



MAKE MEETINGS GREAT AGAIN

RUN THE BEST MEETINGS.

by

- Jeff Whittle and Clayton Whittle -



Tired of useless meetings?

In this short and straightforward text Jeff and Clayton Whittle compress their decades of combined experience in the board room to provide guidance on planning, running, and succeeding in meetings.

With this book, any leader can inspire efficiency, accountability, and respect in their meeting culture.

MAKE MEETINGS GREAT AGAIN

Run the best meetings.

Be very smart.

JEFF WHITTLE & CLAYTON WHITTLE

Make Meetings Great Again

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Chapter One

The Useless Meeting Plague

THE LEADERSHIP TEAMS THAT I WORK WITH HAVE Amazingly effective meetings.

Most of the American workforce will tell you that the time they spend in meetings is about as exciting and effective as the time they spend waiting in line at the DMV. Most meetings are simply aimless and rudderless discussions, conducted without purpose and ended without clarity going forward.

Sound familiar?

You can transform you team meetings from boring wastes of time to hyper-effective productivity explosions. How?

It's simple.

You commit to accomplishing big things in your meetings and

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everyone there holds each other accountable. They get good at keeping each other honest and sticking to a meeting style that maximizes efficiency.

You don't want to spend hours of your life stuck in pointless meetings. Guess what...your team doesn't either. The entrepreneurs we work with despise wasting time. They want to be out achieving -- getting SOMETHING DONE.

If you picked up or downloaded this book, it's because you are tired of asking yourself, "was that meeting worth an hour of my life," and even more tired of realizing that, most of the time, the answer is "no, it wasn't."

This book is going to change that answer to "yes, it was."

I'm Jeff Whittle. I've been a commercial litigation attorney, the general manager of a tech startup, the executive vice president of a software company, and the CEO of a manufacturing company. Believe me when I say I've suffered through plenty of meetings, many seemingly designed to kill brain cells.

And I'm Clayton Whittle, the guy lucky enough to be Jeff's son. I've been a college professor, a learning design consultant, and a conflict management writer and practitioner. I'm currently a fellow in Penn State's college of education. I've also had the distinct pleasure of working on my dad's team, bringing efficiency and progress to leadership teams across the country.

Our hope is that this book condenses our experiences working together into a few tools that we know for a fact improve productivity, increase profitability, and reduce the stress of people working in a business.

Why Are Most People OK with Useless Meetings?

Inefficient meetings are a near ubiquitous part of American corporate culture. They're so common that Scott Adams made a career out of mocking them in *Dilbert*. And that comic strip is a perfect microcosm of the truth.

Most people **aren't** OK with useless meetings. They just accept them, because they don't think there is any alternative. They've been convinced, through a combination of first-hand experience and pop culture punchlines, that meetings are just naturally inefficient and ineffective.

One big reason that meetings are awful is that society has taught us that the same rules of polite social interaction apply to the workplace. In typical conversations we don't openly call people out for dominating conversations or beating around the bush. We try to be nice and accommodate other people's needs. We let people in a conversation say what they want before we change topics. And, as you know, some people never get to the end of what they want to say. Ever.

These social norms allow us to form and keep friendships and communities, but they do nothing to drive communication in a growth-minded company. In fact, polite dishonesty works **against** progress.

Don't get us wrong. We're not saying you should be rude or

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mean to people in your business. In fact, this book is based on our experiences, and our experiences have shown us that the more trust and respect a team has, the more the team will accomplish. What we are saying, is that you don't have to run your meetings by the same social norms of politeness and social gentility that constrain you when you're killing time with another parent at your kids' soccer practice.

Meetings that waste time typically look like this:

- People show up late, because they know they can make an excuse, and no one will care;
- The team spends the first 20 minutes just chatting, because no one wants to be rude and say, "let's start;"
- People repeat their opinions again and again, wasting valuable time, because they think they get to talk until they're done talking;
- Decisions don't get made, because the team is looking for consensus and not finding it;
- After thirty minutes of "talking about" a topic no progress is made, and the decision on what to do is just kicked down to the next meeting...again;
- Massive problems go unaddressed, because we don't want to make people uncomfortable by bringing them up.

Sounds painfully familiar, right? I will confess that until I (Jeff that is) began consulting with growing business teams full time in 2011 I thought lousy meetings were a fact of life as well. But I've gained some simple but powerful insights that can ensure that

your meetings are consistently great instead of constantly painful. If you put your mind to it, you can transform your company's useless meetings into perfectly efficient problem-solving machines. Your business deserves that and shouldn't settle for anything less.

If you're interested, read on.

Holding Meetings That Accomplish Something

The tips in the following pages will give you and your team what they need to shift from "meetings about" to meetings that actually accomplish something. The goal of this book is for every employee in your company to look forward to their meetings as the most productive time in their work week.

When you use these guidelines, you'll see:

- Immediate increase in team focus;
- increased openness and honesty;
- more progress towards strategic goals;
- better short-term reporting;
- increased teamwork;
- long-standing issues finally being addressed;
- people solving problems instead of ignoring them, and;
- true, measurable growth of your business.

And, we aren't just saying this because we **think** it's true. We

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have seen the measurable effects firsthand. We've worked with businesses of all sizes and in nearly every industry all across the United States. Each and every one of them has changed the tone, tenor, and productivity of their meeting regiment. And, the results our clients have experienced have led to healthy, happier teams driving a more profitable business.

Now you have access to some of those tools too. Think of this book as a good set of wrenches that can make a big difference in a small, but important part of your business (and maybe even in your personal life) the time you spend in meetings. Some of the learnings come straight from The Entrepreneurial Operating System®, Gino Wickman's game-changing model that helps growing businesses break through ceilings and reach new heights. The model is outlined in Gino's amazing book Traction, and if you haven't read it you should. Now.

EOS® introduces a variety of critical meetings to ensure that your team maintains consistent alignment with your strategic goals. Traction lays out the purpose and rules for conducting each of these mission-critical meetings on a weekly, quarterly and annual basis. You should be having each of the meetings and following the EOS guidelines religiously. It's what we do when we teach EOS® to entrepreneurial leadership teams. When you conduct one of these meetings, run them exactly the way EOS® teaches.

But what about the countless other meetings you and your team might have to suffer through?

We can help you with those.

Chapter Two

The Good Stuff

Getting your company's meetings to peak efficiency is hard work. It takes the teams willing to commit to some fundamental changes. Those changes will be easier than you think, **if** you can get your team on the same page, supporting the goal of conducting great meetings. Being on the same page requires commitment and accountability.

We're going to talk a lot about accountability, so let's be clear on how we define it.

Accountability is when a person commits to accomplishing or accepts responsibility for something. "Accountability" isn't something you do to another person. It's not holding a stick over

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someone's head and saying, "do what I say or so help me I will hold you accountable." That's holding someone liable.

Teams that hold each other accountable do so by committing to be better at what they do. They empower each other to be critical and call out mistakes and failures -- not to punish, but to accept and hold each other accountable for the collective success of the team.

Our meeting suggestions drive accountability for great meetings in three ways:

- First, they create a language through which the team can separate the issues at hand from the personalities involved;
- Second, they lay out ground rules that the team can agree on in advance, which empowers team members to enforce them;
- Finally, they create a culture of openness, respect, and honesty that allows the team to smoke out problems and address them head on.

It's important to remember that these suggestions aren't a magic wand that you wave over your company's currently dysfunctional meeting process. People on your team -- yourself included -- may struggle with them. Struggling is part of the journey of self-improvement. When you or your team have difficulty implementing one or more of these, just relax and keep looking to improve. Celebrate progress but expect imperfection.

Planning Meetings

1: Assign a Meeting Leader

Assign a person to keep the team on track and on time.

Great meetings don't just happen -- they are the result of everyone agreeing on the guidelines of behavior. In the heat of the moment you will find that those guidelines work best when one person is responsible for making sure that they're followed. Someone must be in charge of moving your meetings forward and keeping the team on track and accountable. Over time teams may naturally begin to behave effectively without a designated "leader", but during your transition period -- and perhaps beyond -- you'll benefit from designating one person who owns keeping the meeting focused and on track. If you've left a meeting before thinking "what a monstrous waste of my time" chances are that there was no one in charge of it.

How do you choose your meeting leader? We'd suggest the person who is most comfortable being politely firm and most committed to running a tight ship. And that isn't always "the boss". Many teams assume that the person in the room with the biggest title should run the meeting. The responsibility naturally falls to the department head, CEO, or whoever.

Wrong.

Just because someone is "in charge" doesn't mean they know how to run a great meeting. In fact, many meetings are awful

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because the boss is running it. Not all bosses are great at running meetings. Sometimes it just isn't in their skill set. Second, if the boss is running the show there's a possibility that people won't speak up with hard truths or gently call out the group when needed.

If you really want to succeed, have your meetings run by the right person -- the task-oriented, firm-but-fair steady hand who won't be uncomfortable keeping things in check for the greater good.

2: Set a Goal

Schedule meetings that have an actionable goal such as “we will decide what action to take for X.”

Good meetings accomplish what they set out to accomplish. That only happens when everyone is clear on the purpose of the meeting and the outcome it is designed to achieve. When a team sets out to accomplish something, it needs an actionable goal, not some vague objective of “talking about” this or that.

“Talk about” meetings are almost always a waste of time. Since people haven't defined what success looks like in advance, they never know if or when they've achieved it. If you spend an hour screwing around and 5 minutes “talking about” the main topic was the meeting a success? You did technically talk about whatever “it” was, but chances are you didn't really accomplish anything.

If you want your meetings to be productive, useful, inspiring

experiences in your company, set goals that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) for every meeting you have. Here is what a SMART goal looks like:

- Specific - are we all on the same page about what exactly this meeting is designed to achieve?

- Measurable - can we clearly determine whether that purpose was achieved?

- Achievable - have we set a realistic goal for the meeting? Can we actually accomplish the purpose with the people gathered in the time allotted?

- Relevant - are we burning precious minutes of our lives on something that really matters?

- Time-bound - have we agreed on exactly when the meeting will begin and when it will end, and will this meeting be held in time for the decisions we make to be enacted?

The next time you are tempted to schedule a meeting to “talk about something”, instead schedule a meeting with a clear purpose and desired outcomes. State that desired outcome clearly in your meeting invitation, on your meeting agenda, and at the outset of the meeting. Be proactive about establishing clarity about what success looks like. This simple change will give your meetings a sense of direction and a way to measure the team’s success in achieving its goal.

For more on setting SMART goals, you should check out Project Smart, an online resource for researchers and executives working to improve how we make and use SMART goals.

3: Do 1 Thing Right, Not 10 Things Wrong

Dedicate an appropriate amount of time to deal with everything that needs dealing with.

Meetings that address too much usually address nothing at all. It's as simple as that. We have all, at some point or another, sat through a meeting in which every issue discussed felt rushed. Each new topic was introduced with "we don't have much time, so I'm just going to speed through this." The result was a meeting in which **everything** got sped through and nothing actually got achieved.

Rushing through agenda items is one of the best ways to identify bad meetings. A rushed item leaves insufficient room for healthy discussion and typically no time for questions, explanations or clarification. Flying through an explanation or discussion is just a recipe for confusing and annoying people. As tempting as it may be to reach for that feeling of "getting more done", you're actually detracting from productivity.

It is always -- and I mean always -- better to get one thing done right than ten things done haphazardly. And if you disagree, ask yourself how you'd feel if you were sitting on an airplane and the pilot said, "we don't have a lot of time, so we are just gonna rush through this whole pre-flight check list thing."

4: Build Agendas Relevant to Attendees

Create meeting agendas to accomplish a goal and only invite the people that need to be there.

Too often we see companies that think they need to invite everyone to every meeting. Sometimes it's because they don't want people to feel left out. Sometimes it's because they're just not taking the time to think about who truly needs to be there. Whatever the reason, the result is the same: wasted time.

If you've set a meeting agenda with a specific goal, ask yourself who ***really*** needs to be there to achieve that goal. That's who gets invited to the meeting. Anyone else will just be a distraction, one that costs the company time and money. People probably have better things to do than sit in a meeting to which they can't meaningfully contribute, and you have better things to do than listen to them. For every meeting, invite only the people who truly need to be there.

5: Be Ready

If you are going into a meeting to make a decision or accomplish a task, bring all necessary information. You have permission to prepare.

Anyone can just show up at a meeting. Teams that succeed show up prepared to be effective. Think about it... how many of your meetings end with someone taking an action item to gather more information so you can decide later? That's code for "we

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weren't ready for this meeting so let's have another one!"

Develop a culture where people think before attending a meeting. They should be asking themselves critical questions about how they can contribute to the meeting's effectiveness. Some great questions to ask before attending are:

- Is there anything I should read or learn to be an effective contributor?
- Is there anything I know that I should share with others in advance?
- What information will be required for us to be effective, and how can I share it before the meeting?
- What work needs to be done in advance to ensure we are as effective as possible?

Many of our clients look at us like we're crazy, when we talk to them about this. They think they are already as prepared as they can be for their meetings. We always ask them what action items came out of their last few meetings. Inevitably, one of those action items is for one of the team members to seek out more information so a decision can be made.

Sure, there are times when things come up that no one could have predicted. That's the real world, and as much as you might want to make it happen, the real world ain't going anywhere. But when a team finds itself constantly putting off a decision because more information is required, it's usually because either team members aren't preparing, or they are avoiding deciding on a course of action.

If your team regularly doesn't have the necessary information to make decisions or achieve the goal of the meeting, you are seriously wasting time. Everyone should show up ready to be productive, and that means preparing. Spending the morning before an important meeting getting ready is a critical investment, not a time suck.

Sitting in on meetings without the information needed to take action? What a waste of time.

Starting Meetings

6: It's a Meeting not a Party

Meetings are a time for efficient, productive work, not conversation and chit-chat.

If you work with people you like (and if you don't, we need to talk), chances are you've made this mistake. When you walk into a room full of friends it's tempting to use a chunk of that time as a happy hour catching up and swapping stories. It's an easy trap to fall into.

Don't get me wrong. Your team should get along and care about one another. Strong friendships drive trust and can improve team health. But, like any other relationship, healthy boundaries are critical.

EOS meetings always have a short check-in period called a Segue. During this initial portion of the meeting attendees build trust and team unity by sharing their personal and business highlights since the last time they were together. Segues like this are great to get the meeting kicked off with structured personal time that quickly transitions into the substantive work to be done.

But once your Segue time is over the visiting time stops. Visit later. Work now. In meetings challenge attendees to leave the

personal conversations at the door and get to work. There's time to socialize, it just isn't **right now**.

It can also be difficult for friendly colleagues to feel comfortable with the level of focus required to make a meeting a great use of time. During meetings you should challenge team members to communicate like coworkers solving a problem, not friends. That means being direct and open, even when someone's feelings are on the line. If a person can't separate a professional disagreement or observation from a personal friendship, they may not be ready to lead your company into the future.

When you have meetings, work hard. Visit some other time.

7: Start on Time and Don't Apologize.

When you schedule your next meeting, let people know that it will start on time. Period.

One of the major complaints about bad meetings is that they are a blight on the one resource you can never get back -- time. Your goal is to increase the efficiency and impact of your meetings, turning them into something that team members value. While that takes dedication and hard work, you can begin today by pledging to respect the time of every attendee.

A meeting start time isn't the time you want people to start wandering in, and it isn't the time you begin the inevitable (and valuable) chit-chat that precedes meetings. The scheduled start time is when you kick off the first agenda item.

Likewise, you will end the meeting exactly on time. Unless

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your organization is dealing with a crisis, your team members have other places they need to be. Show them the respect of ending exactly on time, even if some members have more they want to say during the meeting.

This isn't some Machiavellian flexing of your power and authority. Rather, you want people to understand that you respect their time. When you ask for a fixed period of time on someone's calendar you are taking that time from them forever. You owe it to everyone to make those minutes valuable, and nobody feels that their time is well used waiting for someone to get another cup of coffee or finish a phone conversation.

When teams think they have wiggle room, they waste time. But when everyone knows that the meeting will last a finite time, they are going to feel the pressure and responsibility to keep focused and accomplish their goals.

Get to work right on time. No excuses.

8: Ignore Latecomers

When people are late, they need to enter silently, sit down, and catch themselves up.

How many times have you attended a meeting where someone comes in late and immediately throws the meeting off track? Not only was this person absent during a critical discussion, but now they want to spend the next 15 minutes being caught up on what's happening or just talking about the nasty traffic they were in. Being late is already detrimental to the meeting. Let

people know that when they are late, they need to enter and join the meeting with as little distraction as possible.

Don't even acknowledge when someone comes in late. Don't stop what you're doing. Don't bring them up to speed. Don't even give them the opportunity to explain their tardiness. Whatever the excuse is, it isn't relevant to the meeting's agenda, and it's therefore just another distraction.

Tardiness can't always be prevented. We are all human, after all. But we can prevent the negative impact of tardiness by avoiding it derailing our meeting. Unless it's absolutely necessary for the latecomer to be brought up to speed in real time, do it afterwards.

9: Stick to the Agenda

Have clear transitions for agenda items and let everyone know how much time is allocated for each.

A few minutes before it's time to move on to a new agenda item announce, "let's wrap this up. We'll be moving on in a few minutes." That means it's time to make a decision and clarify action items.

A lot of teams want to talk an issue to death, and this prevents the team from covering a good amount of ground during meetings. Warn people in advance that everything they have to say on a topic will need to be contained to the time allotted. And be vigilant about keeping that time, letting people know when the moment of truth (deciding on an action) is coming.

We want to inspire people to keep their comments short and

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to the point -- no self-congratulatory repetition, no endless debates, and no wandering off topic.

Naturally, some issues will take longer for your team to work through than others. In EOS Level 10 Meetings (a weekly Leadership Team meeting), there is never a restriction on how long to spend on any given issue, just a limit on the length of time you can spend **overall** on identifying, discussing, and solving issues that day. Stick to the timeframe you've allotted for overall discussion and let people know what the time constraints are.

When the team realizes that they have a finite amount of time in which to deal with something, that something gets dealt with efficiently. Don't believe me? Watch how the person responsible for an agenda item acts. They know they'll be the ones on the chopping block if the issue doesn't get resolved, so they'll be gung-ho about getting to a decision within the time limit. Deadlines and timeframes drive efficiency.

Managing Discussions

10: Keep People On-Topic

Be aggressive about pointing out when a discussion is off topic.

Meandering discussions kill meetings, and you don't have to be rude to put an end to them. Tell your team you intend to stay on topic, and then do it without apologizing. They don't get to choose what to talk about when an agenda is already decided upon. You (or someone else) scheduled the meeting to accomplish something specific. So be quick to manage people and put an end to off-topic discussion.

You've set a specific task to accomplish in your meeting and dedicated yourself to starting and ending this meeting on time. You don't have time for off-topic discussions if you want to achieve what you set out to achieve.

If someone takes a discussion off-topic by bringing up a valid but unrelated conversation, record what they were talking about on a "parking lot" list for later discussion and quickly bring things back to the issue at hand. Great ideas on any number of topics can emerge during a meeting, but too often those great ideas divert attention. Let the team know that you are willing to discuss

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ideas that come up but be firm and clear in saying that now is not the time.

Take the time to explain why keeping everyone on topic is a form of respect, not disrespect. You're trying to respect the team by respecting the time they've allocated for **this** meeting to solve **this** issue. You'll do the exact same when you run the meeting to discuss the issue they've just brought up.

11: Make Paying Attention Mandatory

Let people know that participation is not an option. It's a rule.

Strong teams respect each other, and that starts with listening.

How many meetings have you attended when one or more members of the team spent half of the meeting tuned out? They sent emails, texted, stared blankly at the wall, or participated in side conversations that created even greater distraction. This kind of disrespectful behavior damages productivity in a couple of ways.

First, not paying attention to someone when they are speaking is just plain rude. That's no way to build the foundation of an effective team. Show each other respect by listening.

Just as importantly, when people tune out, they take their ears and brains with them. It is not your job or your responsibility to repeat yourself because someone was sending an email when they should have been listening. If someone needs something repeated, it had better be because they didn't understand, not

because they weren't paying attention.

Tell your team you expect active participation during meetings, and immediately call out anyone not complying.

12: Use the Discussion Bullseye

Be brief and specific when defining issues. Aim small, miss small.

One of the most common reason discussions get off topic is the absence of clarity around exactly what you're trying to achieve in the discussion. If you don't know what you're trying to decide on, how can you stay focused on making that decision?

To avoid this, use the "aim small, miss small" mantra. Picture the solution, the goal of your meeting, as a target. If you define your goal as just hitting something in the general vicinity of the target, the discussion might meander anywhere around near the edges of the target-- or worse even miss the target entirely. If, however, you define your goal as putting an arrow dead center in the bullseye, you can still be highly effective even if you miss the target by a bit.

When you define an agenda item or start a discussion, require the person who presented the topic to say what they need in a single, very specific sentence. Define success at the very outset of a discussion, and when people start eyeballing the outer ring of the target, remind them that we are aiming for the bullseye.

13: Faster is Better

Be willing and ready to phrase your input succinctly.

Rambling on and on is easy. Anyone can do it. Just listen to C-SPAN if you don't believe me. Being brief and to the point, though, takes hard work. The more words you use, the harder it is to make a clear point.

Work hard at saying as little as possible while still getting your point across. You'd be surprised at how much more your team accomplishes when they are willing to get away from the societal norms of just talking until they feel like stopping.

Getting to that place isn't easy. Some team members are going to feel like they are being silenced or disrespected if you force them to be concise. Ease your team into this way of talking by a) doing it yourself and b) asking, "can you tell us exactly what you need in just a few words, so the whole team gets the 30,000 foot view of the issue?" when you start discussing a new topic. By being brief yourself, you show that it's something everyone is expected to do. And by using this simple question, you respectfully let others know that you want them to be brief.

As you get used to using this approach, tighten the reins and encourage people to keep speeding up. Before you know it, you'll be giving your team hours of their lives back.

14: Be Merciless about People Repeating Themselves

When things are being repeated, tell the room that if no one has anything new to add, it's time to decide.

You've got one life to live and you don't want to spend it listening to someone repeat their opinion ten times. New information is what helps a decision maker reach a decision. That's high value. Each and every team member should feel safe stating their opinion or introducing new information without consequence.

However, when someone is repeating themselves, they aren't respecting the decision-making process. They're attempting to win an argument by attrition, hoping that other team members will just give up out of boredom or frustration.

Don't let that happen.

Let everyone know that new input is highly valued. Repeating or rephrasing is not. When it happens, be direct and move on.

15: Demand and Reward Openness

Reward honest introduction of new information, even when it's a hard truth to hear.

Problems get fixed when people speak up and share the truth as they see it. But, when a company culture doesn't support openness, problems don't get brought to the attention of the people who can fix them.

Bad leaders are easy to spot, because, when they hear a hard

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truth that they don't like, they strike out at the messenger. You've seen it before. A team member points out a massive flaw in a plan and instead of being rewarded, they get a one-way ticket to the boss's doghouse.

Great leaders encourage and celebrate honesty. Speaking a hard truth to a room of coworkers is hard, and the amount of stress it causes (in the beginning, at least) needs to be followed up with an equal level of reward. Without that reward, people won't think it's worth the effort to speak up.

When someone sticks out their neck to be open and honest, make a big show of thanking them right there on the spot. And, if possible, follow up with even more thanks later. This will let the team know that this kind of openness is sincerely appreciated.

16: The Issue is not the Person

Be vigilant about separating disagreements on decisions from opinions about team members.

It should go without saying that attacking a team member *ad hominem* because you disagree with them has no place in a healthy company. Adults should manage healthy conflict and use it to drive better results, not boost their egos by degrading their colleagues.

Healthy communication means you should be able to disagree with an opinion without offending the person who stated it. If you respect someone, you should not be connecting their

value to their opinion on an issue. This means respecting their decision-making ability and recognizing that their opinion is likely informed with intelligent analysis, even if you disagree with it. Beyond that, you should recognize that they have self-worth beyond this meeting. Their identity doesn't hinge on the current meeting topic. They're an adult. They can take a bit of respectful disagreement. And if you aren't treating them that way, you have to ask yourself why.

By the same token, team members need to be able to separate their own feelings and egos from their opinions. When a colleague disagrees with your opinion, plan, or project, the team can't afford for you to take it personally.

Remind people regularly that you respect them beyond their wrongness or rightness on a single issue. Be honest with the team, even when it's uncomfortable. Trust and respect come from open communication, and you can't build a company worth running without all three of those.

17: Identify the Decision Makers

Every discussion has two decision makers: the person who raised the topic and the person accountable for making a decision.

No discussion is worth having in your meeting if it doesn't end with a decision. Talking a topic to death without clarifying what you're going to do next is the age-old recipe for lousy meetings. Usually, that decision is an action item for someone to pursue outside of the meeting. Sounds simple, right?

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But what happens when reasonable people on a team disagree and can't reach a consensus on what to do next? You'll realize you've reached this critical mass when people start repeating themselves or piling on unhelpful information. Consensus is a great thing when it occurs, but you can't get there all the time. And in the absence of a decision maker, you can be sucked into the vortex of talking without ever doing.

You solve this by identifying two key decision makers for every discussion. The first decision maker is the person who has the authority to decide what happens next if there isn't consensus. In smaller businesses this is usually the founder, CEO, president, or whatever you call the person who runs the company. In bigger businesses this may be a department head or C-level exec. The point is that someone at that table is accountable for making a decision. When that person is ready, they need to speak up and end the discussion by saying, "OK. I have everything I need to make a decision," and then introduce their solution.

The second decision maker is the person who introduced the topic. They thought it was important enough to put on the agenda and they most likely have a good understanding of the issue at hand. For that reason, they have the power to say whether the introduced solution actually addresses the original issue. They don't have to **like** the solution, but, if the solution doesn't address the problem, they have the right to express that.

Here's an example:

Mark, the CMO, puts “funding for social media marketing” on the agenda. He wants an increased budget. After much discussion, Adid, the CFO, tells the team that he has decided that the company will not be able to increase funding for social media marketing. The decision has been announced. Mark then says, “OK. That solves the issue.” Mark didn't get the outcome he wanted (an increased budget), but he got the result he needed -- a decision.

18: Support the Decision

Team members need to trust and support the decisions of the team.

When you are making decisions efficiently, there won't always be consensus. Society has taught us that when you disagree with a policy, you have the right to rebel against it. That may be valuable in the public theater, but in a business, it's poison.

When the team decides, everyone needs to hold themselves accountable for supporting that decision. If you sense dissent or tension around the decision, remind people there that, while they have permission to disagree with the decision, they never have the right to undermine it. Challenge the dissenters to trust that this was the team's best decision, support it fully, and work towards its success.

19: Reinforce Company Values

Company values are critical to your company. Every meeting is a chance to reinforce them.

Company values are more than just a few words on a piece of paper. They're the characteristics that define what you want in an employee of your organization.

Every time you hold a meeting you have a chance to reinforce the importance of those values. Sure, you could recite them and turn them into a trite little set of sounds that no one really hears. Instead, though, use meetings to reinforce them by holding yourself accountable for living the values, letting the values inform the decision-making process, and rewarding those who embody those values.

Make use of the intimacy of meetings for "company value call outs". It's easy to do -- simply dedicate a few minutes in every meeting to recognize people who are living by the values. Name them and tell the team exactly what they did to deserve this praise. People love being recognized for positive behavior. Do it often.

You should also get in the habit of holding your decisions up to the light of your company's values. Ask if the decision reflects the way you expect team members to behave. If it doesn't line up with your values, it may be time to reevaluate the decision or stress test the validity of the company values.

You company's values are at the heart of everything you do.

Use them as a litmus test for everything in your meetings.

20: Add Value or be Quiet

The Golden Rule.

If you have something to say that adds value to the conversation by way of new information, say it. If it truly adds value, the team needs that information to make an educated decision.

If not, let the people who do have new information speak while you quietly pay attention. The end.

Ending Meetings

21: Track Your Victories

End meetings by recording the things you accomplished today.

We find that it's often helpful for teams to keep track of the victories that emerge from their meetings. Memorialize and celebrate the great work that you do.

If you can, take a second at the end of your meetings by keeping a record of everything you achieved in that meeting. It doesn't have to be a detailed history; a few bullet points will do. After a few months of doing this, look back at your victory list. When teams see that your meeting methods are helping them achieve more, they'll be encouraged to stick with the program. Nothing energizes a team for the future like you recognizing, remembering, and celebrating the work you've done in the past.

22: Assign Action Items

Progress is driven by action. Each meeting needs to end with defined actions for the team.

Great meetings have goals and agendas. Goals are achieved by doing the right things, one step at a time. If you're having

meetings that don't end with clarity around what the next step is, you're stuck. End every meeting with perfect clarity around who will do what, and by when. Leave the room only after every team member is very clear on what is required of them, and they've committed to getting it done within a defined period of time. Confirm action items right then and there, not in some rambling after-the-fact email.

As you proceed through your meeting agenda, keep track of the decisions being made and the relevant action items. At the end of your meeting take a few minutes to confirm that each action item has been accepted by a member of the team who will be accountable for it.

23: Follow up on Action Items

Make sure there's a moment of truth when action items will be revisited.

Assigning action items during a meeting accomplishes nothing if they don't get done. Again, the EOS Level 10 Meeting format ensures that the follow-up is baked directly into the meeting agenda. When someone takes a "To-Do" everyone in the meeting knows that action item should be completed within 7 days – meaning it's finished before the next weekly Level 10 Meeting.

When you're conducting other kinds of meetings (committees, project updates, etc.) make sure that there's crystal

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clarity not just on who has responsibility, but the date on which that person commits to complete the task.

24: Seek to Improve your Meetings

Require team members to discuss efficacy of meetings.

When you run meetings like we suggest you're bound to generate color commentary outside of the conference room. People on your team will likely have strong feelings about the way you run meetings and the interactions they have during them.

You should solicit and celebrate that feedback. Make sure you receive this commentary in an open, supportive setting. If people are feeling overly challenged or uncomfortable with your meeting style, it's your responsibility to discuss what could be changed....and their responsibility to understand and accept what can't.

25: Never Meet on The Same Issue Twice

If you need to schedule another meeting to accomplish the same thing you're meeting for now, you've failed.

When you build meeting agendas that aim to accomplish a goal, you should always be making progress. If you need to schedule a second meeting with the same goal, it means that either your team is not using their time in meetings efficiently or you need to break your goals down into more reasonable

portions.

If it's the latter, you can address the problem by simply defining the goals of your meetings more precisely. If your team is suffering from inefficiency, then take time to explicitly address the suggestions in this book as part of your meeting culture and reinforce that these suggestions and changes are a **good** thing. Multiple meetings on the same topic is a tell-tale sign that your meetings are crummy. If you reach the end of meetings concluding only that you need another meeting on the same topic, you should be hearing alarm bells.

Working as A Team

26: Agree on Cues

Take pressure off employees by creating non-aggressive cues for calling out problems in the meeting.

There isn't a team in the world that doesn't have to correct its behavior on a regular basis. Many of the suggestions we've made in this book come from well-meaning teams who inadvertently sacrifice effectiveness because they've learned bad habits over time.

Your goal should be to get the team comfortable with sticking to the guidelines for having great meetings, and it's often helpful to make that fun rather than confrontational. Try agreeing on some cues you can use when your meeting is straying off course:

- Put a finger on your nose and keep it there, if you think someone is getting off topic;
- Keep a toy horse on the table that people can pick up when they think someone is "beating a dead horse."
- Keep a gavel on the table that someone can pick up when they are ready to make a decision.

What you do doesn't matter, just so long as you empower the people at your table to get the team back on track without feeling

uncomfortable. Non-verbal cues are sometimes easier for people to give or hear, because no one says anything out loud. The cue does the speaking and gets things back on track without confrontation. And remember that introducing a bit of fun into the cues can help the course correction feel a bit less harsh.

27: This Applies to Everyone

If you're the leader, make it very clear that the protocols for participating in any meeting apply to you too.

Nothing undermines trust and team effectiveness more quickly than a boss who thinks they don't have to play by the same rules as everyone else. Whether you're leading or participating in a meeting, it's critical that everyone gets to hold the boss accountable for running your meetings the way you've committed to running them.

If you're a boss, challenge yourself to be a vocal critic of your own behavior. When you find yourself in a meeting protocol blunder don't just quietly move on. Make a show of letting people know that you regret screwing up and that you encourage everyone to call you out when it's appropriate. If someone correctly calls you out before you fall on your sword, make a show of thanking them.

This small bit of theater lets your team know that you are willing to be the best boss you can, and that the changes you are enforcing apply to you as well.

Chapter Three

Next Steps

Run your meetings the way we suggest, and they will always be effective and productive. Period. But it won't be easy. You're going to swim upstream against a lot of resistance. If you struggle, here's what I recommend.

First, get involved with our community. Our website, whittleandpartners.com, has a wealth of educational materials for people attempting to improve the productivity of their business and break through to the next level of profitability. We post blogs, videos, and even podcast from time to time.

Second, I know that building efficiency in your meetings is only one piece of the larger mosaic that is building a business, department or team. We absolutely recommend that you read

Gino Wickman's book Traction. There is a complete, simple set of tools that help entrepreneurs get what they want from their businesses, and in Traction Gino shares each of those tools. You can download the first chapter for free on our website at whittleandpartners.com/literature/. Finally, ask for help. Any good teacher knows that students learn best when they get answers to direct questions. If your team is struggling to break through a ceiling, reach out to us for a free consultation at whittleandpartners.com/contact-us/. We'd love to help.

About the Authors

Jeff Whittle is the Founder of Whittle & Partners, a Dallas-based business consulting firm dedicated to helping entrepreneurs, owners and leadership teams build better businesses. Jeff practiced law in Dallas for 15 years and has an additional 20 years of executive business experience. He has run businesses ranging from startups to 300-employee operations and launched Whittle & Partners in 2011. He is certified in Strategic Business Leadership Coaching, Board Facilitation, and Mediation/Dispute Resolution, and is a Certified Implementer for The Entrepreneurial Operating System®.

Clayton Whittle is a Distinguished Graduate Fellow and Ph.D. candidate at Pennsylvania State University, where he researches learning technology. His research focuses on bringing top-tier education to places and people who usually would not have access. He is a life-long educator who found his passion during his M.A. at Texas A&M University and followed it all the way to his posting as a professor at Dankook University in Korea. Clayton

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works with his father at Whittle & Partners to find new and innovative ways to help leadership teams learn, internalize, and implement the tools they need to grow as a business.

He currently sits on the board of Springship, a mental health charity, and acts as an operations advisor to the team. He has published two video games and two albums and gets his kicks losing Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu jitsu matches. Clayton lives in State College, Pennsylvania with his Jodi and his dog Hobi-Cat.