



The Psychology Behind Meeting Overload

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Everyone hates meetings. Attending too many can be highly stressful and tiring, and both productivity and quality take a hit when employees tune out, become demotivated, and lose valuable heads-down work time. As such, it's hardly a surprise that managers in one survey reported 83% of the meetings on their calendars were unproductive, or that US-based professionals rated meetings as the "number one office productivity killer."

But despite what seems to be an overwhelming consensus, endless check-ins, debriefs, all-staffs, and Zoom calls continue to plague the corporate world. What will it take for us to break free from our collective addiction to meetings?

As a behavioral scientist focused on happiness and time management, and the co-founders of a startup building meeting software that's grounded in decades of experience designing communication and collaboration tools, we understand the power of psychology to help us transform how we act (and interact). Below, we explore the common psychological pitfalls that lead us to hold and attend more meetings than we should, and offer research-backed strategies to help employees, managers, and entire organizations overcome them.

1. Meeting FOMO

One of the most common reasons we end up attending too many meetings is FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out. As meeting participants, we worry that our colleagues will judge us — or worse yet, forget about us — if we don't accept every invitation. Deeply

ingrained norms around what it means to be an “ideal worker” lead us to equate presence with productivity, and these assumptions are bolstered when bosses use face time as a proxy for commitment, or when they fail to represent absent employees’ opinions in meetings.

While it’s on managers to avoid these harmful behaviors, employees can work to overcome these fears by finding ways to demonstrate their value and engagement outside of meetings. For example, you may feel more empowered to decline a meeting invite if you make a point of providing your input before the meeting, or of following up with the host after the fact.

Interestingly, meeting FOMO isn’t limited to attendees — it can affect organizers as well, resulting in excessively inflated invite lists. If you’re leading a meeting, remember that leaving someone out isn’t an insult if the meeting isn’t relevant to them, and that it’s actually more respectful to acknowledge when a meeting would be a waste of their time. Consider asking people for their advice beforehand, and check in with key stakeholders afterwards to make sure they have the information they need without subjecting them to the entire conversation.

In addition, as the meeting leader, it’s also up to you to do your part to address participants’ FOMO concerns. Clearly communicate when an invitation is optional, and if some employees aren’t included, make it clear that you appreciate their advice, and have only kept them off the list because you think their time would be better spent on other priorities. Most importantly, make sure you’re not using meeting attendance as a proxy for commitment, whether consciously or subconsciously. Research has shown that the most productive employees attend fewer meetings and protect their calendars for deep work, so if you’ve been relying on meeting attendance to evaluate employee engagement, it’s time to come up with other metrics.

Finally, the best way to help your team overcome meeting FOMO is to model healthy engagement yourself. To encourage your team to decline unnecessary meetings, visibly decline meetings yourself. To encourage people to block off deep focus time, do so yourself — and make it public. One of our colleagues even put their deep work time in their email signature, so their entire team both knew when they would be unavailable, and understood that it was okay for them to do the same.

2. Selfish Urgency

We all fall prey to the Egocentric Bias from time to time — that is, the tendency to focus more on our own needs, desires, and perspectives. When it comes to meetings, this bias yields a phenomenon that we call “selfish urgency.” That is, leaders will schedule meetings whenever convenient for them, without necessarily considering their teams’ needs or schedules. Sometimes leaders even knowingly schedule meetings when their team has conflicts, forcing everyone to shift their calendars around to accommodate.

To be clear, while this can be extremely frustrating, selfish urgency often isn’t malicious. People are notoriously bad at recognizing opportunity costs, meaning it may not even occur to many leaders that scheduling a meeting means their team will be unable to spend the time doing something more valuable. It’s also easy for good intentions to get lost in the daily grind. In a past job, one of us had a long commute, so our manager very kindly blocked off 4 to 5pm in our calendar so we could beat the rush hour traffic. This compassion lasted a full 24 hours: By day two, that block was full of meetings.

To address these challenges, leaders should proactively remind themselves to think about the opportunity costs associated with asking their teams to attend a meeting. These could be financial costs — for example, one company found that a single weekly meeting of middle managers was costing the organization more than \$15 million dollars a year — or more personal costs, such as employees’ lost commute time or mental energy.

If you’re having trouble, try using a tool like this one that calculates a monetary cost per meeting, or talk to your team to find out how meetings are impacting their personal and professional lives. And of course, once you’ve become more aware of the costs, see if there are ways you can address them. Instead of interrupting people’s workflows with a last-minute invite, try to schedule meetings in advance. Do your best to find mutually convenient times, and consider shortening or cancelling a meeting altogether if the benefits don’t seem to outweigh the downsides.

3. Meetings as Commitment Devices

Sometimes we use meetings as commitment devices: that is, mechanisms to help make sure people follow through on their promises. Behavioral science shows that an external deadline (like a meeting with your boss) can be an effective motivator — but the meeting itself is often unnecessary, with people simply reporting on how they did or didn't achieve the agreed-upon target.

To address this issue without losing the motivating effect of meetings as commitment devices, tell your team in advance that the meeting will be cancelled if the deadline is met — essentially framing cancellation as the reward for reaching the goal. If the work isn't done in time, the meeting will likely still be helpful, since the unforeseen factors that led to the delay will likely benefit from discussion. If the work is done, send a congratulatory email and save everyone an hour. And if everyone is done except Steve, don't have the meeting; instead, find another way to hold Steve accountable without wasting everyone else's time.

4. The Mere Urgency Effect

When we are stressed, completing seemingly urgent (yet actually unimportant) tasks can provide some relief. This is known as the Mere Urgency Effect. Scheduling and attending meetings can make us feel like we've accomplished something, and so we're often loath to decline or cancel them, even if they are objectively not as important as our other work. This is often compounded by a strong sense of inertia: If we've always held a certain meeting at a certain time, it's a lot easier to just keep doing that than to reevaluate whether it's actually a good idea.

The solution? Make cancelling or ending early the default, especially for recurring meetings. Instead of asking, "Does anyone have any updates," say, "Unless anyone has anything new, let's cancel and we can all get an hour back." If you aren't sure if a meeting is necessary, try not having it and see what happens. Make it a regular practice in recurring meetings to ask whether you need the next one.

5. Meeting Amnesia

Too often, we end up in the same bad meeting over and over again, just because no one remembers what was discussed in the last meeting. To avoid meeting amnesia, schedule a short five-minute team debrief after key internal and external calls. These debriefs are especially important in a fully virtual environment, since with fewer opportunities to connect informally, it's easy for meeting leaders not to notice when employees (especially junior ones) leave a call confused.

In addition, leaders should make it routine to keep track of what was said — and what was meant — and to share those summaries with attendees and any relevant stakeholders who weren't present. The point is not to capture a full play-by-play of the meeting, but rather to provide a concise synopsis of the key points and action items in a format that makes the information as accessible as possible. As a side benefit, periodically reviewing this documentation can also help your team decide whether these meetings are productive, and whether it may make sense to cancel or shorten them in the future.

6. Pluralistic Ignorance

Have you ever sat through a mind-numbing three-hour meeting, wondering to yourself how it's possible that you're the only one who sees how pointless it is? It's normal to assume that you're the most frustrated person in the room, but psychology suggests that this is often an illusion. Pluralistic ignorance refers to a phenomenon whereby even though we're all experiencing the same thing, we assume that other people don't feel the same way about it as we do. This bias leads us to continue to schedule and attend meetings even when everyone secretly agrees that they're useless, because we assume we're the only one who thinks so.

To overcome pluralistic ignorance, leaders should encourage their teams to openly share their frustrations and feedback, and they should work together to regularly identify and eliminate unproductive meetings. For example, in one forthcoming study,

we used a company's email and calendar data to identify the meetings in which attendees were multitasking the most. When we shared the results with one team, the manager proudly announced: "I stopped going to that meeting weeks ago, what a waste of time!" He then said: "Wait, a minute. Why are you all still going? Should we cancel this meeting altogether?" It turned out that no one liked the meeting; they had all simply been too nervous to say anything.

Of course, there's no once-and-done cure for the modern workplace's meeting addiction. The pitfalls we've identified stem from universal human biases, and those biases are exceedingly difficult to overcome. But by understanding the psychology behind bad meetings, both managers and their teams can work towards healthier communication norms, more-effective interactions, and cleaner calendars.

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