

## **DEATH BY MEETING**

*Patrick Lencioni*

### **Introduction**

1. For those of us who lead and manage organizations, meetings are pretty much what we do. And yet most people hate meetings. And if we hate meetings, can we be making good decisions and successfully leading our organizations. Probably not.
2. The hard truth is that bad meetings almost always lead to bad decisions, which is the biggest recipe for mediocrity.
3. But there is hope. This book shows how we can transform what is now painful and tedious into something productive, compelling, and even energizing.

### **Key Concepts/Ideas**

1. Lethargic. Unfocused. Passionless. It never occurred to them that the company's culture would come to mirror those meetings.
2. Bad meetings produce poor morale.
3. Running time of a film: 96 minutes. A crew of thousands of men and women working with tens of millions of dollars required only one and a half hours to tell a story that spanned more than 10 years in the lives of two people. Point: At work, many organizations often take longer than that to summarize just a week's worth of business activity, and even then never seem to resolve anything! The key to movies is that they introduce conflict.
4. Conflict is nothing more than an anxious situation that needs to be resolved.
5. Hook people at the beginning. Give them a reason to care.
6. Everyone, but especially you as the leader of the group, needs to be looking for places where people have different opinions but aren't necessarily putting them out there. You need to be mining for buried conflict.
7. Different types of meetings:
  - a. Daily—5 minutes—Headline News
  - b. Weekly—1 hour—Drama
  - c. Monthly—2 hours—Movie
  - d. Quarterly—6 hours or more—Mini-Series
8. The Daily Check In—standing up, announcing what each one is doing  
The Weekly Tactical—go over 4-6 key metrics  
The Monthly Strategic—give necessary time to discuss strategy  
The Quarterly Off-Site Review—step back from the daily, weekly, and monthly grind, and review things from a distance. (Like strategy issues that need more attention, morale, competitive landscape)

### **THE MODEL**

1. Two Problems: Many meetings are boring and ineffective.
2. Most meetings are boring because they lack drama. Or conflict. To make meetings less boring leaders must look for legitimate reasons to provoke and uncover relevant, constructive ideological conflict. By doing so, they'll keep

## ***Review by Rob Carlson***

people engaged, which leads to more passionate discussions, and ultimately, to better decisions.

3. Most meetings are ineffective because they lack contextual structure. Most organizations have only one kind of meeting, a staff meeting. For two or three hours they randomly focus on everything from strategy to tactics to administrivia to culture. Because there is no clarity around what topics are appropriate, there is no clear context for the various discussions that take place. There must be multiple types of meetings to give clear context.

### **Problem #1: Lack of Drama**

1. Meetings should be more interesting than movies because they have more inherent potential for passion and engagement than movies do.
2. Meetings are interactive and movies are not.
3. Meetings are directly relevant to our lives, movies are not.
4. Leaders of meetings, as well as participants, should be miners of conflict.
5. Avoiding the issues that merit debate and disagreement not only makes the meeting boring, it guarantees that the issues won't be resolved. This is a recipe for frustration.

### **Problem #2: Lack of Contextual Structure**

1. Meeting Stew: The single biggest structural problem facing leaders of meetings is the tendency to throw every type of issue that needs to be discussed into the same meeting, like a bad stew with too many random ingredients.
2. Four Meetings: There should be different meetings for different purposes, and each of them serves a valid and important function.

### **Meeting #1—The Daily Check-In**

- Huddle, 5 minutes, Standing up, That's it.
- Challenges: Getting people to stick with it. Keeping it to 5 minutes (don't sit down)

### **Meeting #2—The Weekly Tactical**

Weekly staff meeting between 45 and 90 minutes. Should include:

1. *Lightning Round*—
  - a. Quick around the table reporting session in which everyone indicates their two or three priorities for the week.
  - b. It should take each team member no more than one minute (yes--60 seconds). So even a large team can do this in 10 minutes or so.
  - c. The lightning round is critical because it sets the tone for the rest of the meeting.
  - d. By giving all participants a real sense of the actual activities taking place in the organization, it makes it easy for the team to identify potential redundancies, gaps, or other issues that require immediate attention.
2. *Progress Review*—
  - a. This is the routine reporting of critical information or metrics: revenue, expenses, customer satisfaction, inventory, and the like.

## ***Review by Rob Carlson***

- b. Pick 4 or 6 metrics (not all, key few) and review often (BCA Scoreboard).
- c. This should take no more than 5 minutes.
3. *Real-Time Agenda*—
  - a. Counter to conventional wisdom, don't set agenda before meeting--set agenda at meeting.
  - b. This makes sense because the agenda should be based on what everyone is working on. Trying to predict the right priorities before these critical pieces of information are reviewed is unwise.
  - c. Leaders of meetings must therefore have something Lencioni calls disciplined spontaneity. This means they must avoid preparing an agenda in advance and let it take shape during the meeting.

### Challenges--Must overcome temptation to:

- Set agenda in advance either formally or informally.
- Go into too much detail in the lightning round.
- Talk about long-term strategic issues. (save these for Monthly Strategic)

### Meeting #3—The Monthly Strategic

1. This is the most interesting and in many ways the most important type of meeting any team has. It can also be the most fun.
2. It is where executives wrestle with, analyze, debate and decide upon critical issues (but only a few) that will affect the business in fundamental ways.
3. The length of a Monthly Strategic will vary depending on the topic or topics being covered. Schedule at least 2 hours per topic to encourage open-ended discussion and debate.
4. Whether the MS meeting occurs once per month or another frequency, the key is that these strategic meetings occur regular enough to serve as a timely “parking lot” for critical strategic issues that come up during the Weekly Tactical meetings.
5. *Ad Hoc* meetings should be called to discuss a critical issue that comes up in the Weekly Tactical but cannot wait until the Monthly Strategic. Don't let these issues hi-jack the Weekly Tactical.

### Challenges:

1. Failure to schedule enough time.
2. Putting too many items on the agenda.
3. Failure to do research and preparation.
4. The fear of conflict.

### Meeting #4—The Quarterly Off-Site Review

Topics to cover could include:

1. Comprehensive Strategy Review—Review strategic direction 3-4 times/year.
2. Team Review—Review the teams effectiveness, trends, tendencies, etc.
3. Personnel Review—Who are the right people on the bus and who is not? Is it a person problem or seat problem.
4. Competitive and Industry Review—Step back and examine trends and information. It is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees.

*Review by Rob Carlson*

Challenges:

1. Don't overburden and over-structure the meetings.
2. Don't make the meeting a boondoggle by going somewhere distracting.
3. Don't invite outsiders to attend—build team unity.

**THE FOUR MEETINGS**

<b><i>Meeting Type</i></b>	<b><i>Time Required</i></b>	<b><i>Purpose &amp; Format</i></b>	<b><i>Keys to Success</i></b>
<b>Daily Check-In</b>	5 Minutes	Share daily schedules and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't sit down</li> <li>• Keep it administrative</li> <li>• Don't cancel even when some people can't be there</li> </ul>
<b>Weekly Tactical</b>	45-90 Minutes	Review weekly activities and metrics, and resolve tactical obstacles and issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't set agenda until after initial reporting</li> <li>• Postpone strategic discussions</li> </ul>
<b>Monthly Strategic</b> (or Ad Hoc Strategic)	2-4 Hours	Discuss , analyze, brainstorm, and decide upon critical issues affecting long-term development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limit to 1 or 2 topics</li> <li>• Prepare &amp; do research</li> <li>• Engage in good conflict</li> </ul>
<b>Quarterly Off-Site Review</b>	1-2 Days	Review strategy, industry trends, competitive landscape, key personnel, team development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get out of office</li> <li>• Focus on work; limit social activities</li> <li>• Don't over structure or over burden the schedule</li> </ul>