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The productivity battleground



How meeting friction drains team collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Every leadership meeting at Amazon starts the same way: complete and utter silence for up to 30 minutes. You walk in, say hello, and then sit in silence while you consume an in-depth, six-page memo. Only when everyone is finished does the meeting begin in earnest. It's a strange approach to meetings, but like many other things in Amazon founder, CEO, and president Jeff Bezos's meteorically successful empire, it's superbly effective.

Bezos introduced in-depth memos several years ago after becoming frustrated with ineffective meetings packed with incomprehensible PowerPoint presentations and reams of indigestible data. Bezos wanted meetings built on character and narrative—the stuff humans are hardwired to understand. So he insisted that each meeting's organizer write a long, narratively structured memo. Memos don't just help participants understand the meeting's content. The act of crafting a long, narratively structured document helps leaders process information and arrange their thoughts.

“FULL SENTENCES ARE HARDER TO WRITE,” BEZOS TOLD INC. “THEY HAVE VERBS. THE PARAGRAPHS HAVE TOPIC SENTENCES. THERE IS NO WAY TO WRITE A SIX-PAGE, NARRATIVELY STRUCTURED MEMO AND NOT HAVE CLEAR THINKING.”

For new employees, Amazon's meetings can seem utterly alien. "[Attendees are] just not accustomed to sitting silently in a room and doing study hall with a bunch of executives," Bezos told *Fortune*. But once they're over the initial shock, Bezos says employees learn to love the format. Writing in-depth memos may add some preliminary work, but it removes a lot of friction from meetings. Attendees are more engaged, more informed, and less distracted—something facilitators everywhere dream about.

But Amazon's efficient meetings are somewhat of a rarity.

Across the world, millions of meetings are derailed each day from the friction caused by poor structures, bad habits, and malfunctioning technology.

When working together feels difficult, people abandon collaborative activities and default to working on their own. This inevitably produces substandard results.

**WHILE ONE BAD MEETING
ON ITS OWN ISN'T
CATASTROPHIC, A PATTERN
OF POOR MEETINGS CAN
DISRUPT YOUR TEAM.**



HOW LEADERS FIGHT FRICTION

As we saw with Amazon, good meetings don't happen by accident. They require careful forethought and planning. Organizers need to think critically about the challenges they face and take steps to mitigate them. This is especially true with virtual meetings, where effective discussion relies on everything going right.

To discover how organizations are building better meetings, we investigated the processes and structures at four influential companies.

By carefully designing their meetings for minimal friction, they have maximized collaboration and, therefore, results.

HOW APPLE CONTROLS MEETING SIZE

Meetings are always a balancing act. Invite too few people and you simply don't have enough voices for an active discussion. But invite too many and you risk your meeting descending into a maelstrom of competing conversations. Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, was the master of meeting sizes.

Jobs insisted meetings be kept small.

He was unrelenting when it came to enforcing the small-meeting rule. Ken Segall, Jobs's long-term advertising partner, recalled just how blunt Jobs could be. One morning, Jobs arrived at Segall's ad agency for his bi-weekly update meeting. Jobs's eyes swept the room, taking note of those in attendance. Then he spotted someone new.

“HIS EYES LOCKED ON TO THE ONE THING IN THE ROOM THAT DIDN'T LOOK RIGHT,” WROTE SEGALL IN HIS BOOK, INSANELY SIMPLE. “POINTING TO LORRIE, HE SAID, ‘WHO ARE YOU?’”

Lorrie was one of Segall's colleagues. She was attending the meeting because she was working on some related projects. But Jobs saw her as an extra body and a disruptive element. He thanked her for her time and summarily asked her to leave.

It wasn't an isolated incident, according to Segall. If meetings were growing too large, Jobs wasn't afraid to ask people to leave—and he was right to. Robert Sutton, professor of management science at Stanford University, analyzed the effect of group size on decision making. He discovered the sweet spot was between five and eight meeting participants. Veer outside the limits and you'd undermine the work.

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HOW FACEBOOK SETS MEETING PURPOSE

Ineffective meetings are often cited as the most frustrating—and that comes from the structure, or lack thereof, implemented by organizers. In large companies, organizers will often book meeting rooms and invite attendees long before they determine the purpose of the actual meeting.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg experienced this firsthand as his company ballooned from fledgling startup into Silicon Valley unicorn. His engineers and project managers would arrange meetings without deciding in advance what they wanted to achieve.

After the allotted time had elapsed, the attendees would leave feeling frustrated and without having achieved anything. In response, Zuckerberg instituted a new rule.

Before booking a meeting, organizers had to ask themselves one simple question: Is this meeting designed to make a decision or have a discussion?

BECAUSE THERE WAS NO OBJECTIVE, CONVERSATIONS WOULD DRIFT IN CIRCLES OR MEANDER INTO IRRELEVANT TOPICS.

While simple, this question allowed Facebook employees to correctly frame each meeting. For decision meetings, the company defined the decision-making process so that the meeting itself focused on reaching a consensus on any given topic. For discussion meetings, the company set the limits of exploration and helped facilitate healthy debate within those limits. This clarity helped minimize wasted time and streamline discussions, helping Facebook move and innovate faster.

While most businesses will need more than two meeting archetypes, Zuckerberg's advice to define the purpose of your meeting before sitting down is incredibly valuable.

BY DECIDING WHAT YOU WANT OUT OF A MEETING, YOU CAN SELECT THE MEETING STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES THAT WILL GET YOU THERE.

HOW ATLISSIAN CONTROLS DISCUSSION

One of the key purposes of a meeting is to bring together disparate voices, facilitating decision-making conversation. But that's often easier said than done.

When Dominic Price joined Atlassian as head of research and development, he quickly discovered the software company's meetings weren't working. "We realized that there was a situation where the alpha, most senior, or most opinionated person dominated a meeting," Price told *SmartCompany*. But for Price, whose job relied on other people generating fresh ideas, that posed a problem. Price's work required cognitive diversity, and when a meeting was dominated by one or two loud voices, that diversity simply wasn't there.

PRICE BEGAN LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION TO HIS MEETING WOES AND FOUND ONE IN AN UNLIKELY FORM: A SQUEAKING RUBBER CHICKEN CALLED HELMUT.

Helmut was an organizational staple in Atlassian's design team. During a meeting, whenever a designer was speaking for too long, the meeting's facilitator would squeeze Helmut and move the conversation on.

Price borrowed Helmut and began using it as a facilitation aid in his own meetings—and it worked. Price says a sharp squeak from Helmut is enough to quiet down dominant speakers and encourage contributions from other members.

While a squeaking rubber chicken isn't appropriate for every meeting, more generic facilitation aids are. Consider allocating a set speaking time for each attendee or implementing a more understated warning signal like a hand gesture or colored card. With simple facilitation aids in place, you can increase the range of voices in your meetings, improve collaboration, and maximize output.

“HIS JOB IS TO SHUT PEOPLE UP,” EXPLAINED ATlassian’s HEAD OF DESIGN, JÜRGEN SPANGL. “BUT IN A NICE WAY.”

HOW GOOGLE VENTURES LIMITS RUN OVER

Unless you keep an iron grip on conversations, it's easy for meetings to run over. Depending on your attendees' schedules, overruns are either a minor inconvenience or a significant hindrance. Either way, it's a friction point. At Google Ventures, the in-house venture capital arm of Google, facilitators have developed a simple yet effective strategy to minimize overrunning meetings without disrupting the meeting itself.

It all started when Jake Knapp, a design partner at Google Ventures, visited his son's first-grade class. Standing at the back of the class, Knapp watched as the teacher gave the kids an assignment. But before she let them begin, she wound up an oversized oven timer and set it on her desk. As the clock started ticking, all the kids buried their heads in their workbooks, racing to get their work done before the timer sounded. Knapp picked up a similar oversized oven clock and began experimenting with it at Google Ventures. During time-boxed meetings, he'd pull out the clock, set a time limit, and place it on the table, in full view of all the meeting attendees. "It makes time visible and tangible," Knapp said, "so it changes the way people think about time passing." He discovered the visual cue kept attendees focused on the discussion, minimized digressive conversations, and kept meetings on track.

"OH, MY GOD, THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING," KNAPP TOLD BLOOMBERG, RECALLING SEEING THE CLOCK IN ACTION. "I FIGURED WHAT WORKED FOR SMALL CHILDREN WOULD PROBABLY WORK WELL FOR CEOS, TOO."

BUILDING ON SURE FOUNDATIONS

As remote working is now more prominent than ever, these meeting protocols need to translate into the virtual environment. With virtual meetings, creating good meeting structures is only one part of the puzzle. Effective virtual meetings also need robust technology powering them. Without the right tech in place, meetings quickly become productivity hurdles, disrupting your workflow and dissociating attendees.

Consider the worst-case scenario. You email a meeting invite to someone, but they don't have the necessary software. They spend five minutes downloading the software and another five minutes installing. When they eventually join, the video is low quality, lagging, and prone to spontaneous drops in service. When you try to share a file, you discover the basic service only supports video, so you resort to sharing files via email.

With the wrong technology, every moment in a meeting becomes a friction point. Modern workers used to simple, seamless, and instantaneous communication simply won't tolerate it. But if you pick the right collaboration software—something that unifies team chat, voice, and video—that enables effortless movement between them, you can supercharge your meetings and do great work. Take, for example, the difference between application-based and browser-based meeting software. With a browser-based solution, all meeting attendees need to do is click a link to join a call. There's no software to download or plugins to install. Attendees click a link, the feed pops up, and they get straight into the conversation.

Drops in service are a function of reliability, so look for services that advertise the highest uptime and boast impressive flexibility. Flexibility is especially important as more workers begin to work remotely, so look for a service that will grow as your team does.

BROWSER-BASED TECH IS SLICK AND SEAMLESS AND ENCOURAGES COMMUNICATION. BEYOND THAT, YOU MUST LOOK FOR A SERVICE THAT ACTUALLY WORKS.

HELP FROM RINGCENTRAL

We work with our customers to reimagine the world of business communications and collaboration. RingCentral unites the pillars of your communications ecosystem—team messaging, voice, video, and call center—into one seamlessly integrated platform. Since each channel is a core part of RingCentral, users can effortlessly switch between them without losing context or flow.

You can message with a colleague and quickly switch to a phone call with one click. You can then immediately switch to a video meeting with another single click, adding new team members on the fly. For new meeting participants, they don't just join a call, they join a workspace with all the context they need already baked in.

With RingCentral's open platform, you can integrate your communication channels with your critical business apps or build your own custom integrations. With RingCentral, you can build the most effortless communication space possible.

[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT RINGCENTRAL VIDEO, OUR BROWSER-BASED, EFFORTLESS VIDEO SOLUTION.](#)

ABOUT RINGCENTRAL

RingCentral, Inc. (NYSE: RNG) is a leading provider of unified communications (message, video, phone), customer engagement, and contact center solutions for businesses worldwide. More flexible and cost-effective than legacy on-premises PBX and video conferencing systems that it replaces, RingCentral empowers modern mobile and distributed workforces to communicate, collaborate, and connect via any mode, any device, and any location. RingCentral's open platform integrates with leading third-party business applications and enables customers to easily customize business workflows. RingCentral is headquartered in Belmont, California, and has offices around the world.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION,
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