

## Case Study: Too Many Meetings?

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### THE SITUATION

A 300 person business unit of an equipment design and manufacturing company recognized that it was experiencing problems with “too many meetings.” This is not an unusual complaint in any company, but the managers here were voicing this in a much higher volume, with a high concern that they were spending too much time, in too many meetings, and that these did not accomplish the desired results. We performed a quick survey of management concerns that validated this as their #1 business problem because it was draining resources and causing delays in product development and shipments to customers. Their products are highly tailored to individual customers in both the hardware and software features requiring considerable coordination between engineering, manufacturing, and field support. They challenged us: Can you really fix the problem of too many meetings? We thought so, but in a different way.

### THE SOLUTION

We began by conducting structured observations of the various meetings beginning with the division manager’s weekly staff meeting on down. We quantified our observations and included a summary of the meeting evaluation forms that we had members complete. From this, we helped the client understand that the number of meetings was only the symptom of a bigger core problem, which was the poor practices which lead to the ineffectiveness of the meetings. Poor meeting skills, by leaders and members, were being practiced throughout the business. We also helped them understand that meetings are interrelated and that you cannot fix some meetings, and not others. Why? You have to treat meetings as a system. We helped management deploy our *Meetings That Really Matter* program that included creating new meeting rules and seven meeting templates, and training for all staff on their meeting rules and responsibilities. A feedback loop was built into all meetings to ensure that the meeting leader got timely corrective feedback. Fundamental practices were revised that included specific rules such as that all meetings had to end at either five minute till or twenty-five minutes past the hour, so that each meeting did not corrupt subsequent meeting schedules. (One example of the interrelationship of one meeting to others)

### THE RESULTS

After implementation, ninety days into the new meeting structure, we did a post survey. The results were astounding to the client. Prior to the change, the baseline survey revealed the alarming statistic that over half the meetings were felt to be “mostly a waste of time.” This number now had dropped to below ten percent. The use of good meeting practices, such as published agendas, notes, clearly assigned responsibilities, and the review of action items, were reported as being practiced in over ninety percent of all meetings. Even the length of meetings, which was not part of the change goals, declined by an average of ten minutes or sixteen percent.

## **SUMMARY AND LESSONS TO BE APPLIED**

There are some very important lessons in this case. Industry studies show that managers report that they spend between one-third and one-half their time in meetings. They also commonly report that managers indicate that almost half of the time they spend in meetings is wasted on non or unimportant activities. Why is this? Because it is an unmeasured waste of finite management resources, it remains an unaddressed but large business cost in most organizations. To the point, the existing knowledge on how to run effective meetings is very good. We know what works! Yet the number of companies that undertake programs to improve meeting effectiveness and develop meeting leader and member skills is very small. Note that the complaint of too many meetings is a symptom of other problems. Also remember that you can fix your meetings, but not one at a time because this is a system with interrelationships.

No one ever complained about a good meeting where the right people were there and prepared, and where things got done and the bar of progress was moved forward.