

## CHAPTER 1



# HOW TO GET YOUR WORK DONE IN MEETINGS

If you look at the way we meet in organizations and communities across the country, you see a lot of presenters, a lot of podiums, and a lot of passive audiences. This reflects our naiveté in how to bring people together.

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Have you ever fallen asleep on an airplane? Think about it. You are sleeping in a chair bolted to an aluminum frame, a few inches separating you from sixty-five-degree-below-zero (Fahrenheit) air, six miles up in the sky, going more than five hundred miles an hour. The information people share and the decisions engineers make in meetings at Boeing make this death-defying feat commonplace.

Eric Lindblad, vice president and general manager of Boeing's 747 program, runs many of those meetings that allow you to sleep on planes. He has strong opinions about meetings. For one, he finds spending hour upon hour in crowded conference rooms a nightmare. He hates to see conference rooms full of "wall-hangers," people who attend a meeting with no real purpose in mind. He really gets upset when he looks around the room and sees people whose body language indicates they would rather be anywhere else in the world. "Empty inside" is how Eric describes his experience in these meetings.

Eric believes the best way to lead change is to be out on the factory floor, working with production to implement needed changes, not in a stuffy conference room. Eric's factory floor has fuselages, wings, tails, miles of cable, and seats. These parts come together in Renton, Washington, to make the finished product: a Boeing airplane.

Eric's frustration with meetings started when he was working on the Boeing 737. That is when he came to his belief about how to lead change. He also realized his task required building teams, sharing information, and making decisions. Eric had to find a way to both be out on the floor and hold meetings.

Eric started by doing some simple math. He multiplied the number of people in his meetings by their average hourly rate and quickly realized that meetings are a very expensive form of communication. He also concluded that habits were behind a lot of meetings—for example, “We meet every Monday morning, no matter what.”

## **Eric dared to rethink his meetings completely**

Eric sought to change these meeting habits by developing two criteria for determining whether to hold a meeting:

1. Is there a need to share information?
2. Does the information that needs to be shared require dialogue?

The answers would determine whether or not to hold a meeting.

Making sure the “right” people attended was next. He sought to eliminate all wall-hangers from his meetings. His attendance criteria limited attendance to people who

- Had information or knowledge to share
- Had decision-making authority
- Were vital to the issue at hand

## **Next he set about changing the culture of meetings**

Eric sought to eliminate arriving late and leaving early. In consultation with his leadership team, he required all meetings within his organization to be scheduled to start five minutes before the hour and end five minutes after, no matter the

length. Why? Because he found that people were scheduling meetings back-to-back with no time for transition. This made it impossible for attendees to get from one side of a cavernous assembly building to the other and be on time for the next meeting. We suspect the same holds true even in smaller office buildings.

## **Then Eric completely updated his approach to meetings**

What Eric did next was extraordinary. He made all his meetings voluntary. There were no mandatory meetings on Eric's watch. He wanted people to be there not because of threat or politics but because they wanted to be there.

He actually gave people permission to leave meetings that were not valuable. When he noticed people who looked like they would rather be somewhere else, he would ask them, "Would your time be better spent doing something else?" If the answer was yes or they didn't have a good answer to the question, Eric would excuse them from the meeting—no repercussions.

Making meetings voluntary was Eric's way of getting meeting feedback. If people stopped showing up to a particular meeting and Eric believed there was a need to meet, he then asked what people needed to make the meeting more effective.

Eric has been using his approach to meeting effectiveness for more than ten years, starting when he was a senior manager of structures engineering for the 737 airplane. Whenever Eric takes a new assignment, he says it usually takes a month for people to believe that he is serious about his approach to meetings.

## **What would happen if you made all of *your* meetings voluntary?**

You may be like Eric, feeling that too many of the meetings you lead are time-wasting, energy-sapping affairs. Most may seem like useless gatherings endured at the expense of your “real work”—meetings that sabotage your organization’s goals and product while wasting human capital. You may be ready to imitate Eric and make your meetings voluntary. Are you shuddering? It could work, but only if you take a fresh look at meetings and update your approach. If you are ready to take the plunge, then you are reading the right book.

Even if you are not ready to make your meetings voluntary, you are still reading the right book. People always decide the extent to which they will be present in a meeting. If they don’t feel like they can leave, they leave in place; their bodies are present, but their minds are absent. No matter whether you make your meetings voluntary, people will still make choices about how much of themselves they bring to a meeting and how much of themselves they leave behind. You can influence that choice. We’ll show you how.

## **Getting your work done in meetings**

Meetings can be places where people do meaningful work, make plans, reach decisions, make commitments, and grow and develop and where everyone decides to get behind a task. Meetings can be gatherings in which people look forward to participating, even though they don’t have the time, even though the e-mails keep coming, even though no one can pick up the slack while they attend.