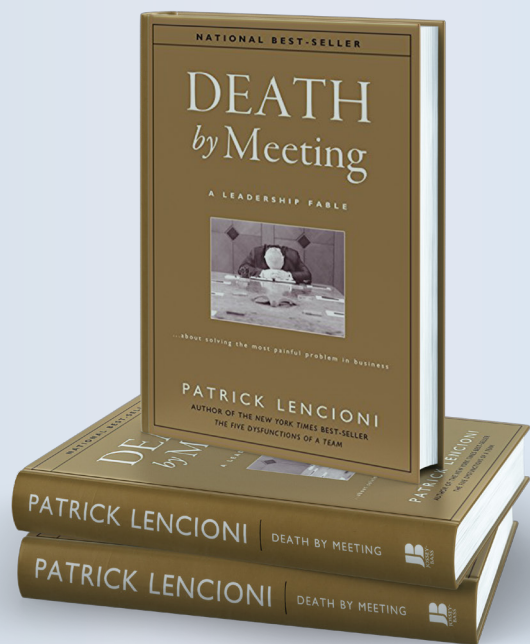


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Death By Meeting

By Patrick Lencioni

Patrick Lencioni is founder and president of The Table Group, a firm dedicated to helping leaders improve their organizations' health since 1997. His principles have been embraced by leaders around the world and adopted by organizations of virtually every kind including multinational corporations, entrepreneurial ventures, professional sports teams, the military, non-profits, schools, and churches. Lencioni is the author of ten business books with over three million copies sold worldwide. His work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review, Fortune, Bloomberg Businessweek, and USA Today.

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How to Solve Painful Problems in Business

It's a phrase that has been thrown around office buildings for years. "Death by meeting" refers to the lamentation of having to come together to share, discuss, or work on a problem too frequently for the team member's taste. Author Patrick Lencioni used to hear complaints about meetings and find that phrase "understandable and even humorous." Over time, though, he changed his tune. He saw this attitude as "a sad comment on the state of our business culture."

Those who are leaders or managers of organizations "are not paid for doing anything exceedingly tangible or physical, like delivering babies or kicking field goals or doing stand-up comedy." Meetings are where the work is done. In a sense they are the stage, field, or operating room of managers and leaders. Despite this, "most of us hate them." But meetings are essential to the running of an organization. They are critical to decision-making, innovation, feedback, and progress. We need meetings to make good decisions and to lead organizations successfully. Meetings themselves are not the problem.

In *Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable About Solving the Most Painful Problems in Business*, Patrick Lencioni lays out a "contrarian, non-traditional view of meetings" to take "what is now painful and tedious" and transform it "into something productive, compelling, and even energizing." On top of that, organizations that follow Lencioni's guidelines will no longer be wasting "time, energy, and enthusiasm lamenting the drudgery of meetings" like their competitors and will thus gain a competitive edge. Presented in parts as a fable and as direct guidance, *Death by Meeting* is a path for any manager or leader to find more effective ways to meet with staff and "restore some of the passion" that is sorely missing from these encounters.

The Fable

Casey McDaniel was a modestly successful pro golfer turned entrepreneur with the successful launch of Yip Software, which created lifelike sports video games aimed at adult athletes. Ten years into the company's history, outsiders would observe that the company, who regularly eked out a profit and threw an annual company picnic, could have been far more success-



ful under the leadership of “a more focused and disciplined” person. Staff were “merely satisfied,” not thrilled to be part of the Yip team. A major part of the problem was how leadership managed weekly staff meetings. They were “lethargic, unfocused, and passionless.”

Eventually, the culture of the entire company began to “mirror those meetings.” A “subtle mediocrity pervaded the organization.” A new executive surveyed staff and found that morale was low. Lower than anyone realized. This unnerved the other executives and they began searching for answers. CEO Casey landed on a solution. He announced that he was taking the company public so that employees could reap the financial rewards he assumed they were seeking. Unfortunately, he would live to regret this decision.

During the process leading up to the initial public offering, Casey received a call from a leading video game company interested in acquiring Yip. Casey figured this would be a way to get “the best of both worlds.” The company’s staff would get the financial gains they deserved and he would not submit himself to the whims of a board of directors or the public. Casey offered it to them under three conditions: he would continue to run his company autonomously, he would retain his entire management team, and he would be allowed to keep the Yip name as a separate, wholesome, sports-oriented brand.” To his surprise, the acquiring company agreed.

A rep from the parent company’s executive team visited the Yip office to observe a staff meeting. Needless to say, he was totally unimpressed with what he saw. Casey received the news that this person would be attending meetings for the next several months, though the purpose was not yet explained. Around the same time, Casey’s longtime assistant put in her notice as she was heading to bed rest with a complicated pregnancy.

Casey hired the son of a family friend who was taking a break after finishing grad school to fill in and in doing so, caused an inadvertent turning point. The new assistant was named Will and he was described by all who knew him as “intensely magnetic.” He was overly qualified for the job and Casey encouraged him to step up and get involved outside of typical admin duties. Casey had no idea how that suggestion would change everything in the coming months.

After attending a few weekly meetings that were unproductive, boring, and pointless, Will got to thinking that the meetings were the root of Yip’s problems. He presented a theory to the executives that meetings are boring when they lack conflict. He suggested that the Yip executives seemed to avoid “crucial conversations” just as they were beginning to get good. They presented dry, straightforward information, often reading directly from a report or data set, and no one was ever compelled to submit a question or challenge a position.

Instead, they should be mining each other’s opinions to find where they differ and airing them all out. It should be a “passionate, unfiltered, messy, provocative discussion” that does not necessarily end in consensus. After all, reaching true consensus is highly unlikely. Instead, the leader should make a sound deci-

sion after someone has made a compelling enough argument to convince the leader to go with their solution. Once that decision is made, the entire team should rally around it, no exceptions.

Will also suggested a new model for meetings. He said that a once weekly, one-size-fits-all meeting was the wrong way to organize the executive team’s time. To the initial chagrin of all involved, Will proffered that having more meetings that were more deliberately planned and executed would make way more sense. From daily five minute check-ins to quarterly off-site reviews, Will laid out a plan to totally revamp Yip’s meeting culture and organization. After a bit of a rocky start, the team got into a flow with the new meeting model. Revenues grew, decisions were clear, and the company progressed forward and intact. The Model, as Lencioni calls it, can be implemented in any organization to make meetings meaningful.

Problem #1: Lack of Drama

Lencioni asserts that “meetings are not inherently boring.” On the contrary, they should be exciting, and productive, and meaningful. After all, they bring together a group of diverse people to solve problems and create solutions that are directly tied to how they make a living. The stakes are actually quite high and the work being conducted in these sessions is entirely relevant to each participant. It is a perfect scenario for a lively exchange where individuals state their case and reach a conclusion. But instead, they are often tedious, boring, and unproductive. One of the reasons they fall so short of their potential is that most of our meetings lack drama or conflict.

The author draws a connection between movies and meetings. He points out that both are about two hours long yet if asked which they would prefer to do for two hours, most people would jump at the movie and run away from the meeting. Why? “Because screenwriters and directors figured out long ago that if you avoid nurturing conflict in your story, no one will want to watch your movie. And they also figured out that it is during the first ten minutes that they must use drama to hook their viewers, so they are willing to stay engaged for another two hours.” We must hook our meeting participants and find ways to inject drama in order to make meetings effective.

Meeting participants need to be “jolted” right from the get go when a meeting is commenced. The leader of the meeting has to set up what is at stake and make it compelling. The leader may need to “illustrate the dangers of making a bad decision,” for example or “highlight a competitive threat that is looming.” Staff are not expecting a stage set drama “but they’re certainly looking for a reason to care.” It’s the leader’s responsibility to give them that reason.

Once the scene is appropriately set, the leader of the meeting must actively look for opportunities to do what Lencioni calls “mining for conflict.” When a team of smart people are gathered together to hammer out issues that really matter, it is completely normal and natural for there to be disagreement. In fact, the resolution of those disagreements is what leads to better decision making and “what makes a meeting productive, engaging, even



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fun.” In the absence of conflict, resolution is often never found, which can later impact team productivity negatively.

A leader has to actively look for “any important issues about which team members do not agree” and then ensure that the disagreement is hashed out, even if it makes the leader “temporarily unpopular.” Over time, team members will become more comfortable confronting issues and working them out. The result will be far better than pretending the problem does not exist. Lencioni says, “I believe far more suffering is caused by failing to deal with an issue directly—and whispering about it in the hallways—than by putting it on the table and wrestling with it head on.”

Problem #2: Lack of Contextual Structure

The other major type of problem related to how most organizations conduct meetings is that they lack structure. And the “single biggest structural problem facing leaders of meetings is the tendency to throw every type of issue that needs to be discussed into the same meeting.” In an effort to save time, leaders often schedule a regular weekly or biweekly meeting that covers everything possible from sales strategies to budget reports. They do this so that team members can knock it all out at once and get back to their so-called “real work.” The end result of such a model is that it “only ensures that the meeting will be ineffective and unsatisfying for everyone.”

Should meetings be “informative and quick,” “interactive and strategic,” conversations about “company culture and people,” or just vehicles to “make clear decisions and move on?” Lencioni says all are true. “There should be different meetings for different purposes” and each of them should serve “a valid and important function.” Meetings should fall into four different types.

The Daily Check-In is a five minute, standing meeting where key leaders share what they are working on that day to avoid confusion about how to prioritize actions. The Weekly Tactical meeting runs sixty to ninety minutes and begins with a “Lightning Round” where each attendee takes just sixty seconds “to quickly describe what is on their respective plates,” which is then used to create an agenda for the meeting. Participants then strive to resolve issues ensuring they only focus on things that are of immediate concern.

The Monthly Strategic is the meeting where leaders get together and “wrestle with, analyze, debate, and decide upon critical issues that will affect the business in a fundamental way.” Topics should be limited to only a few and each topic should be given at least two hours to hash out. These are the meetings where partic-

ipants engage safely in “open-ended conversation and debate.”

Finally, the Quarterly Off-Site Review gives “executives an opportunity to regularly step away from the daily, weekly, even monthly issues that occupy their attention, so they can review the business in a more holistic, long-term manner.” These meetings should be full of “reflection and discussion” on topics like personnel, culture, strategy, competition, and other broad categories that impact the team and the organization in the long run. These meetings also serve as a means to improve relations between team members and unity among the team as a whole.

When seeing the title of the book, most people assume that Lencioni’s book would be about how to have fewer meetings, not more. When they learn that it is actually a prescription for having more, they react negatively. This is because of the damaging myth we have around meetings. We think they are time wasters. And unfortunately, in many organizations that is in fact the case. But the problem is not the number of meetings or how long they are. The problem is that they are organized, led, and managed in the wrong way.

In *Death by Meeting*, Lencioni offers leaders a structured approach to meetings that will make them engaging, productive, and informative for all involved. His model promises to reduce wasted time, improve decision making, and bring teams closer together. But that’s not all. When meetings are chronically mismanaged, they “exact a toll on the human beings who must endure them.” The ramifications of this extend far beyond the business itself. Staff will certainly feel dissatisfied in the immediate term, but they may also end up feeling angry, lethargic, and cynical towards each other and the organization. This bleeds into their personal lives, as well, impacting “self-esteem, families, and their outlook on life.”

Lencioni does not exaggerate when he claims that his model for meetings can positively impact us and the lives of our people. Yes, above all leaders have an obligation to the business but in looking out for the business, they can also take care of their people. This will breed a positive feedback loop that improves business to improve the people, which improves the business and so on. When leaders choose to overcome the ugly “death by meeting” condition of their organization they can learn to change meetings into a productive, useful, and even fun part of business and life.