Six Ideas for Building More Effective Meeting Cultures

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Back in April, at the meetings Modern Executive Solutions hosted for Talent Acquisition, Talent Management, and Exec TA leaders in Atlanta, the agenda ranged from succession planning and total rewards to skills, leadership development, and of course AI. But when leaders were invited to ask about challenges they're facing, one raised a concern—too many meetings—to which everyone can relate.

"The number one complaint I hear from people is 'I don't have enough time,'" the participant said. "I'm in meetings all day and I have no time to think and I have no time to do my work." He then asked the group: "Can I get recommendations around ways [you've] created a more effective meeting culture? Because we have not cracked that nut at all."

Five years after the pandemic began, ushering in calendars jammed with 30-minute Zoom meeting blocks, many leaders are still overwhelmed by how much time they spend in meetings. Back-to-back sessions without so much as a five-minute break. Key decision-makers not showing up to keep the conversation moving forward. And of course, all those meetings that could have been an email.

The conversation that followed prompted participants to share concrete ideas for more effective meetings that should be helpful for both talent leaders and CHROs. Below, find six quick, specific ideas from the discussion that could help make your own meeting culture more effective.

Allow people not to attend if there's no agenda.

"If you have not validated that it's for you to be there based on that agenda," then don't go, one attendee said. Requiring an agenda also forces the organizer to think about what will be covered in the meeting, and for attendees to show up prepared.

Don't allow meeting invites to be forwarded.

One participant said her team had set up their meeting invites so they can't be forwarded to other people—a way to prevent attendee creep. "It's a small thing," she said. But the inability to forward means you don't have people going "well I need this person on my team and that person's like 'well I need this person on my team.' And then we end up with [too many] people."

Let people leave or not attend if the decision-maker isn't there, either.

One attendee said if the decision-maker doesn't attend, they let people opt out. "You've just got this weird middle level of people who are leaders—big leaders—but they're like, I just can't make any decisions unless these two people above me are here too. It creates a different issue."

Recalibrate recurring meetings regularly.

One participant said she occasionally has her team practice what other companies have called 'calendar bankruptcy,' pulling all recurring meetings off their calendar to make sure none are lingering unnecessarily and then choosing which ones really matter. "If it's important, we'll add it back." Others noted that's an area where an AI agent could really help, determining which meetings don't have agendas, which ones people are not regularly attending, and might be candidates for to remove from the calendar.

Calculate the cost.

What does it cost to have top leaders in inefficient meetings, based on their salary? Doing the math can be revealing. One participant said they did a time study that compared time spent in internal and customer meetings and "it was pretty eyeopening. It kind of confirmed what we had anecdotally been saying."

Figure out the team's purpose.

One participant said it helps to make sure you're not just meeting to get updates, but to make cross-functional decisions. "What are you actually going to be doing and how are you spending your time?" she said. "Bring a problem that we're solving and your recommendation to solve it versus a presentation where you're just giving information."