

Author Q & A Pat Lencioni - *Death by Meeting*

Q: What do you have to say to a CEO who thinks meetings are a waste of time?

A: I'd say that CEO is failing. Anyone who leads and manages people needs to understand that meetings are critical to any organization, and there is no good excuse for bad ones. A bad meeting is a function of its leader.

The fact that we, as a business society, have come to accept that meetings are painful, and to continue to endure them that way, is ridiculous. It's like Shaquille O'Neil deciding that basketball games are boring; or a presidential candidate deciding that politics is really not that interesting. Meetings are what executives and managers do, and they need to realize that the fault for bad ones is their own.

Q: Why do so many people hate meetings, and is it inevitable?

People hate meetings for two big reasons. First, they are boring. Painful. Tedious. Second, meetings are unproductive. According to a *Wall Street Journal* poll, CEOs list meetings as the single largest category of unproductive time on their schedules.

Based on my interaction with CEOs and other executives, hatred of meetings is commonplace.

However, bad meetings are not inevitable. There is nothing inherently boring or unproductive about meetings. They are the activity at the center of every organization, and should therefore be both interesting and relevant in the lives of participants. If we can just turn everything we know about meetings upside down - replace agendas and decorum with passion and conflict - we can transform drudgery into meaningful competitive advantage.

Q: Why do meetings ultimately matter? Are they really important?

Meetings, as much as they are loathed, are critical to any organization. According to a recent study, they are where we spend approximately 25% of our business day.

Beyond the time we spend in meetings, however, there should be no doubt that meetings matter. They are the origin of every decision that is made. They are where presidential cabinets decide to wage war or peace, where governors and their staffs decide to raise or lower taxes, where executives decide to open or close a factory. And if executives are nodding off during meetings and waiting for them to end, there is a good chance the decisions they are making are bad ones.

Q: When you decided to write business books, what made you decide to take on the fable format?

I decided to write fables rather than more traditional books for one primary reason—I believe that people learn best when they are engaged. So many of my readers tell me that they relate to the characters and get absorbed in the story, and before they know what's happening, they're learning something big.

Beyond that, I wanted people to actually enjoy reading my books. The thought of writing a more academic book, one that people would use as a sleep aide, was just too depressing for me.

Q: What do meetings and movies have to do with one another?

People who run meetings can learn a lot from movie directors and screenwriters. Think about it this way.

Most movies are roughly two hours in length. Many of our staff meetings are the same. But given the choice, most of us would rather go to a movie than a meeting. Why? Because meetings are boring. Which makes no sense, because meetings have two big advantages over movies. First, meetings are interactive, movies are not. You can't interact with actors on the screen during a movie, but you can weigh in and affect the outcome of a meeting. Second, meetings are relevant to our lives, but movies are not. The outcome of a movie has no direct impact on our lives, while a meeting often has a very real effect on what we will do in the foreseeable future.

So why do we prefer movies to meetings? Simply put, because meetings are boring. Why are they boring? Because they lack conflict. Fortunately for moviegoers, directors and screenwriters figured this out long ago. I dabbled in screenwriting after college and learned that the way to keep an audience engaged was to ensure that there was plenty of conflict in my stories. Not only that, but I learned that if you don't highlight that conflict early in a story - during the first ten pages! - you'll lose your audience.

When we lead meetings, we need to think more like directors and screenwriters. We need to give our people something to care about, something worth engaging in conflict over. We need to raise their level of anxiety about what could go wrong if we don't engage. And we need to raise these issues at the beginning of our meetings, before our audience checks out and starts thinking about what movie they're going to see that night.

The good news is that there are plenty of issues at every meeting that have the potential for productive, relevant conflict.

Q: When it comes to evaluating the success of a company, many people examine balance sheets, stock prices, etc. What made you focus on meetings?

While financial indicators are certainly the best way to evaluate a company's success from a symptomatic standpoint, a better way to predict success is to assess the organization's vibrancy, passion and commitment. And the most central activity at the heart of an organization is the executive staff meeting. It is where every decision, whether strategic or tactical, originates.

And so, when executives sleepily nod their way through their weekly meetings, the odds are good that the decisions being made are not the best ones. Similarly, when you look at companies that continue to perform at the top of their industries, you can bet that executive staff meetings are anything but boring. Microsoft, Intel and General Electric are known for the passionate discourse and confrontation that takes place among leaders.

Q: As technology continues to make life and business more and more virtual, do you think this has positive or negative effects on meetings?

I think that the promises of the virtual workplace have not panned out to the extent that everyone expected. The fact is human beings need to be in the same room, face to face, in order to engage in the kind of discourse that leads to good decisions. When we try to circumvent that reality by using audio and video conferencing, we dilute the quality of our conversations, and ultimately, the decisions that we make. Of course, there are certain types of conversations that are fine for virtual communication - customer service, basic information sharing, and tactical updates. But trust and conflict and commitment and accountability are not easily nurtured over a network, even a high speed one.