

The Collective Edge
Guide to Effective Meetings

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"An eye-opening guide to making teams more than the sum of their individual parts. Essential reading."
—DANIEL H. PINK, author of *Drive* and *The Power of Regret*

Unlocking the Secret Power of Groups

Colin M. Fisher

The Collective Edge

Guide to Effective Meetings

Most groups need meetings. At their best, meetings are where groups coordinate, learn, create, and make crucial decisions.

Yet, meetings get a bad rap—and, in many cases, they deserve it. As management guru Peter Drucker put it,² “One either meets or one works. One cannot do both at the same time.” Although that’s too extreme, it rings true because most groups and organizations fail to hold effective meetings.

Here are a few tips to increase the chances that your group holds effective meetings—meetings where collective work gets done and members want to attend.

1. Cancel the Meeting

You know why people say meetings are pointless? Because many are! The best way to improve the quality of your meetings is to cancel the unnecessary ones.

If the meeting has no clear purpose, cancel it. If the purpose is just to “share updates,” find a more efficient way, like email, a shared document, or an audio/video message.

Meetings don’t automatically lead to better coordination. In fact, excessive meetings reduce energy and crowd out deep work time.¹ Unnecessary meetings aren’t just taking time away from other things; they may also be encouraging unhealthy norms—like members checking out or grumbling about them.

So, if you can cancel the meeting, DO IT!

2. Invite Fewer People

Meeting attendance should be purposeful, not prescribed or political. If someone's input isn't required to reach the meeting's goal, they should not feel compelled to attend.

In good meetings, attendees aren't audience members; they're contributors.⁴ Research suggests that groups function best with 3–7 members. If a meeting has considerably more members, the chances that each member may struggle to meaningfully participate.

Of course, some meetings require all hands on deck—think about hundreds of members of Congress debating and voting on an important bill. (And, honestly, I hope your group doesn't function like Congress!) But shortening the guest list whenever possible avoids wasting people's time, increasing coordination costs, and fostering norms of checking out and nonparticipation.

3. Make the Goal Clear

Every attendee should be able to finish this sentence:

“At the end of this meeting, we will have _____.”

Good goals include:

- A decision reached
- An action plan defined
- A work product created

This framing keeps the meeting anchored and discourages rambling, status updates, or diffuse ideation with no outcome.

Now, sometimes, the goals of the meeting are more abstract, like reflections (e.g., midpoint reviews, debriefs), making sense of confusing events, defining what problems need solving, or coming up with new ideas. Those are great reasons to meet! The point is to be clear so all members understand what the goals of the meeting are.

4. Share an Agenda in Advance

One of the most common problems in meetings is that attendees don't know what will happen during the meeting. Sometimes, even the organizer doesn't know! That's a recipe for a bad meeting.

So, write down the goals and agenda for the meeting. If you aren't sure, take your best shot. Share the agenda at least a day in advance. Add it to the calendar invite! (But invite group members to revise and refine them—agenda's shouldn't be set only by one member).

A strong agenda includes:

- The goal of the meeting
- Key discussion topics or decisions
- Time allotments
- Roles (e.g., facilitator, notetaker)

The agenda sets shared expectations and helps manage members' time and attention. And remember to put the most important agenda items first so they aren't rushed at the end!

5. Facilitate the Meeting Like It Matters

Good meetings don't run themselves. Someone needs to guide the conversation.

Key practices:

- Capture notes live on a shared screen or whiteboard.
- Encourage participation from all members (and gently point out when a few people are dominating the discussion).
- Summarize decisions and action items before closing.
- Facilitators should frequently ask for comments and corrections on their understanding and summaries
- Assign a notetaker (human or AI) and circulate a summary promptly.

Note that formal leaders don't have to facilitate meetings—that job can rotate or fall to members who are especially skilled in meeting facilitation.

6. Create Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the foundation of effective group work. It's the belief that one can speak up without fear of punishment or humiliation.⁵ (See chapter 8 for more information).

Create safety by:

- Framing disagreement as collective exploration
- Admit your own confusion and fallibility
- Actively inviting contrarian views
- Invite questions and new perspectives—and praise those who contribute them.
- Avoiding punitive or dismissive responses to honest input.

7. Balance Meetings with Individual Work

Meetings and solo work draw on different cognitive and energetic resources. If meetings dominate the day, workers get fewer chances to replenish. Research shows that when meetings crowd out time for individual work and microbreaks, workers feel drained and disengaged.⁷

Be mindful of:

- Not stacking back-to-back meetings.
- Letting people do focused work in between.
- Limiting total meeting time per day or week.

8. Tips for Virtual Meetings (see pp. 236–237)

Virtual meetings offer flexibility—but they amplify coordination challenges and energy drain. Use these strategies to keep them productive and humane:

- **Use visual structure.** Share screens, whiteboards, or live docs to orient discussion.
- **Keep cameras optional.** Mandating camera use reduces autonomy and increases fatigue—especially when the meeting doesn't require visual presence.
- **Watch the time.** Virtual meetings fatigue participants faster. Aim for 25-minute slots instead of full hours.
- **Encourage async prep.** Let people read, comment, or brainstorm before the meeting, so the session focuses on decisions.
- **Take advantage of multiple communication modes.** Encourage the use of chat and screen-sharing to aid in communication.
- **Reduce psychological distance.** Virtual meetings sometimes lead us to treat each other more like tools than humans. Try something humanizing, like using the first five minutes for personal catch up (like good news or struggles), featuring a different member, show and tell, or something else creative to remind us we are all humans.
- **Rotate facilitation.** Avoid letting one voice dominate. Shared facilitation can increase engagement and psychological safety.⁸

9. Beware of Hybrid Meetings

Hybrid meetings are alluring. They hold the promise of the connection and real-time coordination of face-to-face meetings with the flexibility of virtual meetings.

But hybrid meetings are the most challenging kind of meeting—even more challenging than virtual. If some members are consistently virtual, they are likely to feel less involved than those who are meeting face-to-face, and their contribution tends to dip. Hybrid arrangements can also reinforce subgroups within the group, where it no longer feels like a single, cohesive whole.

Hybrid meetings are best facilitated more like virtual meetings than like face-to-face ones. Facilitators should take special care to invite participation from virtual members—and establish norms for how they can get into the discussion. Good practices are:

1. Clarify whether the chat or “hand raise” functions will be used and monitored by those in person. If not, facilitators should frequently solicit virtual members’ participation, and virtual members should be invited to interrupt if they have something to say.
2. Better yet, appoint one in-person member to monitor the chat and hand-raise functions and to speak on behalf of virtual members. Facilitators should still frequently solicit virtual member participation.

Some managers have wrongly mandated in-person meetings, concluding that hybrid meetings aren’t worth the trouble. However, switching to virtual meetings is better than switching to in-person (assuming that there was a good reason they were hybrid). If we needed hybrid meetings before, an in-person mandate systematically disadvantages those who were attending virtually. This may again alienate some group members and foster inequity within the group.

Final Thought

Meetings aren’t inherently good or bad. They’re tools. Use them when they help the group move forward. When they don’t, cancel, shorten, or reshape them.

The goal is not to meet more—it’s to work better together.

NOTES

1. Zhang, C., Spreitzer, G. M., & Qiu, Z. A. (2023). *Meetings and Individual Work During the Workday*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 108 (10), 1640–61.
2. Drucker, P. F. (1967/2002). *The Effective Executive*.
3. Roels, G., & Corbett, C. J. (2024). *Too Many Meetings? Scheduling Rules for Team Coordination*. *Management Science*, 70(12), 8647–67.
4. Beck, S. J., Paskewitz, E. A., & Allen, J. A. (2025). *Toward a Strategic Perspective of Meeting Participation*. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 15(1), 28–43.
5. Edmondson, A. C. (1999). *Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44 (2), 350–83.
6. Edmondson, A. C., & Mortensen, M. (2021). *What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace*. *Harvard Business Review*.
7. Zhang et al. (2023).
8. Edmondson & Mortensen (2021).

ADDITIONAL READING

Allen, J. A., & Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. 2022. The key features of workplace meetings: Conceptualizing the why, how, and what of meetings at work. **Organizational Psychology Review**, 20413866221129231.

Kauffeld, S., & Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. 2012. Meetings matter: Effects of team meetings on team and organizational success. **Small Group Research**, 43 (2): 130–58.