesn't necessarily result from participants being unprepared. Everyone may have prepared carefully, but for a different conversation. Having a common subject doesn't mean having a common objective. You can discuss the same project with the intention of understanding its problems, choosing a solution, dividing responsibilities, or assessing progress. Each of these meetings will look different and should produce a different outcome.

That's why, before you start preparing an agenda, inviting people, or wondering whether thirty minutes will be enough, you need to answer one question: what exactly should this conversation produce?

A meeting objective must be clear enough for participants to recognize when they've achieved it. "We'll talk about customer problems" is a topic. "We'll select the three most urgent customer problems requiring action this month" defines an outcome. "We'll analyze costs" announces an activity. "We'll decide which expenses can be reduced without compromising the agreed project scope" identifies a decision that needs to be made.

The difference may seem cosmetic until you actually try to lead the discussion. When the objective is vague, almost any contribution can be considered relevant. When it's specific, you can assess whether a new thread helps achieve the intended result. You don't have to silence participants or pretend that other issues don't exist. You can say, "That's an important problem, but today we're choosing

a solution concerning the deadline. Let's record that issue separately and return to the decision."

That sentence works much better when everyone knows what decision is needed. Otherwise, it sounds like an arbitrary attempt to restrict the discussion by someone who happens to have access to the screen-sharing function.

An Objective, a Topic, and an Agenda Are Not the Same Thing

These three concepts are often confused because they all appear in meeting invitations and preparation documents. In reality, they serve different purposes.

The topic tells participants what the conversation concerns. The agenda identifies which issues will be addressed and in what order. The objective defines the result the conversation is supposed to produce. This means you can have a perfectly prepared agenda and still have no idea why the meeting is actually taking place.

An example agenda might look like this: current results, main problems, proposed solutions, next steps. Everything appears logical, organized, and professional. Unfortunately, it could just as easily describe Monday's team meeting, Thursday's management discussion, and Friday's weekly review. It doesn't tell anyone what decision needs to be reached.

Adding a specific objective changes the meaning of each item. If participants are supposed to decide how to improve delivery punctuality, the current results become evidence for assessing the scale of the problem. The list of difficulties helps identify the causes of delays. Proposed solutions provide options to compare, and the next steps follow from the choice the group makes.

The agenda then begins guiding participants toward an outcome rather than merely providing an elegant list of subjects for discussion.

That doesn't mean every meeting must end with a decision. Sometimes the objective is to collect information needed for a later decision. On other occasions, the group needs to clarify differences between teams, identify risks, or establish a shared understanding of a new process. These outcomes can also be specific, provided everyone knows what they should understand or prepare by the end.

For example, the objective "We'll understand the current implementation problems" still leaves considerable room for interpretation. A better formulation would be: "We'll identify which obstacles are blocking implementation and what information we need before deciding on the next schedule." You're not promising to solve problems whose causes you don't yet understand. You are, however, defining what progress the meeting should achieve.

It's also important to be honest about the limits of your authority. If the participants aren't authorized to approve a budget, you shouldn't promise that they will make a final financial decision during the meeting. They can prepare a recommendation, agree on possible options, or identify matters requiring approval. The objective must reflect the group's actual authority.

Otherwise, the meeting starts to resemble a committee that, after extensive discussion, discovers it can only recommend establishing another committee.

How to Turn a Vague Topic into a Useful Outcome

The simplest place to begin is by asking why the issue requires attention right now. Perhaps a decision deadline is