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Want a better decision? Plan a better meeting

Effective meetings produce better business decisions. Yet too many decision meetings are doomed from the get-go. You can do better.

by Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost, and Leigh Weiss

Decisions are the lifeblood of organizations, and meetings are where important business decisions often happen. Yet many executives are nonplussed—at best—when describing their own experience of meetings. Some business leaders we know wonder openly how they can dedicate so much time (commonly six to seven hours a day and often more) to an activity that feels so unproductive. "I spend nearly all of my time in meetings," admitted one top-team member to us recently, "and I don't get to sit down to think on my own until after 6:00 p.m."

Many leaders will empathize. In a recent McKinsey survey, 61 percent of executives said that at least half the time they spent making decisions, much of it surely spent in meetings, was ineffective. And just 37 percent of respondents said their organizations' decisions were both high-quality and timely.

How can senior managers get better, faster business decisions from the meetings they attend or lead? Certainly, getting steeped in best practices is wise, as there is a wealth of good thinking available on the topic of decision making (see sidebar, "Read me: Quick-hit recommendations for decision makers"). In the meantime, we recommend looking closer to home, namely at the preparation that should happen (but perhaps doesn't) before your *own* meetings.

Try this exercise: take out your phone, open your calendar, and review today's remaining meetings against the three questions below to see if you can spot any of the interrelated "fatal flaws" that most commonly sabotage meeting effectiveness. Besides improving the quality and speed of your team's decisions and helping you make better use of your time, we hope the exercise helps you shed light on the underlying organizational dynamics and mind-sets that may be seeding dysfunction in the first place.

1. Should we even be meeting at all?

Removing superfluous meetings is perhaps the single biggest gift to an executive's productivity. Start by examining your recurring meetings, as these are a fertile place for otherwise useful and timely decision topics to mutate in unproductive ways.

Consider the case of the healthcare company that held a recurring "growth committee" meeting that in principle should have been making decisions about strategic partnerships, M&A, and new lines of business but in practice rarely did. Meanwhile, the company's executive committee (which included several of the growth-committee members, along with the CEO) also met routinely to cover the same ground—and *was* making the decisions.

Why the disconnect? Left unexamined, the growth-committee meeting had evolved over several years into a discussion forum and holding pen for topics to be decided by the executive committee. Moreover, the range of subjects the growth committee covered had widened considerably beyond its original remit. The meeting was, in effect, not only redundant but also confusing to managers further down in the organization about what decisions were being made and where.

While the company went on to remedy the situation and successfully streamline where decisions about growth priorities were made, the issues the CEO and top team had to confront went well beyond eliminating redundant meetings. For example, poor clarity around decision rights encouraged wide-ranging discussions but not decisions, and over time this behavior became a habit in meetings—a habit that exacerbated a general lack of accountability among some executives. Moreover, the team lacked the psychological safety to take interpersonal risks and thus feared making the "wrong" decision.[1] Together, these intertwined factors encouraged leaders to escalate decisions up the chain of command, as the growth committee had done. Had the CEO attacked the symptoms by only announcing fixes from on high (say, blanket restrictions on the number of meetings allowed, or introducing meeting-free blackout days—both actions we have seen frustrated leaders take), the problems would have continued.

[1] To better understand how psychological safety operates in the workplace, see Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*, first edition, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019.

This is not to say that time management isn't part of the solution. It is, and if ingrained habits or cultural expectations encourage meetings as your company's default mode, then soul searching is in order. If you are one of those leaders who reflexively accepts meeting invitations as they appear in your calendar, then you should hit pause. Your goal should be to treat your leadership capacity—a finite resource—as seriously as your company treats financial capital (an equally finite one).

When recurring meetings *are* needed, check with the other decision makers to ensure the frequency is right (can weekly become monthly?). Look also to see if the decision might be best made by an individual. Remember: Delegating a decision to someone doesn't mean that the person can't still consult others for guidance. It just probably doesn't require an entire committee to do so.

Finally, it's tough to spot problems when no one is looking. At the healthcare company, like at many organizations, it wasn't anyone's responsibility to ensure that senior-management meetings had clear, non-overlapping purposes. A chief of staff can be invaluable here, as we will see next.

2. What is this meeting for anyway?

At a broad level, we naturally associate the meetings we lead with the topics they cover (think "branch network review" or "China strategy"). But how often do we go further and clarify whether the meeting is meant to share information, discuss it, or decide something? It may seem rudimentary, but we can all recall meetings (and large-group meetings in particular) where the lines between sharing, discussing, and deciding were blurred or absent—or where the very purpose of the meeting is unclear, as was true of the healthcare company's growth committee and its ever-expanding list of discussion topics. In such situations, meetings may begin to seem frustrating and even futile.

This was the dynamic that product-development leaders were struggling with at an advanced industrial company. The team attended a monthly meeting where they were meant to make decisions about whether to advance or kill products in the middle stages of development (the company had similar meetings for early- and late-stage products). But instead, the meetings involved hours of discussion and few decisions.

Your goal: treat your leadership capacity as seriously as your company treats financial capital.

In part, this was because of the complexity of the topic; the success of the products in question wasn't a foregone conclusion, but the products were all far enough along to show real promise. Any decisions would therefore be difficult to make. Another challenge was that each product had a group of backers at the meeting who didn't want to see their work torpedoed. The mix of interests and motivations in the room, combined with the lack of organization and role clarity (a factor we will explore next) spelled trouble. The result was a freewheeling mix of provocative, meandering, inconclusive discussions. At times, important questions would get raised that couldn't be answered, in part because participants didn't have the information they needed beforehand. In one meeting, for example, the team didn't know the status of a major customer's own product-development efforts. This was vital because the customer's products would rely on the ones being developed by the industrial company. In other cases, meeting attendees were expected to review the relevant material as the meeting took place around them.

To tackle the problems, the company tapped a leader to serve in a chief-of-staff capacity for the effort. This colleague coordinated the materials before the meeting, ensured that they were distributed in advance, and along the way verified that the proper staff work had been done in the first place. This minimized the "informational" aspects of the meetings themselves, saving time while in fact better preparing the participants with the information they needed.

This colleague also helped run the meetings differently—for instance, by keeping the lines clear between discussion and debate sessions, and the actual decision making itself (following the principles outlined in the exhibit). This allowed for richer, more thorough conversations about the products and debates around the trade-offs involved, and ultimately led to better decisions.[2] After the meetings, the chief of staff ensured the appropriate follow-up took place and that the various committees stayed closely coordinated with one another. Finally, the company trained additional executives in these skills so that the role could be reproduced and the benefits scaled.

A final note. Just because a decision is made doesn't mean people are committed to it. As the industrial company's example suggests, people bring their own motivations to meetings, and we've seen plenty of cases where a "yes" in the meeting turns into a "maybe" in the following days and weeks. Part of the solution for this is to make sure the next steps are clear, including the nitty-gritty details of execution. After all, a decision only matters if it can be implemented. The broader challenge, of course, is making sure that everyone feels a stake in the outcome. Getting there involves institutionalizing the principle of "disagree and commit," articulated by Jeff Bezos in his 2017 letter to Amazon shareholders.[3]

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[2] Indeed, for infrequent, high-stakes decisions, the quality of debate among the top team is the most important success factor. For more, see "Decision making in the age of urgency," April 2019, McKinsey.com.

[3] Another notable practice Amazon follows is to move the information-sharing component of meetings into a memo that is read, silently, by participants at the outset. See Justin Bariso, "Jeff Bezos knows how to run a meeting. Here's how he does it," *Inc*, April 30, 2018, inc.com.

Exhibit

Want a good meeting? Begin by clarifying the goal.

	Typical size	Typical characteristics	Typical outcome
Decision meeting 	6 to 8 attendees	Structured agenda identifies decision(s) to be made Decision makers have been identified and are in the room Active facilitation	Action
Discussion meeting 	8 to 20 attendees	Structured agenda identifies discussion topics Active dialogue by attendees	Consideration
Information-sharing meeting 	2 to 2,000+ attendees	Agenda clarifies topics for information sharing, although additional items may arise during the meeting One-way communication from speaker	Awareness

3. What is everyone's role?

Just as it's crucial for meetings to have a clear purpose and for attendees to know whether they're meant to be debating or deciding, it is equally important to know who makes the call. Indeed, even if it's clear who the decider is—and even if it's you—it's a mistake to meet without fully considering the roles of the other participants and how they are meant to influence the outcome. This was part of the challenge faced by the industrial company's product-development team: the backers of a given product sought to informally veto any moves that would kill or delay it, even though they had no explicit authority to do so.

Poor role clarity can kill productivity and cause frustration when decisions involve complicated business activities that cut across organizational boundaries. At a global pharmaceutical company, for example, a pricing decision for a new product became a political, energy-sapping affair because several leaders believed they each had decision-making authority in overlapping parts of the pricing process. Further confusing matters, the ultimate pricing decision was made by a committee where no single member had clear authority to decide.

Blurry accountability can also have immediate repercussions in an era where speed and agility are a competitive advantage. For example, a major business unit of an industrial company missed out on a high-priority acquisition because the head of the unit thought the CEO and executive team needed to approve all acquisitions. The CEO, meanwhile, thought the business head could make the call. Before the mix-up was sorted out, just 48 hours later, a rival had stolen the deal.

Sidebar

Read me: Quick-hit recommendations for decision makers

The difficulties associated with decision making have long been of keen management interest, and any tour of the decision-making landscape should include Daniel Kahneman's seminal book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), which explores the pervasive role that cognitive biases play in human thinking and behavior.

We also recommend sampling a range of views on the principles of decision making itself—for instance, how behavioral economics affects decision making, as well as how categorizing decisions can help business leaders manage and improve them.

- Chip Heath and Olivier Sibony, "Making great decisions," *McKinsey Quarterly*, April 2013, McKinsey.com

- Dan Lovallo and Olivier Sibony, "The case for behavioral strategy," *McKinsey Quarterly*, March 2010, McKinsey.com

- Aaron De Smet, Gerald Lackey, and Leigh M. Weiss, "Untangling your organization's decision making," *McKinsey Quarterly*, June 2017, McKinsey.com

When it comes to decision making in meetings, seek a practical grounding in areas such as spurring productive debate in meetings, slaying cognitive biases in them, and designing meetings for routinely overlooked groups.

- Morten T. Hansen, "How to have a good debate in a meeting," *Harvard Business Review*, January 10, 2018, hbr.org

- Dan Lovallo and Olivier Sibony, "Taking the bias out of meetings," *McKinsey Quarterly*, April 2010, McKinsey.com

- Renee Cullinan, "Run meetings that are fair to introverts, women, and remote workers," *Harvard Business Review*, April 29, 2016, hbr.org

Finally, curate your own list and share it with your team. The state of management thinking on this topic will continue to evolve—and you'll want to evolve with it.

To get a handle on meeting roles and responsibilities, we are fans of using a simple yet comprehensive "cheat sheet" of responsibilities. Our list goes by the acronym DARE, and while you may prefer different nomenclature in your company,[4] make sure you can identify the essence of these four roles when you hold your next decision meeting. (Note that your chief of staff could also come from any of these roles and serve in two capacities.)

- *Decision maker(s)* are the only ones with a vote and the ones with responsibility to decide as they see fit; if they get stuck, they should jointly align on how to escalate the decision or otherwise get the process unstuck, even if this means agreeing to "disagree and commit."

- *Advisers* give input and shape the decision. They have an outsize voice in setting the context of the decision and a big stake in its outcome—for example, the decision might affect their profit-and-loss statement. But they don't have a vote on the decision.

- *Recommenders* conduct the analyses, explore the alternatives, illuminate the pros and cons, and ultimately recommend a course of action to the advisers and decision makers. They see the day-to-day implications of the decision, but they also have no vote. In general, the more recommenders the better in the process—but not in the decision meeting itself, as noted in the exhibit.

- *Execution partners* don't give input so much as get deeply involved in implementing the decision, and therefore they must be informed. For speed and clarity, you will need the right ones in the room when the decision is made so they can ask clarifying questions and spot flaws that might hinder implementation. Notably, the number of execution partners doesn't necessarily depend on the importance of the decision. An M&A decision, for example, might have just two execution partners: the CFO and a business-unit head.

These stakeholders are all critically important, and they should hear so from you—even as you take away their decision rights, votes, veto power, and escalation authority, as appropriate. Remember, just because they don't have a vote doesn't mean they don't have a voice. Good decisions are the culmination of a thoughtful process. Clarified roles will help that process be thorough—and speedy.

One role you never want represented? *T*, for tourists. Many of your colleagues will want to be in the loop and will even need to be involved downstream eventually—but if they have no role in the decision-making process, they shouldn't be in today's meeting. Get disciplined, keep them out, and find other ways, such as memos or town halls, to communicate decisions to relevant stakeholders.

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[4] If our formulation sounds a bit like a responsibility-assignment matrix (sometimes called a RACI matrix, for "responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed"), that's because it is. Our version, however, is modified to be more suitable for generating speed and quality in decision making.

Be mindful, however, that tourists come for a reason, and having a lot of them is often a sign of deeper problems. It's human nature, after all, to want to know what's going on. If you aren't giving them a clear sense of how their roles fit into the decisions being made, you can expect grumbling—and it will be deserved. To prevent it, make it a point to communicate more than just the outcome of a meeting, but also what it means for specific roles. In large organizations, enlist other leaders, including your direct reports, to help you.

The best organizations use multiple channels and vehicles to share and reinforce information about important decisions, policies, and so on. The worst companies tend to leave it to serendipity—and to chance.

Finally, there could be plenty of situations where a "guest" seems a perfectly reasonable idea—say you want to give an up-and-coming direct report a chance for some C-suite exposure. If they are truly contributing to one of the roles we've outlined, go for it. More likely, you risk falling into one or more of the traps described in this article. If what you want is exposure for your colleague, suggest that the CEO invite them to lunch instead. Q

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