# why meetings suck and how to make them useful for your team

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A reader writes:

*I have been a manager for a year at my organization, and in total I've been at my organization for seven years in part-time, front-line jobs. I am now moving into a new position with a bigger team to lead (all full-time people). In the past, my boss has led weekly team meetings that I have not felt were the best use of my time. They sometimes drag on for two hours, they get sidetracked to other conversations, they include non-work conversation topics, and they are agenda-less. We mostly spend time going around the circle talking about what tasks we've accomplished since the last meeting. How should I decide whether team meetings are a good idea for my team? What should they include? What makes them useful?*

Good for you for thinking about this, because I think that at most organizations, 85% of meetings are a waste of time. And the ones you describe being forced to attend hit all the characteristics of bad meetings — particularly having no agenda and just going around the room talking about what you're working on.

Strive to have far fewer meetings and to make them actually useful. To do that, do the following:

• Before scheduling a meeting, ask yourself these questions:  Is this something that could be just as easily conveyed in a memo or email?  Is this a discussion (meaning there will be back-and-forth, which is what a meeting should be for) or just information-sharing (which might point you back to a memo or email)? Is it really a good use of my staff's time to have them there? Who really needs to be there? Should it be optional or mandatory?

• Always, always, always have an agenda. You might even note on the agenda roughly how much time you're allotting to each topic.  If one of your staffers wants to

schedule a meeting, insist they distribute an agenda beforehand too. This ensures that people think about what they want to achieve in the meeting ahead of time, which counteracts the rambling, purposeless meetings your boss has been holding.

- When something comes up that isn't on the agenda, decide on the spot if it's truly important enough to displace another topic (usually it won't be, but sometimes it will); if it's not, then say, "Let's put that on the agenda for another time" and move the conversation back to what you're there to discuss.

- Be clear about what you want the take-aways from the meeting to be. Announce that at the beginning: ""We have one hour to cover A, B, and C. At the end of this meeting, I'm hoping we'll have ___."

- Start and end on time. If you don't take the start time seriously, people will start showing up later and later, wasting more and more of the punctual participants' time. Apply the same rigor to the ending time: Set a time limit, announce it at the start, and warn people when you're five or ten minutes away from wrapping up.

- Make sure that someone is in charge of running the meeting and that they know what that means. Whether it's you or someone else, someone needs to be in charge of keeping the meeting moving, redirecting conversation as needed, teasing out action items, cutting off ramblers, and wrapping it up on time.

- At the end of the meeting, make sure everyone is clear on next steps — i.e., that the conversation has been translated into action items, and those action items have a clear owner.

- Never use group meetings as a substitute for individual check-in's, which is what it sounds like your boss was doing. That's disrespectful of and wasteful of other people's time.