

THE 25 MINUTE MEETING



**HALF THE TIME
DOUBLE THE IMPACT**

**DONNA
McGEORGE**

WILEY

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Introduction

We all know it.

Meetings suck.

They suck up our energy and enthusiasm for life at work.

Many of us are time-poor, stressed out, overwhelmed and on the verge of ‘death by meetings’. Our calendars are full of irrelevant or tedious back-to-back ‘catch-ups’ and our email is overloaded with messages screaming for attention.

Every time we get a chance to breathe and catch up on some ‘real work’, our computers *ding!* to remind us of another pointless meeting that is starting in five minutes.

Last year, I put the following post up on Facebook:

Meetings seem to be the de facto way of working yet they aren't always as effective as they could be. In fact, most people roll their eyes at the mention of meetings ... I'm researching for my new book and would love to know what is the one thing you HATE MOST about workplace meetings?

Top 10 meeting pet peeves

Here are the top 10 responses I got back:

- » That you have a meeting to get ready for the meeting, and a meeting after to go over the meeting (like having to clean the house before the house cleaner comes).
- » People showing up late. People showing up unprepared. People showing up who don't need to be there. People not showing up at all.
- » An agenda not sent in sufficient time to allow people to prepare properly. Then, not even sticking to the agenda. Or lacking a clear commitment to time frames set for the agenda.
- » Looking at phones rather than being present.
- » People who leave midway because they have 'more important matters'. (They tend to be serial offenders.)
- » Managers who turn up late while everyone sits around waiting, like their time is far more important.
- » Lack of clarity as to the purpose of the meeting.
- » Never having time OUTSIDE meetings to get anything done. Senior managers seem triple booked from nine until five, and they are exhausting themselves after hours trying to 'work'.
- » A meeting that gets hijacked by two people who spend the group's shared meeting time discussing something that should be discussed at another time between just the two of them.
- » Lack of clear action items. Like, what are we supposed to do next?

This list is by no means exhaustive. As more people saw the post, the more (and angrier) responses I got back.

It's time to stop the meeting madness.

What I'm about to show you is that you don't have to suffer like this. There is a solution to all of this meeting mess, and it's a lot simpler than you might think.

We need meetings. We need them at work because when they work, they are valuable. Clear actions get set, decisions are made and the whole business moves forward.

But what we don't need is for meetings to waste our time, money and resources.

What we need is a 25-minute meeting. A meeting that is short, sharp and productive. A meeting that gets the job done efficiently. A meeting that gets more value in way less time.

Stop for a minute and look at your calendar. How many of your meetings are 60 minutes or more? By choosing to do 25-minute meetings, you will free up a large chunk of time to get your day-to-day work done. Or even just have space to think!

Too often I have heard people say that they spend all day in meetings, so their evenings (when they should be with their families, friends or enjoying leisure time) are spent doing their actual work or catching up on emails they have missed.

With 25-minute meetings, your team members and colleagues will thank you for the time you gift them back.

Your organisation will thank you for the money you will save them—around \$5775 per week, if you do the following maths.

According to Glass Door, a company that provides average salary information across a range of roles and industries, the average salary of a manager is \$110 000.

They say that there are approximately 75 people at this level in a number of large organisations, and they spend between 35 per cent and 50 per cent of their time in meetings.

For the sake of simplicity, let's work with a 40-hour week. ('Dreaming!' I hear you say; but stay with me.) Say 7 managers spend about 15 hours per week (or 3 hours per day) in meetings. Here's what it will cost:

$$\begin{aligned} & \mathbf{7 \text{ managers} \times} \\ & \mathbf{\$55 \text{ per hour} \times} \\ & \mathbf{\underline{15 \text{ hours per week} =}} \\ & \mathbf{\$5775 \text{ per week}} \end{aligned}$$

Remember, that's just in a week. Imagine how serious these numbers start to get over the course of a year. AND this is not taking into account any opportunity cost!

In fact, a 2014 Bain & Company study of time budgeting at large corporations found that a single weekly meeting of midlevel managers was costing one organisation \$15 million a year!

It is such a big problem that *Harvard Business Review* has even developed a Meeting Cost Calculator app to help you figure out exactly how much meetings drain your bottom line.

This level of spending in any other context would be tightly controlled by the finance team. Yet someone as junior as the current intern can be responsible for setting up and running a weekly team meeting that consistently and constantly brings down teams, the whole organisation, without any regulation.

This is why we must get more frugal in both our time and costs. This is why we must meet in 25 minutes.

The very idea of this might be enough to make you laugh. You'll say, 'Twenty-five minutes, is she serious? Like that could ever be done.'

Well, I am here to show you that not only is it possible, but it is plausible.

Together, we'll start a meeting revolution.

Are you ready to rework the way you meet?

Bad meeting habit checklist

Take this checklist to your next meeting. How many of these bad meeting habits do you see?

- There was no reason for us to meet. This could have been done without bringing a bunch of people together around a table.
- The people present were not actually able to make a decision or move the topic forward. They still had to go and 'check' with someone else.
- People were late, technology didn't work or we had to call people on their mobiles to check if they were coming or not.

The 25 Minute Meeting

- People were distracted during the meeting, accessing their phones, tablets or computers to check email, messages or take a call.
- There was no clear agenda.
- There was no clear process.
- I contemplated why I was at this meeting.
- We had to schedule an additional meeting because time ran out while we were all skirting around the subject.
- Most of us arrived from other meetings with no time to gather our thoughts and be mentally ready for the topic at hand.
- The presenter at the meeting simply read the slides to the participants, and we all zoned out.

If you ticked more than three boxes on this list, it's likely that you need to take some action to improve your meetings. Read on!

CHAPTER 2

It's easier than you think

That's right. Because you are already having 25-minute meetings—you just don't realise it.

Right now, you are cushioning your 25-minute meetings with extra fat—that is, a whole bunch of unnecessary time that is pushing them out to 60 minutes.

The problem is that you're running meetings, as you have always done, unconsciously.

Your team or organisation's meeting culture is driven by everything from the default setting in your calendar app (not to mention your brain) to how the lack of punctuality is tolerated.

Like most, you probably believe that cooperation, collaboration and communication must be done in the form of meetings.

You spend all day flitting from one 60-minute meeting to the next like it's the standard operating procedure.

As a leader, this behaviour is driven by and accepted by you: it's been said that the standard you walk past is the standard you accept. (Ouch.)

Well, no more!

I'm about to show you that your default mindset is wasting time and draining productivity levels. You could be doing 25-minute meetings without making that much effort, and you can boost your brain power while you're doing it. Yes, really!

How to slim back to 25 minutes

Let's start by looking at a typical meeting scenario.

You may show up on time, while others may not. Maybe they (or even you) rock up 10 to 15 minutes late with a few excuses about why others are not coming.

Then the meeting starts with questions about the agenda that no-one has seen and/or some are disputing.

You finally get started on the first item and there is some active discussion that chews up 15 minutes, and you still have a further three items to get through.

So, the remaining agenda items are rushed through before two people stand up and say they need to leave to get to their next meeting, which they are already late for.

That's 25 minutes of productive meeting at best.

So, let's explore what our bad meeting habits actually cost us:

- » waiting for latecomers: (at least) 5 minutes
- » wondering about the agenda: 5 minutes
- » waffling and going off track: 5 minutes
- » watching mobile phones or PCs: 5 minutes
- » wasting time on fixing tech: 5 minutes.

There's 25 minutes RIGHT THERE that you could recover if you got rid of bad meeting habits, and I think I've been generous with time here. We frequently spend more than 5 minutes on some of these things.

See for yourself. In your next meeting, keep a tally of how many minutes are actually spent being productive.

That means taking note of time where there is open discussion and debate, when decisions are made, relevant information is shared and problems are solved.

I believe you will be lucky to make it to 25 minutes.

I believe this because I have seen it happen time and time again, in organisations large and small—and even while writing this book. I spent no more than 25 minutes on the phone with my editor each time we discussed reviews and actions.

Renowned sculptor Michelangelo is reputed to have said that the statue of David was already in the block of marble, so all he had to do was take away the parts that weren't David: 'I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free'.

Useful and purposeful meetings are already there in the form of 25 minutes. You just need to chisel away the bits that ‘aren’t David’.

Sounds fabulous, right?

Autopilot to action hero

When we are on autopilot, we look for excuses and reasons to blame external forces for the lack of engagement in our meetings: company culture, calendars, time, nature of work, projects—the list goes on. We say to ourselves, ‘If only the organisation would ...’ or, ‘It’s management’s fault because ...’

When we become an action hero, we give ourselves permission to take charge of the situation and change those things that don’t serve us. We stop thinking about things that are outside of our control and focus on things that we do have control over.

Action heroes have a 25-minute meeting mindset. That’s exactly what you need.

When you’re on autopilot (60-minute default) your meetings:

- » have an unclear agenda
- » have reluctant participants
- » make people distracted and bored
- » decrease productivity
- » drain and discourage participants
- » waste time.

When you're an action hero (25-minute meeting), your meetings:

- » have a laser-like focus
- » engage participants
- » keep participants present and on task
- » increase productivity
- » leave people with a sense of accomplishment and purpose
- » save time.

When you use 25-minute meetings, you go from autopilot to action hero overnight.

So, put your pilot hat away and pull out your cape: it's time to fly into chapter 3. But first, use Experiment 2 (overleaf) to assess how you're operating right now, and how you might need to change things to become an action hero at meetings.

When you chisel away the waiting, wondering, waffling, watching and wasting you can easily shift your meetings to 25 minutes.



Make a change

Take yourself off autopilot and start cutting out all the wasted time in your current meetings.

Shift your mindset and calendar first

A client, Sue, decided to set all of her future calendar appointments to 30 minutes irrespective of who was involved and what the topic of discussion was.

She knew this would give her 25 minutes of productive time, and 5 minutes for her colleagues to get to wherever they needed to be next.

At first, she had some pushback. People replied, 'Will 30 minutes be enough time?' She responded, 'If it isn't, the coffee is on me'.

The meetings did indeed conclude in 25 minutes—much to the surprise and delight of many of Sue's colleagues, some even confessing they had allowed an extra 30 minutes in their diaries in case time ran over.

On the rare occasion more time was needed, Sue was able to continue the meeting or reschedule accordingly.

She was rarely out of pocket for the coffee.



EXPERIMENT 2

Are you on autopilot or are you an action hero when it comes to meetings? Check the boxes in table 2.1 that apply to you when you are in meetings.

(Your team members may also like to rate themselves. This can be a fun and gentle way to start introducing the concept of 25-minute meetings to them.)

Table 2.1: autopilot vs action hero checklist

Autopilot (60-minute default)	Action Hero (25-minute meeting)
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>There wasn't a clear agenda</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I had a laser-like focus</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I waffled, or let others waffle</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I was actively engaged</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I didn't really participate</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I stayed present and on task</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I was distracted and bored</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>We got through what we needed to</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>We didn't get through what we needed to</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I (and others) left with a sense of accomplishment and purpose</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I felt drained and discouraged at the end</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>It was a good use of my time</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I feel like I wasted my time</i>	



Increase your self-awareness.

- » **Pay attention to your approach to meetings now. Are you on autopilot or are you an action hero? (Be honest.) Use Exercise 2 to help you figure it out.**
- » **Notice how many meetings you attend that are only 25 minutes of *value* but using up 60 minutes of *time*.**
- » **Reflect on what you need to chisel away from meetings to make them more effective.**

CHAPTER 3

There's nothing to lose

I know what you're thinking.

You're thinking 25 minutes is a pretty specific number. Why does this number work? Why not 40 minutes or 20, even?

Put simply, 25 minutes is practical, easy and achievable—and it has the smarts to back it up.

Doing work in short, focused bursts has long been supported as a way of efficiently using time and energy. Anyone from your mentor to your personal trainer will tell you this.

After doing a series of repetitive tasks, you rest before doing another series of repetitive tasks. This is how you build, maintain and sustain your strength over time, and reduce the chance of injury, mental fatigue and stuffing something up.

As far back as 1911, Frederick Taylor Winslow, whom we recognise as one of the very first management consultants, made the connection between productivity, effort, and rest or breaks. He found that people who gave a focused amount of effort for 25 minutes, and then spent the next 35 minutes resting, increased productivity by 600 per cent. (Wow!)

Now, I'm not suggesting that you have a meeting, and then take a 35-minute nap. Our ability to maintain focus for 25 minutes is what's important here.

Francesco Cirillo's book *The Pomodoro Technique* centres around short bursts of work for 25 minutes at a time, followed by a short 5-minute break. This choice of 25 minutes was not arbitrary and was based on several different trials, experiments and iterations before landing on 30-minute work intervals. (Fun fact: I wrote this book using the Pomodoro technique.)

Another study in 2016 done by the Draugiem Group, a social networking company, found that their most productive employees didn't work full 8-hour days: they took 17-minute breaks for every 52 minutes of work.

The lesson here is simple.

You need quality meetings over quantity.

Parkinson's Law explains that 'work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion'. Put simply, when you give people time to get stuff done, they will use whatever time you allow them.

When we concentrate our effort in controlled periods of time, we achieve more.

Scarcity + clarity = urgency

I was in a meeting as the change management expert for a global organisation. I was there to gather information, as their meetings were notorious for being late and inefficient. But this meeting was different: a manager came into the room and announced before we started, 'I have a hard stop at 10.30 am'. Immediately, there was an increase in energy, attention and focus. People were ready and able to get down to business! I noticed the effect of this technique, and started using it myself and had the same results.

Often, we are more productive and produce higher quality work when we have less time.

A 2002 study published in the *Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* showed that people who imposed strict deadlines on themselves for tasks performed far better (and more consistently) than those who didn't. More interestingly, they found that those who allotted too much (or ample) time to complete tasks often created more work for themselves.

When we have less time (or even if we simply perceive we have less time) our call to action is much greater. The less time we have, the more focused we are on getting the task done.

When we announce we have a limited amount of time (SCARCITY) to do something specific (CLARITY) we create action (URGENCY).

Figure 3.1 (overleaf) shows the three principles that can be leveraged to improve our efficiency in meetings.

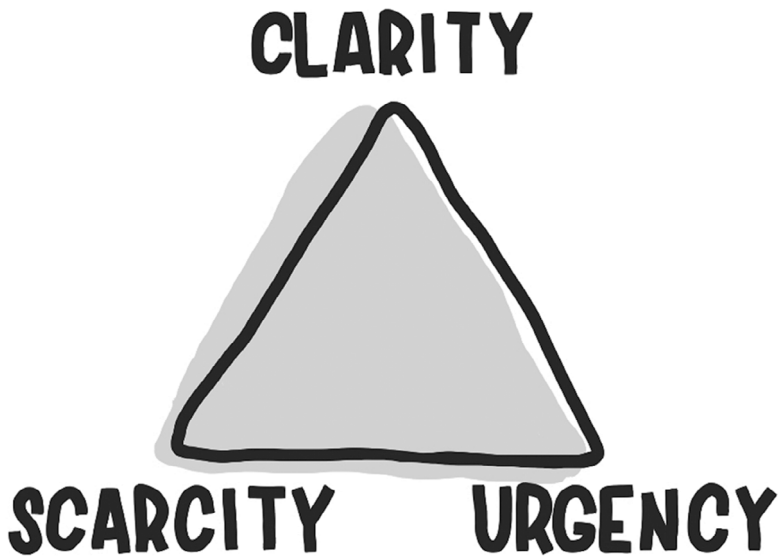


Figure 3.1: the Clarity–Scarcity–Urgency triangle

Scarcity is one of the world's most powerful persuaders and an immediate instigator of urgent behaviour. That's why it's so effective when it comes to marketing products and services.

Last chance to buy...

Only three places left!

(Admit it, you have fallen for those!)

For most of us time is a highly valuable resource and we already view it with a sense of scarcity. When running 25-minute meetings, we are getting a double whammy with this.

Firstly, we use the highly valued time more wisely, and secondly, we are giving people back a highly regarded and valuable resource.

Having only 25 minutes creates *clarity* around doing what's important. If we only have 25 minutes, we had better be focused on what we need to get done. This automatically forces us to think about the top two or three things to discuss in a meeting.

Having a sense of *urgency* drives immediate action. We need to do it and we need to do it now. It's probably why it's the most overused word in most workplaces, and why some of us are urgency junkies. Unless it's urgent it won't get done; if it's urgent you will do it immediately.

I know this to be true based on how long it takes me to clean my house. If I know I'm expecting visitors in 20 minutes

(urgency), I am incredibly efficient on what I need to do to achieve a presentable home (clarity). No time for distraction or dawdling (scarcity). This is a stark difference from when I'm doing it in my own time, dawdling from room to room, tidying here, cleaning there, getting distracted.

25-minute meetings mean we need to get cracking right now on what we need to talk about.

Are you convinced?

Good. So now that you know why you need to start running 25-minute meetings, it's time to explore how to run one. Let's get into part II!



Make a decision

Declare to yourself, not to the world, that you are going to, wherever possible, keep meetings to 25 minutes from this point on. On second thought, why not declare it to the world? Post it on social media with **#the25minutemeeting**.

Achieve more with less

I recently took a phone call from a distraught colleague. Her supervisor had taken leave and, in their absence, Claire would be taking up the slack.

After two days, Claire was feeling overwhelmed and drowning in the volume of work. So much so that she had not taken the time to have lunch, and actually didn't even look at the time until 2 pm, when she stopped to have a bite to eat. Which was when the flood caught up with her.

During the call, I urged her to pause, and write down the major tasks she needed to complete before 6 pm. I told her to be specific about that time, and not say 'before going home', as that was vague and could always be moved.

I advised her to be specific about what she needed to do (clarity). To limit the time frame to 6 pm (scarcity). This way she created a sense of focus and action (urgency).

She sent me the following text at 6.05 on her way home from work: 'Smashed it out this afternoon. Totally got on top of things'.

Isn't it amazing when you reduce the time and give yourself some constraints, how much you can achieve?



EXPERIMENT 3

Firstly, decide to keep meetings to 25 minutes from now on.

At the beginning, implement the 25-minute rule in one or two of your regular meetings:

- » team meetings
- » status report meetings
- » one-on-one team member check-ins
- » project team check-ins or updates
- » random/ad hoc requests for information from you
- » random/ad hoc meetings where you need information
- » ‘drive-by’ meetings where someone stops by and says, ‘Do you have a minute?’ (e.g. ‘No, I have 25, let’s schedule it in.’)

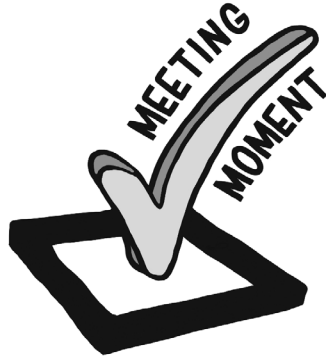
Create a checklist of all your regular meetings, and tick when you have rescheduled each meeting to 25 minutes.

Why stop there?

You may also like to think of other ways in which you could apply the 25-minute rule: exercise, phone calls, bursts of work activity.

Notice the positive changes this brings about.

There's nothing to lose



Improve your productivity.

- » **Think of the last deadline you had. How much more productive were you when you knew you had less time to get it done?**
- » **What did you do to make your limited amount of time more efficient? How did you limit distractions and focus?**
- » **Now think of your next meeting. What would happen if you limited time and/or distractions and focused on the task at hand like it was a 25-minute deadline?**