

# STOP THE MEETING

*I Want to Get Off!*

How to Eliminate Endless Meetings  
While Improving Your Team's Communication,  
Productivity, and Effectiveness

**SCOTT SNAIR**

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# Introduction

## From Ground Attack to Corporate Combat

**A** few times in my life, I have enjoyed watching extraordinary and effective leaders at work.

In 1991, three years after graduation from the U.S. Military Academy, I served in the Army as a cannon platoon leader. I had the honor of taking 70 soldiers 100 miles into Iraq during a ground attack and setting up a fire base there for a month. My commander throughout Operation Desert Storm was Captain Karl T. Stebbins.

Stebbins displayed a reassuring calm throughout our mission, walking the gun line and checking his sergeants and soldiers. By all accounts, his unit was admirably prepared, with each soldier knowing exactly what was expected of him in a complicated orchestration of moving, shooting, and communicating.

Remarkable, however, was that during the six months we had practiced in the Saudi Arabian desert for this mission, Stebbins had not brought the unit together for a meeting more than once! While other commanders had labored endlessly with their troops over huge charts and map display boards, Stebbins had concentrated on spending one-on-one time with his lieutenants, his platoon sergeants, and his gunnery sergeants—pulling out a small, folded map or using a stick

in the sand when tactics needed discussion. We, in turn, followed suit, spending time with our soldiers, gun section by gun section—sometimes soldier by soldier—to ensure that each individual understood his unique role in accomplishing this important assignment.

Stebbins was always accessible, always close at hand. When enemy cannon rounds landed near my platoon, it was the captain, unruffled and almost serene, that reported the volleys over his radio—leading to the eventual detection and annihilation of their source. He was someone people respected and worked hard to please.

Fast-forward nearly 10 years. I was fighting yet another battle.

Having been out of the Army for years, I was working as a manufacturing and logistics manager for an international paper company. I had just informed all concerned at the mill that a desperate customer was about to get only half of the 40,000 pounds of paper he was expecting. The shipping coordinator was confirming the short inventory on her computer.

John Pastor, the head of planning and purchasing—and my boss—entered the shipping office with his trademark composure. “Everything we need for that order is here.”

I looked at him incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

He showed me his notepad. “I spoke with Quality. They have rechecked the five pallets in the Hold Product area—they’re fine and just need data entry into inventory. I spoke with the shippers. They managed to find three pallets that had been repackaged but not re-entered into inventory. And I took a walk through the partials area myself. There are four half-skids that we can combine into two full ones. That’s 10, plus the 10 on inventory. There’s your order.”

I looked at the figures, my mouth hanging open.

Over the years, Pastor had been asked to take on the simultaneous management of four different departments at our plant, each located as far away from the other three as geographically possible. Holding at least one staff meeting each day with his four department managers (including me) would have been acceptable, standard fare. But Pastor was rarely one for meetings. Instead, he chose to walk the mill, talking with his managers, inspecting their departments, and chatting with their workers. He was both a methodical and motivating supervisor.

These two leaders serve as appropriate bookends for the 10 years I have spent observing, interviewing, and documenting dozens of innovative managers, both inside and outside my personal backdrops. As a West Pointer, a manager, and a college business instructor, I find the study of transformational leadership truly inspiring.

What common quality did I discover among these special men and women? They chose successful one-on-one communication, delegating, and a strong, hands-on style over staff meetings and work team conferences.

To put it bluntly, great managers do not hold business meetings. They have figured out a way to be successful without them.

I have formalized these attributes and actions into a system of meetingless management, and I have used it myself for years. These techniques, including something I call *organizational channeling*, are provided in this book. The steps are easy to follow, and the commentary regarding the uselessness of meetings is easy to digest. Each of the book's 10 parts stands alone as a lesson, and each three- or four-page subchapter can be read and pondered as a separate dose.

My primary desire in writing this book is to change the way all types of managers view the standard workplace meeting and to



encourage them to replace their meetings with more results-directed and time-efficient ways of getting things done.

While I provide solid ideas in the text for avoiding the conferences of others, most of my instruction concentrates on offering the manager most likely to convene meetings convincing reasons and methods for not doing so. Why? Because no matter how much people may hate staff meetings, if their boss calls one, people will be there. The appreciation for fewer (or zero) meetings must begin with a team's manager. Therefore, my second hope in writing this book is to begin a valuable discussion among business leaders on whether or not a corporate culture so addicted to meetings is good for business itself.

Imagine a workday free from meetings. How much more could you accomplish? What great things could you go off and achieve? Perhaps after reading this text, the notion will not seem so far-fetched to you or your team.

*Scott Snair*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Stop Surrendering to Meetings



## ACCEPT YOUR DISTASTE FOR MEETINGS

*Business meetings have taken over my life.*

*I am a young, midlevel manager who came to this company a few years ago hoping to be successful and make a difference. These days, most of what I do is count minutes at meetings.*

*Allow me to describe my average workday. I wake up at 5:30 A.M., following the lead of Benjamin Franklin. With everyone else asleep, I sit down with a cup of coffee and ponder my personal and professional goals for the day ahead. I jot down these goals, prioritize them, and schedule them in my daily planner. I still have time to make an entry or two into my daily journal, read the national and business news in the morning papers, eat a good breakfast, get washed and dressed, and beat the morning rush hour by 15 minutes! Ha! I have seized the day, and life is good.*

*Upon my arrival at work, I am promptly informed by one of my contemporaries that Joe the Boss, my immediate supervisor, needs to see me and several others at a 10:00 A.M. meeting. SWOOSH! There goes my pondered, planned, productive day right down the toilet.*

*I show up at the conference room 5 minutes early, as usual, and proceed to sit idly by as half a dozen others show up late. Following the usual morning banter, the heart of the meeting gets underway at about 10:20 A.M., if I'm lucky.*

*The meeting is interrupted twice by phone calls to Joe. I twiddle my thumbs as Joe indicates to everyone whose time he considers least important.*

*The meeting takes about an hour, packed full of about 10 minutes worth of information. As I try to leave, Joe pulls me aside for a 5-minute,*

*one-on-one exchange of information and ideas. Although Joe may not understand or accept the failure of the meeting that just took place, at least he is smart and successful enough to know the importance of one-on-one interaction.*

*The time is now 11:25 A.M. I have a lunch date planned—to discuss business. And when I return, I ignore all common sense and call a meeting with those people I directly supervise. After all, Joe needs to know that I found his information and direction important enough to occupy an hour's worth of my people's time. In a moment of weakness, an afternoon meeting seems, well, the right thing—the human thing—to do.*

*That evening, I leave work, wondering once again how the day I thought I had seized got away from me. Often, I take home the work I had hoped to accomplish at the office.*

*Besides the way they eat up my time, business meetings seem wrong for so many other reasons. Frequently, the most assertive people in the conference room veer the meeting off its agenda. Others play silly games of one-upmanship, hoping to gain favor with the boss. Many people—if not most—sit there quietly, listening to bad ideas being tossed around and hoping the spectacle soon will end. Sometimes these theatrics get in the way of the boss's message, muddling the information he had hoped to relate.*

*Lack of time. Lack of direction. Bad decision making. All because of business meetings.*

Sound familiar? It should. Statistics indicate that managers spend about half of their workday in business meetings. For senior managers, the amount approaches three-quarters of their day. The time consumed, the politics, the tendency towards bad decision making—it's all a part of life, right?

Indeed, most managers surrender to meetings without realizing they're doing so. Holding meetings, at some point, becomes as natural as breathing. And the suggestion that these daily sessions are unproductive or bad for business doesn't register because there simply doesn't seem to be an alternative way of doing things.

Allow me to offer this alternative way, a different approach to managing—without meetings! Over the years, I have researched and, in some cases, worked with leaders who essentially have purged standard workplace meetings from their management regimen. I have successfully used many of their ideas to avoid calling together my team or coworkers. In fact, I can count the number of meetings I have convened over the last 10 years on one hand—not bad for someone who has a diverse background managing systems, projects, and groups of people from 7 to 70 strong. The results? A more creative and productive workday. A strong sense of personal direction and time efficiency. And, surprisingly, greater control over my team and the coworkers I depend on.

The first step to managing without meetings is to accept your distaste for them. This recognition may be more difficult than you think. After all, what could be more basic—more human—than wanting to bring together on a daily basis the people you are responsible for or rely upon? Having these workers in front of you certainly has the feel of hands-on control. If you have important information to distribute, it seems to make sense to pass it out, all at once, from mouth to ears. And if you are surrounded with competent people in a conference room, it seems appropriate to seek advice and information firsthand. On the surface, it all makes perfect sense. It's easy to see why you perhaps have allowed meetings to dominate your day.

And if you are called to a meeting, what could be more basic—more human—than wanting to attend? It could mean gaining some type of useful information. It could mean receiving work direction. And you could be asked to offer important advice to your boss or your coworkers. You would think that people would enthusiastically scramble for a meeting whenever one was called!

And yet, you know this eagerness is not the case. Like most people, you probably dread meetings. Underneath the rudimentary assumptions made about the benefits of holding a meeting, you sense, deep down, the uselessness—and the hindering effects—of these daily discussions.

Accept this underlying disgust with meetings. And then delve into the reasons for your repugnance.

## EXPLORE YOUR DISTASTE FOR MEETINGS

So what is it with this inner loathing of meetings? Why do people generally groan when a meeting is called? Why are meetings hated by the people who schedule them, who conduct them, and who attend them?

The answers are there, once you are cognizant of meeting misgivings.

First, meetings take time—lots and lots of it. The time consumed is rarely well scheduled or well managed. Management studies suggest that about half of all time spent in a meeting is unproductive—and I would label those studies as generous. When you are at a meeting, even one that you have convened, your most valuable resource—time—is being used up.

I remember eating brown-bagged lunches during meetings back when I was a production manager. My boss had mandated my pres-



ence at daily machine status meetings, and I had figured that overlapping my lunch with this new requirement made for an efficient schedule. Looking back, it seems naïve, but I actually believed people would be impressed with my time maximization. Once, I showed up without the bag. “Well, Scott,” my boss suggested dryly, “since you don’t have your lunch, I assume you plan to join us today both in body *and* mind.” Oops! No bag lunches after that comment.

I suppose attempting any other task during a meeting, even eating, is a bit impolite. However, the discourtesy isn’t the problem. When a meeting is called, people are expected to give up not just their attention, but every aspect of their time. Part of the illusion at any workplace meeting is that everyone must at least seem interested.

When a meeting is in progress, *nothing* else involving the people on hand is taking place. No sales rep ever closed a big deal in the middle of a sales meeting. No construction worker ever poured a foundation during the site manager’s morning meeting. No good plan or idea ever was carried out or monitored during a staff meeting. When meetings happen, nothing else does.

Many corporations spend large amounts of money to train their workers on management and time allocation skills. A company I worked for spent 2500 dollars for me to attend a two-day seminar on time management. Yes, I found the course interesting and insightful, but the corporate expense gave me pause, as I considered the aggregate cost to companies that sent thousands of people to such courses each year. Teaching workers to allocate their time and prioritize their tasks undoubtedly produces some sort of return on investment. But I doubt if even the best time allocator in the world can uncover the hour-and-a-half of productive time gained by canceling just one useless meeting.